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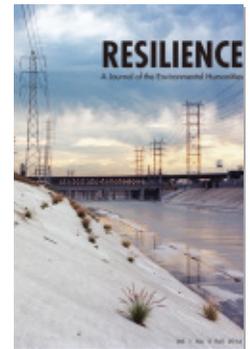
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Claiming the Language Ecotone: Translinguality, Resilience,  
and the Environmental Humanities

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# Claiming the Language Ecotone

Translinguality, Resilience, and the Environmental Humanities

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## Points of Departure

Adaptation, interdependence, diversity—the words we use to describe resilience are themselves evidence of the power that concept embodies, terms celebrating the evolution of English through connection with Latin, French, and other languages. The knowledge they represent flows in every direction, crossing disciplines and shaping the terminology of environmentalism worldwide. In this sense, resilience is in fundamental ways inseparable from the indelible ecotone of language and culture. Even so, while humanities scholars agree on the importance of language in their respective disciplines, transcultural processes and multilingual matters remain crucially unaddressed. Thus, in proposing the centrality of translingual and transcultural literacy to environmental sensibility, we envision a conversation about the potential synergy between the foreign languages and environmental humanities discourse that will have transformative force. Our argument pivots around concepts of monolingualism, “foreign” languages, and forms of knowledge production mediated by language. We contend that by opening discussions of ecocriticism and environmental imagination to the aspect of language—languages other than English, ecolinguistics, and multiple dimensions of language education—new paths to resilience emerge.

## Monolingualism and the Ecotone

To be sure, English is the lingua franca of the environmental humanities. The obvious choice for scholarly communication as the most dominant language in global academic discourse, English has also been institutionally privileged, given the fact that the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was founded in the United States and has its most powerful stronghold on the North American continent. This circumstance was pointed out by literary critic and ecocritic Lawrence Buell, who after examining ASLE's membership concluded that "by far the majority of self-identified ecocritics remain Anglophone scholars working on Anglophone texts" (2011, 92).

Yet as a relatively young, international, and expanding academic field, the environmental humanities are well positioned to reflect critically from the start on how language shapes our intellectual commitments. As scholars, we exercise caution about our very means of communication, avoiding language that would contribute to attitudes of dominance, imperialism, and one-sidedness. We seek, as Buell encourages, ways to "relativize ecocriticism's preexisting Eurocentric . . . vocabulary and analytical biases" (2011, 100), recognizing the reciprocal demand for a new sense of ecology related to the use of language. Reminding us that linguistic monoculture comes with a cost, ecocritic and comparatist Ursula Heise has unwaveringly, and for good reasons, stressed too that "monolingualism is currently one of ecocriticism's most serious intellectual limitations. The environmentalist ambition is to think globally, but doing so in terms of a single language is inconceivable—even and especially when that language is a hegemonic one" (2006, 513). Such linguistic awareness, however, represents a challenge to the assumptions we share about the field and our identity as scholars.

Cognizant of our own linguistic boundaries, we realize that there are very real human limits to learning multiple languages and at present inadequate means to address those limitations. Though "distant reading" promises access to the wider world of texts and new ways of interpreting them (Moretti 2000, 57), this mode of interacting with texts brings with it inherent limitations. When scholar-teachers make use of translated texts in their classes and research to overcome that restriction imposed by functioning within one language (the limitation of relying on just one tradition of perception, thought, and argumentation), new constraints surface. The unquestioning reliance on texts in translation

often gives scant attention to idioms or writing styles and even ignores the symbolic meaning of words, as Buell (2011, 107) observes:

So environmental critics have not worried as much as likely we should about how there is no satisfactory word for “environment” in Chinese, no adequate term for “wilderness” in Spanish. Or how “watershed” means something quite different in the United States than in Europe, even in the United Kingdom. . . . Environmental humanists would benefit greatly from a collaborative project that will help negotiate these differences and, perhaps, in the process also achieve a stronger shared critical vocabulary among the growing number of ecocritics worldwide.

Thoughts and sentiments become mere traces through the translation process, regardless of language; for there is inevitably a crucial shift in context. Values, beliefs, and attitudes are expressed differently in every language. Translation cannot do full justice to these aspects, for its mediation effects elide aspects of register, dialect, and cultural difference in the act of speaking to a new audience.

