Toward a More Eco-Relational English

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Abstract

This exploratory paper intends to spark conversation and further investigation into the relational/ecological possibilities of English. English has ecological, colonial, and relational troubles baked into both its structure and usage—issues rarely addressed in environmental education. However, these problematics might be mitigated with playful linguistic adjustments and careful assessments of embedded cultural assumptions. The paper illustrates a number of ways English can move toward greater relationality. Broadly speaking, we work through these potential relational shifts in English at two main levels and five sub-categories: 1) Structure: punctuation, word choice, and grammar, and 2) Usage: form and content. In the end, we suggest that at all levels, micro to macro, the English language can be employed in ways that are more or less relational and ecological. English speakers can make thoughtful and creative decisions about the words used, the grammar employed, and the punctuation engaged. Speakers can also critically examine the cultural assumptions that undergird the "common sense" ways English is used throughout society. Practices for engaging students in these tasks are suggested.

Résumé

Cet article exploratoire a le double objectif de susciter la discussion et de poursuivre l'étude des possibilités relationnelles et écologiques de la langue anglaise. La structure et l'usage de la cette langue sont fondées sur des conceptions écologiques, coloniales et relationnelles problématiques, un point rarement abordé en éducation de l'environnement. Toutefois, ces problématiques peuvent être atténuées en opérant des ajustements à la fois linguistiques et ludiques, et en examinant les présupposés culturels intégrés dans la langue. Cet article illustre plusieurs moyens d'accroître la relationalité de la langue. Dans les grandes lignes, nous envisageons ce potentiel de relationalité de la langue anglaise en proposant des ajustements sur deux fronts : 1) la structure : la ponctuation, le vocabulaire et la grammaire; 2) l'usage : le fond et la forme. Nous arrivons à la conclusion que, tant à petite échelle qu'à grande échelle, la langue anglaise peut être exprimée principalement d'un point de vue relationnel et écologique. En effet, les locuteurs anglophones peuvent user de leur jugement et de leur créativité pour faire des choix quant à la grammaire, la ponctuation et le vocabulaire, et poser un regard critique sur les présupposés culturels entretenus par la langue au sein de la société. Nous présentons également des moyens pour inciter la participation des apprenants à cette discussion.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Relationality, English Language, English Usage, Environmental Education

Mots-clés : écolinguistique, relationalité, langue anglaise, usage de la langue, éducation à l'environnement

An Opening Encounter

Tide had already pulled away, leaving Octopus abandoned on wet Sand between slippery Stones. Most of Octopus's limbs had been torn off, perhaps from a seal.

"Do you think they's dead?" I asked my friends, gravely.

"Probably."

"But what if they's still alive? They can't get back to Ocean by themself. And even if not, they might like their body to be returned home." I looked around for seagulls, but they were all occupied, gorging themselves on the abundant mussels.

Disinterested, other Humans turned away, but I didn't want to leave Octopus. Octopus dreamed to me a few years before, so I felt a responsibility I didn't know quite how to enact. They told me to always care for them because their kind embodied a form of intelligence far beyond what humans could currently imagine—intuitively impulsive, creative, and relational (Godfrey-Smith, 2016). I found two large, flat Sticks and began shimmying them beneath their plate-sized mantle. Then, Sticks-Octopus-I ventured awkwardly toward Ocean's edge. We were octopusing in sneakers or humaning with a variety of limbs. Feet made rough conversation with the barnacles. Shore sounded over the stones.

Finally, I set them down in salt Waves with Sticks. They drifted with the lethargy of the dead. There would be no more octopusing that day . . .

Introduction

Estella's story contains numerous adjustments to the English language with the purpose of reflecting and fostering an eco-centric worldview and an ecological ethos. As Daniel Butt explains, an ecological ethos is present when "groups and individuals are motivated to act with non-self-interested concern for the environment" (as cited in Gardiner et al., 2015, para. 1). Shifting beyond anthropocentric concerns for the environment enables humans to think more broadly, creatively, and realistically about the current health of the planet and our responsibility for it. But what happens if the tools available to us to think with, in this case English, themselves potentially limit the changes sought and the possibilities imagined? Since cognition, imagination, and language are indelibly connected, a similar shift beyond the anthropocentrism and alienation is needed in our use of the English language. In the field of environmental education

there has been limited discussion about English itself as potentially part of the challenge toward reaching a deeper relationality. Creeping Snowberry (2010), for example, has suggested thinking more specifically about how language, English in particular, might become more eco-semiotic. While at the same time worrying about what cultural norms are embedded in English itself when it is not sufficiently critically questioned. (Blenkinsop & Egan, 2009)

