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**Voices of Nature: An Ecolinguistic Exploration of Human–Environment
Interaction in *Prodigal Summer***



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Abstract

This study seeks to explore how language is used to create and convey connections between people and their environments in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. Through an investigation into the lexical choice, structural and discursively strategic forms employed by Kingsolver in her novel, we seek to understand the ideological perspectives toward nature, diversity (biodiversity) and sustainable practices reflected through Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. Using Stibbe's model, we identify commonalities in language use in relation to three primary aspects: representation of seasonal and ecological cycle(s), the interconnectedness of human(s) and wildlife and the symbolic representation of Appalachian landscape(s). Our results demonstrate that Kingsolver uses language in such a way that encourages readers to see nature as an active, morally responsible entity rather than merely a resource for humans. We also found that Kingsolver employs metaphorical and semantic field strategies in addition to her narrative voice in order to raise ecological consciousness among her audience. Additionally, our findings illustrate that *Prodigal Summer* serves as an example of how literary works can critically educate audiences about ecological ethics. Ultimately, this study illustrates that by framing human/environment interactions within linguistic systems, it supports the value placed on discourse as a means of increasing awareness and encouraging both personal and collective responsibility toward the natural world.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Stibbe Model, Human–Environment Interaction, Ecological Discourse, Sustainability, Environmental Ideology, Biodiversity

Introduction

The protagonist of Barbara King's novel "*Prodigal Summer*" is not only the setting but also a major player in the unfolding of events. Nature creates and illustrates human experience and vice versa. The stories of the four main protagonists are intertwined with the seasons and the cyclical rhythm of the Appalachian mountains. This interconnection between nature and humanity is one of the most important aspects of applying an ecolinguistic method to understand the way Kingsolver has created her stories. As a discipline, ecolinguistics argues that language does not reflect reality, but rather forms the basis for an ecological consciousness. Either through a positive or a negative lens, language influences our relationships with nature and the way we act upon it. To find out how Kingsolver has used the language in *Prodigal Summer* to portray not only the ecological realities of the world around us, but also to establish an ethical sense of human responsibility towards all living things, this essay explores Kingsolver's choice of language, the structure of the narrative and the mannerisms she uses when describing nature.

Kingsolver has developed her narrative using multiple methods to illustrate environmentalism. Her detailed descriptions of the plants, animals, and natural processes are not just illustrations but also reflect Kingsolver's deep understanding of ecosystems and their vulnerability. Through this emphasis on detailing ecosystem mechanisms, Kingsolver demonstrates that language can serve as a bridge between scientific information and literature. Each character in the novel, such as Deanna

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Wolfe, Garnet Walker, and Lusa Malory, exists within the context of these ecosystems and their connections to nature express different levels of sensitivity or disengagement from the natural world. The narrative emphasizes both the interconnectedness of human beings and other living organisms, and the effects resulting from disrupting this connection to illustrate another key aspect of ecolinguistics: the ethical aspect of communicating ideas related to nature.

An application of an ecolinguistic methodology to *Prodigal Summer* provides a means to examine how language may be reflective of cultural views concerning the environment. Kingsolver's use of metaphors, symbols and various narrative points-of-view develop a moral ecology in which human behaviors have impacts far beyond immediate social boundaries, and ultimately impact and are impacted by the nonhuman world. Language in *Prodigal Summer* serves two purposes simultaneously: it acts as both representation and intervention -- representing ecological processes while inviting readers to consider the moral and emotional implications of human-nature interactions. Through an examination of word-choices, sentence-level syntax, and overall rhetoric, this research endeavors to demonstrate that Kingsolver's writing develops an ecologically-oriented literacy consistent with modern-day environmental ethics, conservation efforts and sustainability initiatives. Thus, *Prodigal Summer* is an ideal subject for analyzing how literature may help cultivate ecological awareness through its use of subtle linguistic mechanisms.