Awareness of this power of language calls us not only to acquaint ourselves with ecocriticism and environmental texts not written in English but also to embrace a larger transformative potential of the environmental humanities. As Heise (2013, 638) explains, ecocriticism has productively expanded the comparative theoretical perspective by creating a “fusion of postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives,” interrogating the meaning of local difference, in particular by emphasizing “a way of reading rather than a canon,” and voicing the ways in which non-human interactions with human culture surface through language. The interdisciplinary perspective needed to carry out work that expresses how language fully shapes our relationship to the environment cannot depend on the labor of individual scholars, however linguistically talented. It will need to be a collaborative effort among many scholars and actively engaged with emerging modes of research, especially those offered by the digital humanities, that are equipped for the broader sharing of knowledge. Rather than excluding multilingual and transcultural matters from the ecocritical discourse and conceptualization of the environmental humanities, resilient and courageous pioneers working in this way must learn to further transcend the boundaries of disciplines and established, language-specific academic traditions.

Many teacher-scholars have, of course, experienced that the disciplinary boundaries at many institutions of higher learning are much less porous than we envision them or want them to be. That said, topics that cannot be grasped within the confines of just one traditional discipline necessarily require the crossing of disciplinary boundaries and the employment of interdisciplinary thrust. Inquiry into all processes concerning ecology and the interface between human and nonhuman environments constitute prime examples of such topics. By talking about not only linguistic but also cultural, social, and political repercussions that occur in adjacent regions or territories, teacher-scholars in linguistics and intercultural education, for example, have established the importance of the phenomenon that Mary Louise Pratt (1991) succinctly describes as a “contact zone.” More often than not, such a disciplinary juxtaposition becomes productive by virtue of the fact that the contending dynamics of disparate fields yield unexpected results.

In the scientific study of ecology and environments, such interactions are defined by the concept of the “ecotone.” An ecotone is commonly described as a transitional area between neighboring biological communities. This area typically shares characteristics of each bordering community and often contains species that cannot be found in either of the overlapping communities alone—the result of the dynamic interaction between the entities. The processes of juxtaposition, intermingling, and fluid interaction allow us to compare the concept of the ecotone with the dynamics of the contact zone. Seen in this way, the flow of crossing boundaries and establishing common grounds based on diversity and difference resemble the synergies that biologists and geographers identify with ecotones. This notion of the ecotone, we contend, offers a paradigm for the fruitful collaboration between foreign languages and the environmental humanities.

Already such work is emerging through the serious engagement of environmental humanities scholars with edge-effect conditions, which study the influence of the two bordering communities on each other. Rob Nixon has convincingly argued in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* that scholarly ecotones show similar risks and challenges as biological ones, for both “may . . . open up new configurations of possibility” (2011, 30) and—an aspect that certainly applies to numerous academic disciplines—may, “for some species, introduce new threats” (2011, 30). Still, the most obvious challenge faced in cur-

rent discussions about the role of foreign languages in the environmental humanities is the question of linguistic limitations. We ourselves are keenly aware that we have access to only a few European languages and that even our concept of the language ecotone may not adequately reflect the situation for scholars on other continents. What is at stake, though, is not language competency per se but the capacity to address the larger issues at hand. Our own linguistic limitations should not distract us from the fact that in order to adjust to new environmental conditions and the complex demands of higher education in the United States and elsewhere around the world, the environmental humanities need to demonstrate resilience. With Nixon, we ask, “How adaptable [will] the humanities prove in a less specialist environment? In particular, what kinds of connective corridors toward other disciplines can scholars creatively navigate in an intellectual milieu where habitat fracture is becoming increasingly pervasive?” (30).

Powerful as these arguments are in making the case for greater synergy between foreign languages and the environmental humanities, what we notice is the crucial relationship between the intellectual scholarship and intelligent teaching. Today, foreign-language education in the best sense aims to foster transcultural and translingual competence and, thus, plays a crucial role in answering the question of how to establish connective corridors. After all, the environmental humanities “are entering a dynamic phase” (Nixon 2011, 30), and the international affiliates of ASLE, hence foreign languages, are an important driver of this development. Ultimately, multilingualism will prove key within the environmental humanities to fruitful collaborations of all kinds. Translingual and transcultural contacts create the transitional ecotone that supports this trend.