Beyond environmental education, the English language has been rightly criticized for its unecological features and for promoting conceptions of the world that are inaccurate, anthropocentric, and unecological. For example, Chawla (1991) has criticized English's fragmented sense of time which implies the "march" of technological progress is unavoidable (p. 117). She and others (e.g. Kimmerer 2017) noted that the noun-based feature of the English language is problematic (more about this below). Goatly (1996) identified the ways English is incompatible with contemporary scientific understanding of biology, ecology, and physics. Kimmerer (2017) has identified the ways English reduces the animacy of mountains, sandy beaches, bays, and other beings in ways the Indigenous Potawatomi language does not. Meighan (2020) noted that the noncountable (no singular vs. plural form) word "water" implies an "'infinite' source, or product, which can be ultimately exploited" (p. 84.).

Not only does English reveal persistently unecological modes of thinking and relating, the language and its embedded ideologies have been 'exported' across the globe through the violence of colonization, the enticements of globalization, and other forces. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (2017) remind us that imperialism "entailed dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their territory, culture and languages, *three indivisible constituents*" and often led to "linguistic genocide" (emphasis ours, n. p.). Wade Davis (2009) warned that humanity is facing "the imminent disappearance of half the extant languages of the world," a phenomenon which amounts to the devastating loss of vast "repositor[ies] of knowledge" (p. 5). Even when English doesn't kill off other languages, it regularly dominates them in fields of knowledge, such as science and technology along with academic journals and conferences. This snowballing of the English language's individualistic, anthropocentric, materialistic, and non-local ways of thinking across the globe has massive eco-cognitive implications.

While these critiques are valuable, focusing solely on criticism of the language amounts to soiling the nest we are living in. After all, English is currently the language of this journal and the primary language for most research and pedagogical resources in environmental education. If English lags in promoting ecological ways of being, it's time to examine our waste management and clean-up our homes. Care, attention, and appreciation for the language may help to renew relationships between the natural world and those humans who are alienated there from. This effort may also allow us to better diagnose what ails us while imagining richer relational ways of being in and with the world.

Many of the astute critiques of English originate in the same foundational issue: English, in its structure and often in its cultural usage tends to promote fragmented, compartmentalized, individualistic, alienated, and object-oriented thinking. To put it another way, at core, English orients toward objects and individuals rather than relationships—or the act of relating. The prioritization of objects may shift speakers' focus toward material, economic, and consumer goals. The prioritization of individuals can lead to hierarchies which in turn motivates competition and the promotion of self-centered needs, often at the expense of others, whether those others are humans, plants, animals, mountainsides, or waterways. In these ways, English provides a cognitive template of the spatial world that is populated primarily by objects and individuals.

Similarly, English provides a cognitive template for the temporal world that is also troubled. English offers artificial disconnections of time. These dynamics occur on multiple levels of the language. For example, "year," "century," and "day" do not contain the same root form, implying a lack of relationship between them. Chawla (1991) argued that because English time words are countable nouns, they are treated "as if they are touch-and-see objects" (p. 256) rather than experiential events with blurred boundaries and complex interdependencies. This disjunction promotes the notion that the past is "over" and can no longer impact the present. In reality, the intertwined atrocities of Indigenous genocide and ecocide reverberate painfully across the continent in the present moment and shadow the future. Rushworth (2020) observed, "Where we wreak havoc in the world comes from how we see time and space, among other fundamental visions" (p. 135). He continued:

> The grammar and the vision are a product of the image of time, the picture that time is given. People can look back on the timeline, back toward the feathers on the arrow, but they do not see Indians in the future, not in the National [American] Mind. The pain of this limited vision is all around us, a deep struggle for Indigenous people, whose internal structures present an altogether different image of time and space." (p. 136)

Object-oriented and individualistic English does not readily lend to reconciliation with land and with the Original-and-Continuing-Through-to-Future Peoples of this Land.