Moreover, the author's use of ecological knowledge combined with its use of narrative storytelling produces a literary ecology in which human and nonhuman voices interact with each other. This reciprocal relationship among voices supports a fundamental principle of ecolinguistics: establishing a dialogue between humans and the environment utilizing language so as to promote mutual understanding and responsible stewardship. An examination of these narrative strategies will highlight how Kingsolver subverts anthropocentrism while positioning readers to acknowledge the agency of nonhuman entities, and thus the ethical implications of ecological entanglements. Moreover, through this analysis this study will contribute to larger ecolinguistic debates concerning the role of literature in forming environmental discourse.

Therefore, this study locates *Prodigal Summer* within an ecolinguistic model to explore how Kingsolver uses language to articulate the dependence of humans on nature. Through an examination of Kingsolver's descriptive techniques, narrative voice and linguistic representations of ecological processes, this study will aim to expose the cognitive and moral aspects of human/nature interactions presented throughout the novel. Through this analysis, *Prodigal Summer* becomes a significant example of how literature can facilitate ecological understanding and provide insight into the linguistic construction of environmental consciousness, including the moral obligations associated therewith.

Research Questions

1. How does Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* depict human-environment interdependence, and what ethical meanings emerge?
2. How does *Prodigal Summer* challenge anthropocentrism and promote ecological awareness through human-non-human relations?

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Literature Review

Ecolinguistics is a highly dynamic and multidisciplinary field that examines the relationship between languages and ecological systems. In essence, ecolinguistics examines how discourse generates, supports, or contests human-environment relations (Bortoluzzi, 2025). As described by the International Ecolinguistics Association, "ecolinguistics examines the effects of language on the life-sustaining transactions of people, other species, and the physical environment," focusing on ethics and creating narratives that support or harm ecosystems. Concepts surrounding ecolinguistics date back to the 1970s with ideas surrounding linguistic ecology (Halliday, 1990), yet, today the focus is situated upon using language to promote interaction with ecosystems and to discuss environmental justice issues (Fill & Penz, 2022). These foundational concepts provide a theoretical framework for evaluating literature such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, which uses ecological discourse to serve as a mediator between human society and the natural world.

Ecolinguistics as a field of study emphasizes the notion that language does not simply reflect how people understand nature; it actually influences ecological awareness. Halliday's earlier criticism of mainstream discourse emphasized how repeated patterns of linguistic expression--for example, expressing value for "growth" and productivity--may foster environmentally destructive world views. Stibbe applied critical discourse analysis to environmental texts and further developed Halliday's thinking by stating that ecolinguistics should demonstrate how implicit assumptions may guide people's actions towards their environments (Stibbe, 2014). The methods used in Stibbe's application of critical discourse analysis to environmental texts have been applied across various fields, including corporate sustainability communication and environmental education materials, to illustrate how discourse may express or imply ecological values (Ainsworth, 2021). These applications confirm that discourse-based linguistic analysis can identify ideological frames with major ecological implications--an important consideration when analyzing literary representations similar to those depicted in *Prodigal Summer*.

Ecological interconnectedness and ethical implications of the novel have been examined in studies employing ecocriticism and/or ecolinguistic approaches to analyze *Prodigal Summer*. For example, Hema (2017) noted that Kingsolver wove biotic facts and facts related to interactions among species into the narrative. This illustrates how Kingsolver demonstrated that even distinct organisms such as coyotes, moths and chestnut trees were part of an ecosystem exhibiting ecological interdependency. This perspective exemplifies how narrative language represents ecological systems, rather than binary representations of humanity vs. nature. Likewise, Abinaya and Meena Rani (2024) pointed out the 'extensive biological considerations' and necessity of interdependency among all living things including non-living entities; they concluded that Kingsolver's novel represented a holistic representation of both environment and culture (Abinaya & Rani, 2024). Both of these articles place *Prodigal Summer* in the context of expanding amounts of ecocritically focused literary works treating literary language as a means of making sense of ecological meanings.