By shifting the focus of environmental humanities scholars more toward language as a constitutive element in their work, larger intellectual alignments also appear. The recent Vilnius Declaration, for example, a statement of intent issued by the newly formed European Environmental Humanities Alliance, points out that “humanities research interprets modes of human perception and experience, clarifies and critically assesses underlying assumptions in other sciences, harnesses social engagement, and shapes critical awareness via cultural analysis, public debate and creative expression” (EEHA 2013). These operations to create and process knowledge are intrinsic to language, for they depend, as

research tells us, on the verbal and cultural codes used by different peoples to perceive the environment around them and make sense of their experiences. It is the use of language in the broadest sense that allows people to clarify and assess their views on the world. Those perspectives differ radically with regard to cultural developments and environmental embeddedness. Matters of language, then, including its foreignness, become central to understanding context. The comparatist or anthropologist learning of a target language and culture from the perspective of someone else's first language or mother tongue gains unique insights into the similarities and differences of alternate worldviews. We learn about ways of perceiving, experiencing, and, most importantly, encoding human and nonhuman environments. "European ecocriticism," as ecocritics Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby observe, already appears to be moving in this direction by taking "inspiration from the proximity of the Continent's diverse languages, societies, and cultures" (2011, 3). Likewise, Simon Gikandi's vivid description of "a thriving Silk Road of languages and dialects in what is often assumed to be the land of monolingualism" (2013, 866) suggests a similar directional change in the United States.

### Life Does Not Come with Subtitles

Today, studies in foreign languages and cultures are considered central to the humanities; and in higher-education settings, they constitute an important part of a student's education for her or his role as a global citizen. Foreign-language educator Michael Byram (2010, 320) describes this further:

The cultural dimension of foreign language teaching needs to fulfill purposes that are both educational and utilitarian. In the best of all possible worlds, the intercultural citizen is *gebildet* [educated], is a social agent active in a multicultural society, whether "national-state" or international policy.

Associations and groups like the American Council for Foreign Language Teaching (ACTFL), the Council of Europe, and the Modern Language Association (MLA) describe similar objectives. Recommendations concerning foreign-language education appear in the *ACTFL National Standards*; the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (Council of Europe 2001); the 2007

MLA report, *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World*; and the 2013 Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences report, *The Heart of the Matter*. These influential documents and others emphasize that foreign-language teaching today is conceived more broadly than in the past, aiming today at intercultural (or transcultural and translingual) competencies or literacies rather than mere grammar. Such literacy presupposes the ability to operate between languages and cultures and to take an insider's view as well as an outsider's view of first and second languages and cultures. In other words, foreign-language learners reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture, striving to understand differences in meaning, mentality, and worldviews as expressed in their own and the foreign language(s). We are all learners in this regard.

It should be noted that Byram's call for an education for social agency in a multicultural society has been a goal in the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which is nearing its end in 2014. For the UN, the desired goal is "environmental literacy"—a phrase not yet officially defined in terms of educational purposes. The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), for instance, has been working on a draft definition that will identify means of assessing for environmental literacy, and already the term has been making its way into foreign-language pedagogy as well. The NAAEE defines an environmentally literate person as "someone who, both individually and together with others, makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the well being of other individuals, societies, and the global environment; and participates in civic life" (NAAEE 2011, 2-3). According to NAAEE, one can distinguish cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of environmental literacy, all of which are central also in foreign-language education. Curiously, NAAEE does not directly mention the role of language learning and intercultural education in the development of environmental literacy (although "worldviews" are referenced in their description of dispositions). Despite this shortcoming, the NAAEE's definition might serve as a convenient starting point, or rather "connective corridor," to the transitional zones between the foreign languages and the environmental humanities. After all, the previously described goals and competencies in foreign-language education are certainly also of the utmost importance in the teaching of environmental humanities, with its ambitious goal of fostering environ-

mental literacy, which should comprise, among other objectives, background knowledge of (cultural) environments, awareness of our culturally shaped environmental concepts, a reflection on our (own) attitudes, and the deciphering and communicating of environmental issues (also through linguistic means).

The interweaving of intellectual projects across the environmental humanities, languages, and foreign-language learning and teaching is a matter that is both complex and urgent, in our view. Turning now to themes of adaptation, interdependence, and diversity, which we identified at the outset as key factors contributing to resilience, we will briefly sketch out several areas in which research and praxis in the foreign languages have much to contribute to the formation of environmental humanities.