Unsurprisingly, numerous scholars—from new materialists to animists to posthumanists to Indigenous—have identified that a relational worldview is more in harmony with an ecological worldview (Kuchta, 2022, p. 57). The relational worldview emerges from an ontology centered around relationships rather than objects or individuals. Humans exist and can best be understood as a network of relationships. Our contexts, communities, cultures shape, sustain, and create the "I" as it is understood within that frame. There is no detached, autonomous being enclosed by a thin wall of skin. The Earth's gravitational and spatial relationship to the sun creates the conditions for all biological life on Earth to exist.

Scholars in differing fields have leaned into relational ontologies from different angles. Educational Psychologist Darcia Narvaez (2016) spelled out the science of these interconnections when she wrote, "at the quantum level everyone on earth is connected; at the biological level, humans share DNA with virtually every other entity and each person is a community of microorganisms" (p. 8). Ethnobotanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) clarified the relational ontology from the perspective of Anishinaabe beliefs in reciprocity:

> We are all bound by a covenant of reciprocity: plant breath for animal breath, winter and summer, predator and prey, grass and fire, night and day, living and dying. Water knows this, clouds know this. Soil and rocks know they are dancing in a continuous giveaway of making, unmaking, and making again the earth. (p. 383)

In the field of theology, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (as paraphrased by Delio, 2017) believed, "union precedes being because love is the core energy of evolution and love is intrinsically relational" (p. x). Rather than having to work to prove that all things are connected—as so many of us English speakers do—perhaps we can begin to shift the language and create a more relationally oriented foundation.

Gifts of the English Language

For all its flaws and ugly and ongoing contributions to colonialism and ecological degradation, the inherent gifts of the English language (because *all* languages contain gifts) can potentially be used to respond to and perhaps overcome some of its aforementioned weaknesses. As a language, English is unusually flexible and adaptable. It is unusually forward-leaning. Already the largest vocabulary on the planet (Kimmerer, 2017, p. 128), astoundingly, English adds over 2000 new words every year (OED, 2021). Although we may not necessarily want to encourage this voracious appetite for new words (rapaciousness being an ethical downfall associated with the language), perhaps this keen adaptability can be ethically and creatively guided. This writing identifies some of the features of English that can flex, expand, or adapt to reflect more relational and ecological perspectives. Earlier, we characterized language as a nest because all languages hold their speakers. But in reality, each individual language is a unique species with attributes and features of its own.

Thus, metaphorically, English may be more of a water-strider than a nest. English is light and quick and deft, floating like the strider on top of the water, changing directions with panache, and sparkling in the sun. English skims across semiotic surfaces rather than whirlpooling listeners into the slow depths of history, order, or nuance. Quickness constitutes a different kind of genius, that of spontaneity, nimbleness, even playfulness. Since its earliest days, English has readily adopted words from other languages. Indeed, what we think of

as "English" is a mixed foundation of Germanic, Dutch, and Romance words. This multicultural linguistic foundation naturally lends itself to a multicultural cognitive capacity that might even allow room for expressions, words, usages, ways of thinking that come from more relational depths. Making a relational shift in the language may be possible due to the language's remarkable flexibility, adaptability, and innovation.

This is an exploratory paper, intended to spark conversation and further investigation into the relational/ecological possibilities of English. It is not an invitation to create linguistic obstacle courses that only the most "woke-of-woke" academics can carry out. Rather than offer prescriptions, shoulds, and ought-to's, this paper is an open invitation for everyone to *play* with language in ways that are inclusive and joyful. Yet, what begins as experimentation can take root fairly quickly with the general public when a shift in language is overdue and much needed. Consider, for example, the adoption and mental shift accompanying gender-neutral word changes from fire*man* to firefighter, from post*man* to postal *worker*, and from *he/she* to *they*. Similarly, consider the shift in the national Canadian mind when the term "Indian" in reference to Indigenous peoples shifted to "First Nations" in government documents, political speech, journalism, and education. Words matter. As Haraway (2017) noted, "it matters . . . what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions" (p. 12).

Broadly speaking, and for the sake of clarity, we see relational shifts in English occurring at two main levels: 1) Structure: punctuation, word choice, and grammar, and 2) Usage: form and content. Of course, the two levels are linked, and our goal is not to further underscore the fragmenting and fracturing—the bits and pieces—qualities of structure and usage English. Rather, we are suggesting that at all levels, micro to macro, we can employ the language in ways that are more or less relational. We can prioritize and facilitate connections and illustrate the linkages that in some ways were always present but were rendered invisible by language. Rather than think of English punctuation, word choice, grammar, form, and content as pebbles in one's hand, consider them as nodes, links, gatherings in a multidimensional web, linking past-present-future, linking semiotics to ontologies, and linking creative intuition to action (Ross and Mannion, 2012).