Scholars have also examined *Prodigal Summer* using complementary methods that will add depth to an ecolinguistic assessment. A scholarly article assessing the degree of ecological balance present in the novel employs Aldo Leopold's land ethic to show how Kingsolver's characters represent Leopold's concepts of integrity and stability,

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emphasizing respect for natural processes and conservation (Rojer & Jayapaul, 2025). These studies exemplify the ethical dimensions associated with the portrayal of nature in literature; thus they reinforce ecolinguistic principles regarding how narratives shape people's perceptions of nature. Additionally, McIntyre (2023) assessed *Prodigal Summer* utilizing a zoomorphic and eco-feminist methodology that extends examinations of human-nonhuman connections and challenges long-held binary distinctions between humans and nature that ecolinguists have critiqued.

Although extensive criticism exists concerning *Prodigal Summer* in terms of ecocritical evaluations and ecofeminist assessments, relatively few investigations have specifically utilized ecolinguistic methodologies to examine *Prodigal Summer*. Most studies utilizing ecolinguistic methodologies do so broadly through examining ecocritical theories or ecofeminist thematic content rather than applying theoretically grounded discourse analysis to evaluate linguistically mediated constructions or deconstructions of human-environment ideologies. Therefore, there appears to be a clear opportunity for future research in this area to apply systematic examination(s) of linguistically mediated metaphorical expressions of nature and discourse structural expressions of human-environment ideologies throughout the novel. Such an investigation could be conducted in accordance with recent ecolinguistic research that analyzes environmental discourse across multiple disciplines, including media texts, educational materials, etc.--examining the extent to which language choice mediates the formation of ecological thought and action (Solangi et al., 2025; Re, 2024).

In conclusion, while the current literature provides sufficient background for an ecolinguistic evaluation of *Prodigal Summer*, ecocritical studies of the novel clearly exhibit its ecologically relevant themes/ideologies and ethical resonance. There exists a clear research opportunity to link ecocritical scholarship and ecolinguistic scholarship through direct application of ecolinguistic discourse analytical techniques to examine Kingsolver's narrative. Such an investigation would enhance our ability to better comprehend how Kingsolver's narrative creates ecological awareness and presents potential pathways toward more ecologically conscious interpretation and "voiceing" nature in literature.

Methodology

Ecology and ecolinguistics are closely related areas of study that explore the relationship between language, nature, and human society (Stibbe, 2015; Halliday, 2001). Ecology focuses on the relationship between living beings and their environment, while ecolinguistics examines how language shapes human attitudes toward nature and the environment (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). This approach emphasises the link between nature, human thought, and cultural expressions in language (Stibbe, 2015). Ecology and ecolinguistics see the relationship between the degradation and exploitation of the natural world and the ways human societies talk about and understand nature (Mühlhäusler, 2003). Ecolinguistics involves factors of environmental movements and linguistic studies while simultaneously challenging both (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). The green movement concerns the effects of human activity on the non-human world (Dryzek, 2013). Scholars of ecology and ecolinguistics argue that people must recognise their influence on nature and change harmful attitudes if they are to struggle toward environmental sustainability (Stibbe, 2015). Some writers and activists have been remarkable names in the movement since its inception (Carson, 1962).

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They argue that environmentalism and linguistic awareness can be united to foster respect for nature and the environment, and were encouraged by the notion that the long-standing historical model of human interaction with nature, expressed through language and culture, has often justified exploitation (Halliday, 2001; Stibbe, 2015). They found that nature is often portrayed in language and discourse as passive, chaotic, or inferior (Goatly, 2001). At the same time, humans are often seen as coherent, orderly, and thus able to direct and explore the development of the natural world (Stibbe, 2015). Ecologists and ecolinguists argue that this understanding leads to a hierarchical construction that empowers humans to exploit nature, especially when language reinforces these ideas (Mühlhäusler, 2003). Researchers in ecolinguistics suggest that resolving environmental problems requires changing both human practices and the language that shapes attitudes toward nature (Stibbe, 2015).