### *Adaptation*

The term “adaptation”—frequently used by biologists—describes strategies employed by animals and plants to adjust, by ways of natural selection or genetic variation, to a (changing) habitat. The term has also found its way into discourses on sociological, cultural, and linguistic issues. In this context, adaptation designates how phenomena fit together with such surrounding conditions as purposes, functions, or structures.

Ecolinguists may help the environmental humanities to ask relevant questions, such as how languages fit into the ecological and sociocultural environment of a given speaker’s community. In other words, do natural environments have an effect on the way people speak, on the way they encode their experiences with the help of grammar, vocabulary, or even narrative strategies? Through the study of texts in their original language, we learn how environmental issues and ecological knowledge are (en) coded in other cultures and languages. British linguist Michael A. K. Halliday refers back to Edwards Sapir and Benjamin Whorf’s concept of linguistic relativity, the idea that language does not passively reflect the environment of its speakers’ community but that it actively contributes in the construction of that environment. Halliday claims that “The categories and concepts of our material existence are not ‘given’ to us prior to their expression in language” (2001, 179). Instead, he expounds that the linguistic conceptualization of reality or the environment is based on the convergence of the material and the symbolic. A person’s experiences cast individual perceptions into meanings. Grammar and lexicon emerge from those experiences. At the same time, they constitute the basis for

social interaction, if not also human interaction with the environment: “In both these functions or metafunctions, grammar creates the potential within which we act and enact our cultural being. This potential is at once both enabling and constraining: that is, grammar makes meaning possible and also sets limits on what can be meant” (Halliday 2001, 179). This interlacing of linguistic repertoire with cultural specifics and their material, environmental basis, further clarifies Halliday’s semiotic understanding of language:

Language is not a superstructure on a base; it is a product of the conscious and the material impacting each on the other—the contradiction between our material being and our conscious being as antithetic realms of experience. Hence language has the power to shape our consciousness; and it does so for each human child, by providing the theory that he or she uses to interpret and to manipulate their environment. (179–80)

Such an understanding attributes three crucial roles to a language, be it one’s mother tongue, a second, or a foreign language. A language is as much a part of an individual’s reality as it is the (social, cultural, environmental) interpretation of that reality and also a metaphor for it. Language exhibits remarkable dynamic adaptability when humans face changing realities; it also codifies a society’s contradictions, including its troubled relationship with the nonhuman environment. The tension between adaptability and constraint produces the interpretative power of language. The capacity of language to overcome racism, sexism, or ethnocentrism has been the object of scholarly investigation for many decades. Beginning in the 1970s, ecolinguistics began to tackle the questions of nature and the environment, anthropocentrism, speciesism, and the utilitarian framing of the natural environments (Fill 2001).

To become aware of the functioning of a language and of the special and specific way one language relates to (its) reality differently from another language would be a primary goal for ecological studies in foreign-language education. Learning and analytically comparing languages allows speakers to make themselves aware of how a language encodes certain thought patterns and categorizations (Fill 1993, 103; 1996, 14). The tendency to focus on the negative when describing the current ecological situation is a case in point, as ecocritic Greg Garrard eloquently points out:

To describe something as an ecological problem is to make a normative claim about how we would wish things to be, and while this arises out of the claims of ecological scientists, it is not defined by them. A “weed” is not a kind of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place. Eliminating weeds is obviously a “problem of gardening,” but defining weeds in the first place requires a cultural, not horticultural, analysis. (Garrard 2004, 5–6)

To name such things, language is needed.

### *Interdependence*

It is certainly tempting to start a discussion on interdependence by quoting Barry Commoner’s first ecological principle that “everything is connected to everything else” (1971, 33). Instead, we would like to draw attention to the interdependence of the sciences and the humanities, including languages. As Dan Philippon has convincingly argued, the humanities have much to contribute to the sciences, because they “provide *meaning* and [. . .] *perspective*” (2012, 164). This they achieve, among other ways, “by *defining and questioning definitions*” (164) and “by *theorizing and questioning theories*” (165). Philippon is certainly right when he stresses that “humanities scholars have been some of the leading voices in helping us understand the keywords involved in the concept of sustainability, such as ‘human,’ ‘nature,’ ‘environment,’ ‘wilderness,’ ‘equity,’ and ‘wealth’ [and that] they have done so in part by questioning the assumptions that underlie these definitions” (164). Such a practice of asking critical questions is central as well to the foreign languages, making them an opportune site for the critical examination of environmental issues. Moreover, unlike most (natural) science classes, foreign-language courses offer the opportunity to address and reflect on affective components of environmental issues as well as multiple possibilities for transcultural and translingual explorations of “green speak” and “greenwashing” techniques, hence for understanding “differences on meaning, mentality, and worldview expressed in American English and in the target language” (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages 2007).