1) Structure

1.1) Playing with Punctuation

Creative-minded academics in a variety of fields are already playing with punctuation to highlight the betweenness of objects, concepts, and beings. For example, Bayo Akomolafe, a "renegade academic" and Nigerian scholar (Young, 2020), uses dashes to disrupt English-language conceptions of divided, categorical time. Akomolafe writes (2018) that the "*middle-ing space* . . . gives

birth to beginnings and endings" (n. p.), and in doing so, he mends (with a dash and a gerund) traditionally disconnected notions of time in English and clarifies (with an explanation) the overlapping, entangled, and ongoing nature of beginnings and endings.

In addition to time references, scholars and writers are using dashes and joined words to heighten awareness of pre-existing relationships in realms that may otherwise escape notice. With poetic insight, Akomolafe (2018) reminds readers of common but unethical links between biology, law, and racial profiling/implicit bias with another hyphenation: "gut-microbial-courtrooms" (n. p.). He writes, "What stirred in spacetime or squirmed in gut-microbial-courtrooms when that white Starbucks store employee called the Philadelphia police on two black men, who had committed no crime except to delay their orders?" (n. p.). Dashes, in this instance, allow for lightning-quick communication of complex interconnections. Feminist, scholar, and cultural critic Donna Haraway (2016), whose work centers on relationality and "tentacular thinking" (p. 31) makes a similar move when she references "techno-apocalypses" (p. 3), an easily understood concept for readers. In another move, however, Haraway (2016) abandons the dash with similar effect when she refers to "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (p. 2). "Timeplace" is a creative invention that collapses imaginary divides between temporal and spatial realities in the context of climate change and other planetary degradations.

In the same way that dashes and joined words can visually link words, thus, highlighting inherent connections, dashes can also divide singular words to prompt new understanding. Both Haraway and Akomolafe use dashes in this way, prompting pause and reconsideration over familiar words. For example, in the above passage, Haraway divides 'responsibility' into "response-ability," implying that responsibility should not merely be a quiet inward feeling of duty but is about actually *responding* and taking action (p. 2). Akomolafe's use of the dividing dash also implies an action. He writes (2018), "This is why we re-turn to DNA. Because 'it' now unfolds within the Anthropocene—a time of blurred boundaries, a time of noticed confusion when essences and static identities have become untenable" (n. p.). "Re-turn" suggests physical motion—as if physically returning to an unfinished past—and simultaneously spiralling down the down the double helix of DNA, our ancestral inheritance.

Where Haraway and Akomolafe use dashes, marie diane caroline lefebvre[1] (2017), "a scholar of Mohawk and French ancestry," favours parenthetical additions and divisions to similar effect (p. iii). Her cousin to Akomolafe's "re-turn" is the "retu(r)ning" to the essentialness of the natural environment in Indigenous education—an invitation to *return*, to re*tune* the relationship, and perhaps, *tune* into or *re-tune* into those relationships (p. i). Her scholarship was driven in part by a yearning "to (re)connect with the ancestors" (p. 70). Her parenthetical nesting here of "(re)" reminds readers that we are never

disconnected or unconnected from ancestors, though perhaps the connections float below the level of consciousness. In another illustration of parenthetical nesting, she writes of the tall grasses, "I loved how they swayed because I saw them as (m)*Other* earth's hair, a place of (dis)entanglement where I could be both lost and found" (p. 70). With these creative punctuations, lefebvre harkens to the oppression and marginalization of the "other," in this case, the earth. Indeed, the parenthesis in "(m)*Other*" creates a fleeting stutter in the reader's mind, as if there is some discomfort, an acknowledgement perhaps, of the perceived impoliteness of identifying oppression and relating to the oppressed while also likely leaning into quantum physics understandings of "entanglement" between self as mother and other and the familiar grasses. lefebvre draws our attention to her connection with the grass in being and identity, across time and space. But lefebvre's moment in the grass is also one of momentary *dis*engagement, a deliberate cognitive "(dis)entanglement, perhaps from mainstream society, urbanity, and/or the human-made world." Like the wampum belts she writes about, lefebvre literally "speaks to a different or (an)*Other* way of knowing/seeing/reading the world" (p. 73). Her parenthetical nests reveal to readers all that is embedded—the political, emotional, quantum, and metaphysical—within her relationships to earth, grass, words, history, stories, wampum belts, and ancestors.

In Estella's example, "Sticks-Octopus-I" is used to illustrate a momentary unity of direction as, "Sticks-Octopus-I ventured awkwardly toward Ocean's edge." Consider the alternative, written in conventional English: "I ventured awkwardly toward the edge of the ocean, using sticks to balance the octopus." In this writing, "I" is the centre, "I" alone is animated, and "I" alone takes action. This sense of the human as the lone, vital action taker disappears in the subtle use of more capital letters and the omission of the article "the" to underscore the sense of a meeting occurring between and amongst beings rather than *things*. If we write "Tide had already pulled away, leaving Octopus stranded," the feeling is more intimate and familiar than if we write, "The tide had already pulled away, leaving the octopus stranded." "The" turns Tide and Octopus into objects whereas its omission implies a relational intimacy. And, in this example Estella is encountering a particular Octopus, as she might encounter a particular Anika or Aubrey, and not octopuses or humans writ large or as a generic category. Without these considerations the ocean, sticks, and octopus remain mere objects which "I" can manipulate, use, approach, or choose to encounter. If this conventional, object-oriented writing style does anything at all to suggest relationship, it is only to reinforce a belief in human superiority in relationship to non-human ("non" placed here intentionally and not unproblematically) entities. As a creative and relational practice, environmental education students could be asked to take a paragraph of their own writing and rewrite it using punctuation and capitalization to illustrate relationships between beings and concepts.

1.2] Playing with Word Creation and Loanwords

As an unusually expansive and adaptable language, English readily adopts new words, whether creations from English (e.g. craftivist, denialism, idiocracy), combination English-foreign words (farmette), or loanwords from other languages, such these Algonquian words: moose, chipmunk, persimmon (Chamberlain, 1902, p. 240). This multicultural nature of the language is built into the origins of the language itself. On the positive side, it builds on a foundation of diversity and inclusivity, and on the dubious side, that foundation includes an economic orientation and an ongoing colonialist legacy. A relational shift in the English language is not about making a colonialist "grab" at words from other languages and cultures. Rather, it means flexing the structures and making space for other language speakers to bring words and phrasing into English when suitable translations or meanings don't exist. It also means continuing the kind of creativity and flexibility inherent in the language that allows us to say things like: Those craftivists are putting knit bikinis on fir trees to protest climate denialism and the idiocracies that fuel it.

How can the inclusion—whether fleeting or permanent—of foreign words be done ethically? Ho and Chang (2021) illustrate one way. They recognized a gap in practices, concepts, and ideals of North American outdoor education. According to Ho and Chang, white-dominated environmental education programs privilege concepts and practices related to adventure, athleticism, and pristine wilderness, and sideline many immigrant experiences of the natural world such as generational gardening practices and village and urban relationships within the more-than-human. As native Taiwanese Mandarin speakers, they introduce the term *xiang tu* (**鄉土**) to expand awareness of human relationships to land. They explain:

> *Xiang tu* is a unifying concept that captures interconnectedness of people and place, the non-generalizable nature of land. In essence, the land is both people and place. Xiang tu evokes people's memories of home, of belonging, of contact with soil, the sensory cords that tie people to place. Xiang tu is neither wild nor urban, neither an exotic paradise, nor a frenetic metropolis, but instead references the multivalent space of human/land relations in its variegated forms . . . *Xiang tu* points to the nourishing effect of land, of the formative influence of place in the development of person and consciousness. (p. 10)

It would be difficult to imagine a word in English—even a hyphenated collection of words—that cultivates in the mind of speakers such depth and subtly of relationship between people and place. However, even when a foreign word has been presented, it may or may not be offered as a give-away. When in doubt, speakers might simply ask if the word is available for wider use and if their use of the word is doing justice to its original linguistic intent. Even if it is, those who are gifting words and those receiving them may want to bear in mind

that words, just like people, tend to shift in character, often inadvertently and unknowingly, when in a new location.