By making use of foreign-language texts and focusing on multilingual and cross-cultural matters, ecocritical research can elicit the ways we name, designate, perceive, and make sense of our environment. For

learners, the process of foreign-language learning and intercultural literacy has the potential to encourage environmental thinking at the same time. It is through the study of texts in their original language that we learn how certain thoughts, concepts, and relationships can be expressed in most creative and diverse ways and how environmental issues and ecological knowledge are (en)coded in other cultures and languages. Those issues only surface if foreign-language learning is aligned and fully supported by the environmental humanities—when English becomes one of many languages (rather than the only one) used as a vehicle for ecocriticism. The limitations of monolingualism can never do justice to the complexity of the relationships between mankind and the nonhuman environment.

### *Diversity*

Diversity has become a key concept not only in ecology, of course, but also in cultural studies and education, particularly in foreign-language education. Today, many educational institutions espouse internationalization and diversity as their central goals. At the same time, we witness “declension narratives” used to justify the closure of many language programs in terms of low enrollment or unprofitability. This atmosphere of perceived scarcity of resources hampers international research and collaboration. In this climate, internationalization becomes widely understood as the study of global topics in English translation, rather than through the lens of another language or culture. Such a focus inevitably is restricted by the availability of works in English translation, which is driven by market factors. Only works that are viewed as economically viable and as commercial products are worth disseminating, because translation is costly and time consuming. For researchers in any “internationally” prefixed field who do not at least have a reading knowledge of a foreign language, many original—and often critical—materials will remain inaccessible.

The trend toward monolingualism that market conditions impose not only limits research in the environmental humanities; it also neglects current studies on the interconnectedness of linguistic diversity and biodiversity, which have brought convincing evidence that “language loss . . . has a negative impact on biodiversity conservation” (UNESCO n.d.). Such new insights foreground the important role of linguistics in efforts to preserve biodiversity and, by extension, the need

to train more (future) scholars in languages other than English. Ecolinguists describe the striking interrelations between ecological diversity and the developing of cultures and their uniquely adapted languages as follows: “The links between language, culture and the environment suggest that biological, cultural and linguistic diversity should be studied together, as distinct but closely and necessarily related manifestations of the diversity of life on Earth” (Skutnabb-Kangas, Maffi, and Harmon 2003, 9). They continue to argue, “The world’s languages represent an extraordinary wealth of human creativity. They contain and express the total ‘pool of ideas,’ the universe of thought introduced by the human species” (28). Our ability to engage with such diversity in adequate, cross-cultural terms depends on securing a role for multilingualism and the foreign languages within the environmental humanities.

### Moving Ahead: Diversifying the Environmental Humanities

What is at stake in the questions we have posed here about whether the environmental humanities can adapt and become a linguistically diverse discipline comes more sharply into focus when we consider the conclusions reached by political philosopher Luuk van Middelaar about the emergence of a new European public sphere. Citing the diversity of languages as one of the chief characteristics of the European public, Middelaar regards this “interplay of voices” not as an obstacle but as vital to the collective agenda: “Public space requires more than debate alone. It would be more accurate to say, as Arendt does (in contrast to her colleague Habermas), that it is sustained by stories, by events and acts. . . . Only by means of a public arena can a small story, which would be lost with time, be absorbed into a larger story, into history” (2013, 302). As environmental humanities advocates, we must recognize the shortsightedness of claiming, as former secretary of the treasury and former president of Harvard University Lawrence Summers (2012) did, that studying a foreign language has no practical use, because “English’s emergence as the global language, along with the rapid progress in machine translation and the fragmentation of languages spoken around the world, make it less clear that the substantial investment necessary to speak a foreign tongue is universally worthwhile.” Let us make our manifesto the opposite. Following Buell’s prediction that “non-Eurocentric ecocriticism will generate alternative frameworks and vocabularies for enriching reconceiving ecocritical categories” (2011, 99), let us welcome

the emerging language ecotone. It is now up to environmental humanities scholars to establish and enlarge ecotones in the transitional space between ecocriticism and the foreign languages, to use edge effects for their own advantages, and to imbue “declension narratives” with new meanings that will generate resilience.

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