Haraway (2016) explains another example of a new adopted word: *chthulucene*. Chthulucene presents a more embodied and engaged way to live of this timespace in light of ongoing and catastrophic ecological degradation than the word *Anthropocene* which inaccurately piles blame on 'humans' rather than on particular values and practices of particular populations of techno-industrialized humans. Haraway articulates:

> [C]*hthulucene* is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthon* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth. (p. 2)

Greek is not an entirely 'foreign' language to English, as Greek helped shape Latin and French, which in turn, have helped shape English.

Drawing from her French ancestry, lefebvre remakes numerous English words into more meaningful English-French hybrids. For example, in French, the word "histoire" means both "story" and "history," so lefebvre sets "histoire" alongside "history" to emphasize the narrative aspect of history for English speakers (2017, p. iii). By using "elle" the French word for "she" in "*Elle*mental," lefebvre also links the feminine nature of Mother Earth to the elements (p. i). Environmental education students might be asked to research and consider nature-related words from their own linguistic heritage (such as *komorebi* from Japanese, *hiraeth* from Welsh), and whether, how, and when it might be appropriate to bring those words into English writing and discussion.

1.3) Playing with Verbing

Sometimes it's only possible to understand the character of a language when compared to another. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) encountered this experience while trying to learn the Indigenous language of her ancestors: Potawatomi. She reported, "English is a noun-based language, somehow appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things. Only 30% of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi that proportion is 70%" (p. 130). As Kimmerer points out, the consequence of increased verbing (yes, that is a word) is that beings in the natural world take on greater animacy and, thus, centrality and importance in the collective imagination. In Potawatomi, words we commonly think of as "things" are verbs, such as Saturday, a sandy beach, or a bay (Kimmerer, 2017). "A bay" in English is a static thing, while in Potawatomi, a bay is "being a bay" or, if we may, "bay*ing*."

Kimmerer does not suggest that the English language should adopt Indigenous features, and nor do we. Yet, without trying to mimic other traditions, English may allow for more verbing in its own right. After all, verbing is another fast-moving, adaptable feature of the language. Consider

the many words that began as nouns and became verbs, such as othering, emailing, texting, and adulting.[2]

In fact, might we offer a new verbing word: *humaning*? At a recent conference of outdoor educators, one young academic said she always felt so bad stepping on the grasses. She talked about reducing her 'footprint' on the natural world by eating only vegan food. Another young scholar looked unconvinced. She explained (we are paraphrasing): 'Bears can walk on the grasses. Lions can hunt and eat prey. I'm allowed to be a human and do human things.' *Humaning* means wrestling with these kinds of questions. It means making environmentally-minded but possibly incorrect choices, such as returning a severely injured or deceased octopus to the ocean. The word clarifies that being human is a changeable, challengeable, and processional state, open for debate and change, by no means static or fixed. It means wrestling with what it means to be human or do humaning well in relation to all our kin, human and the rest of burbling, buzzing, basking denizens on this planet. It means trying to hold to a sense of obligation to Nature's other beings, with recognition that humans are fallible and don't always make the right choices even when trying.

Environmental education students can likely readily think of many examples of *humaning*. And they might be asked: What additional nouns might be shifted from static to active forms through verbing? How can adding -ing illustrate additional ecological on-goings, beingness, and relationships?

2) Usage

2.1) Examining cultural assumptions and the problem of N(n)ature

It has long been noted in feminist circles that to position women using natural metaphors is often done in deeply derogatory ways (Plumwood, 2002). Patriarchal language finds ways to first separate, often through binaries, and then associate the female with other "lesser than" beings thereby reifying male superiority. The same move is easily noticed in relation to other, often non-English language, cultures as the colonizer searches for power over. For our purposes here this is problematic for two reasons. First, the intentional use of language as a means to denigrate any other groups of humans is problematic and certainly doesn't support relationality. And second, the cultural assumptions built into these moves often don't even allow the question of why being metaphorically linked to the natural world is derogatory. For what is so wrong with being an ass, a snake, a wallflower, a dog, and so on? And, how do we come to notice these assumptions and better yet, find ways to change them?

As in all languages, many cultural assumptions are built into the form of the English language. For example, the natural world has been positioned and articulated in heteronormative ways—and then that positioned heteronormativity is used to "prove" or affirm those assumptions. This is a kind of manipulative

bridge-burning tautology. Mortimer-Sandilands's (2010) research in this area examines how biology, for example, laced with heteronormativity has supposedly "found" gendered behaviour throughout the animal world. For example, male researchers will focus on the "dominant" heterosexual behaviour of the silver back gorilla and not notice all the other goings on between and amongst the rest of the troop. Subsequently, this limited vision is picked up by the mainstream culture and used as a linguistic weapon against LGBTQ2S+ populations suggesting that they are "unnatural" even though, as many other researchers have been pointing out, the diversity of gender expression and sexuality of the natural world, or even that particular troop of gorillas, is certainly not normed to some monogamous heterosexual Truth.

These examples are striking, but less obvious forms of English also maintain alienation. Forests are seen as a "resource," open plains as "bread-baskets," and herds of deer and antelopes as "game." However, the obvious example in ESE involves the words used for all those beings around us that are not human. The binary language of nature and the environment have been rightfully critiqued as furthering and sustaining this problematic alienation of humans from the world. Binary language is also a colonizing way of lumping immense diversity into a single category in the way settler colonial cultures have done for centuries with diverse communities (Blenkinsop et al, 2017). For example, gathering an entire continent of diverse peoples, cultures, languages, and ecosystems into a single word "Africa" and then making overgeneralized or power-over statements therewith. This said, we are still challenged to find something to adequately position humans as being *part* of the world, not separate from or better than. Abram (1996), for example, tried to do this work with the term *more-than-human*. However, the result has often been to simply use it in place of *environment* or *nature*, which was not Abram's goal and is a misuse of the term as he envisioned. Our little nod in this direction, for example, is to acknowledge the particularity of the encountered Octopus in the opening of the introduction with a capital.

Finally, we might consider the form of the typical English essay, a structure that contains an externally-prescribed organizational pattern. This form does not reflect the diversity of available communication, but rather promotes homogeneity, dependency on a singular style that sorts, almost immediately, those in the know and those that aren't but that also leans towards a kind of objective argumentation no self-respecting hummingbird would countenance. Alternatively, English writing projects could be "transformed by ecological principles" in order to "acknowledge our ecological interconnectedness" (Englehardt & Schraffenberger, p. 273), such as Tsing's book chapters blooming like "flushes of mushrooms" (2015, p. viii), Kimmerer's stories woven like sweetgrass (2015), and Powers's old growth interdependencies (2018). Traditional essays are largely structured for reader efficiency, to allow for skimming and quick consumption. But efficiency and consumption are problematic features

from an ecological perspective. The typical English essay structure also hints at colonialist tendencies since it makes a 'claim' almost as soon as arriving and unwaveringly fulfills that claim to the end.

Instead, students could be asked create diversified writings inspired by the organizational design patterns of foxglove, ocean waves, or bee dances, wherein "introductions," for example, are replaced by conceptual "stems," "primary rhythms," or "waggle angles." For further inspiration, students might read Noel Gough's "RhizomANTics," which plays with rhizomatic thinking, posthuman pedagogies, and, of course, ants.

2.2] Examining Kinship terms, favoured sayings, and the question of "It"

A number of creative possibilities exist that emphasize a relational ontology in English. For example, Chawla (1991) has reminded us that many Indigenous languages use kinship terms in reference to more-than-humans (p. 118). Among the Cherokee, the "new moon is addressed as grandfather," while "Among the Pueblo, the sun is the father . . . and the earth is the mother" (Chawla, p. 118). These are not likely "anthropomorphic" descriptions in the true sense of the word, as Chawla once suggested (1991, p. 118). Rather, they are suggestive of a depth and quality of a very real relationship, similar to how Indonesians might refer to beloved older men as *Bapak* ("father") and women as *Ibu* ("mother"). The term is a sign of respect, a recognition of the relationship that is possible, and an openness to that relationship—not an attempt to claim a biological relationship.

Again, the point is not to imitate the speech of Indonesians or Cherokee. In fact, those are exactly the kind of superficial, self-serving enactments that echo English's long history of colonialism. Even a term frequently used in English, such as "Mother Earth," can be problematic depending on the context and speaker. After all, in North America, mainstream culture tends to sideline and devalue mothers. On screens and other media, mothers are often portrayed as unattractive and undesirable but endlessly self-sacrificing women who strive—or should strive—for heroic parenting feats at the expense of their own needs. Food appears, laundry is done, waste is removed as if by magic and the "family" neither notices or cares for the doer nor worries that mother might become exhausted and incapable of keeping this up. Referring to the planet as "Mother Earth" may, sadly and accidentally reflect how much she does for us with little to no recognition. When used without conscious thought by the dominant culture, the term may be accurate but not remotely ecological. It offers nothing for many individuals in terms of decentering the human and aligning with a more ecological relationality. The point is that more attention can be paid to the implied content of the words we use.

Individual English speakers might look honestly at their own relationships to the natural beings around them and consider what linguistic adjustments might authentically reflect and serve those relationships. For example, in writing about octopus, "they" was used instead of "it" to underscore a felt closeness and as

recognition of Octopus's rights to be known as they might desire. Environmental education students might be asked to engage in this as an exercise: What terms, verbs, and phrases most accurately articulate your relationship to the natural world—both the actual relationship and the ideal?

Finally, we want to identify some playful possibilities that English might provide as it moves toward greater eco-relationality. For example, while considering this paper we wondered, in an attempt to reverse the use of natural beings as human insults, what taunts our natural kin might use on each other. Jellyfish might notice how a friend moved as if it had a *skeleton* or Mouse might point out the worrisome human-like shoulders on a sibling or Cheetah laughing at its mates slow two-leggedness. This flip in frame has become a useful tool in many of the classrooms we work with as teachers and students re-think expressions – "killing two birds with one stone" – in more ecological forms – "feeding two birds with one hand." Students can be asked to consider other ecologically problematic idioms and suggest revisions. Teachers can also change the stories they read and tell (Blenkinsop, 2010) in order to undo myriad manifestations in language of these alienated, hierarchical, and species elitist cultural assumptions.

Conclusion and Caveats

Moving toward a more relational English in whatever manner can reveal challenges while also centralizing inherent relationships that may otherwise fly under the radar in standard English communication. These ecolinguistic moves can potentially emphasize the wholistic, nonlinear nature of time and highlight inequities and injustices. They offer a shorthand way to relay complex concepts to readers with brevity and fleetness. They clarify how meanings and matter lean into each other and share space. On the other hand, not all creative linguistic changes highlight relationality—at least not in the ecocentric relational ontology sense. And many ecolinguistic moves may begin a process but, upon further review, may themselves be changed or even retired.

Loanwords from other languages need to be handled with care. The same can be said for "adopting" Indigenous kinship terms in reference to Nature's many beings. Although loanwords and kinship terms illustrate meaningful ways to enrich the relational capacity of the language, ethical issues of appropriation and misuse are risks. On the other hand, drawing from one's own heritage or the linguistic origins of English can be a playful and rewarding way to expand the cognitive carrying capacity of singular words, sayings, and metaphors.

Environmental education students can play with language by writing their own Octopussing tales. In doing so, they might be encouraged to play with punctuation, capitalization, word joining, verbing, and other flexes of the English language. They might counter colonial practices and enact ongoing reconciliations by identifying the origin of loan words and giving thanks for

those gifts as well as recognizing the inherent link between words and place. They might find ways to decentralize the human "I" and foreground the often backgrounded stories of flora and fauna. In doing so, they might experiment with diverse modes of expression; rather than writing traditional "essays," for example, they might creatively craft literary versions of iris blooms, dragonfly wings, or wind patterns by rethinking direction and theme along with the structure of sentences and paragraphs, and overall organizational design along ecological principles.

Of course, not all language experiments survive. Even promising, much needed, and well-considered linguistic experiments (shout out to all the "zhe" fans!) sometimes fail to take root. In addition to the obvious ethical pitfalls of carelessly appropriating from other languages and cultures, shifts in English risk coming across as trite or gimmicky. Perhaps even worse, they risk becoming exclusionary; meaning, English and the politics surrounding it are changing so rapidly, sometimes only those on the very cutting edge know what's going on. Meanwhile, those who haven't gotten the latest memos can be unfairly chastised, excluded, and called out. If we're going to open up the invitation to play with language, let's make sure everyone is invited into the party, no matter how recently they arrived. After all, what's the point of becoming more relational if it results in more exclusion? If English has been an unwitting vehicle for oppression—of peoples, Nature, and places—then the reconciliation necessarily involves more liberation for all.

Notes

1 A side project for you the reader: Consider lefebvre's choice to lower case their name.

2 Sean and Estella have recently co-authored a book called Ecologizing Education although "ecologizing" is not officially part of the OED yet.

Notes On Contributors

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