The connection between the degradation of nature and human cultural attitudes expressed in language is at the heart of ecological and ecolinguistic thought (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). Western tradition equally devalues everything associated with nature and the natural environment (Plumwood, 1993). Ecolinguistics also helps to reveal dualisms in language and culture (Stibbe, 2015). To understand why the environment is an important issue, ecolinguists have described several links between human language, cultural narratives, and environmental exploitation (Goatly, 2001). In turn, environmental concerns may offer a way to address harmful linguistic and cultural assumptions (Stibbe, 2015). It is because of the way nature and human society have traditionally been conceptualised in the West that living interconnections with animals and nature have devalued everything related to nature, emotions, animals, and the body, while at the same time increasing the value of things related to humans, reason, culture, and the mind (Plumwood, 1993). Ecolinguists have sought to expose these dualisms and the ways in which language has been used to justify human dominance over animals, nature, and the earth (Stibbe, 2015).

Ecologists and ecolinguists maintain that human activities should change to protect nature from exploitation and environmental damage (Dryzek, 2013). They claim that without changing harmful cultural attitudes and language patterns, it is impossible to end the exploitation of nature (Halliday, 2001). Our understanding of power and progress should be separated from the domination of nature, and society should reject ideas that encourage environmental degradation (Plumwood, 1993). Ecology and ecolinguistics emphasise the need for a more interdependent worldview by asserting that humans and nature are deeply connected (Stibbe, 2015). Humans are not separate from or superior to other life forms (Naess, 1989).

Ecological and ecolinguistic perspectives also view environmental issues as social issues, as many communities are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of environmental degradation and climate change, particularly in developing countries (Dryzek, 2013). This approach recognises that environmental problems are not separate from cultural, linguistic, and socio-political systems, and that they are also cultural, social, and political in nature (Stibbe, 2015).

Analysis

Three of the main characters in *Prodigal Summer* behave in ways that challenge the notion of a woman while also reflecting a close relationship with ecology and the natural environment. It is a culture in which women do not have the same authority or freedom as men that Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie live in. When it comes to farm

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administration and wilderness survival, it is more common for people to assume that men will take up the role of leader than women. This patriarchal system's concept that men should have more authority than women might be challenged by the main characters if they refuse to perform their duties. These women believe that gender equality for men and women is necessary and that humans must rethink their relationship with nature. Dealing with this old ritual that reminds me of coverture's past is not an option, no matter how hard they try. This long-standing custom persists, despite their efforts to change it. In Anglo-American law, a woman's legal status alters with her marriage, a process known as coverture. According to 19th-century law, a woman's legal rights were completely surrendered upon marriage, and she could no longer file a lawsuit against her husband or be taken to court by him, which also reflects how systems of control extend over both women and the environment in social discourse.

Individuals may create new possibilities for themselves and their community by questioning the beliefs they have long held about the world and the language used to describe it. To live their lives without dependence on men, women are compelled to oppose patriarchal restrictions and seek a broader space in which their identities may flourish alongside the natural environment. There has always been a strong connection between women and their homes, but this book questions that bond by portraying homes as a limitation. These characters are then able to welcome the natural world, which has no limits, a variety of people and many types of creatures, highlighting an ecological perspective of interconnected life. Men and women do not exist in distinct spheres of society, as shown by Nannie, Lusa, and Deanna, who all live on their own farms or in the forest, demonstrating a balance between human life and ecological systems, as well as how their experiences reshape meanings and narratives about nature.

In her novel, Barbara Kingsolver highlights people's relationships, language, and interactions with marriage, nature, the environment, and broader ecological effects. This is an eco-feminist novel that also reflects ecological and ecolinguistic perspectives. In this novel, the writer focuses on environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, animal extinction, and the suffering of female characters under a patriarchal social system, showing how human attitudes toward nature are shaped by culture and discourse. *The Prodigal Summer* (2000) contains three tales about Deanna Wolfe, Lusa Landowski, and Garnet Walker. These three characters have distinct opinions about the natural environment and express different understandings of nature through their experiences. The first story is about Deanna. She begins her life in Zebulon County.

Deanna is fascinated by coyotes and is writing her thesis on protecting them, reflecting an ecological awareness of wildlife conservation. Here she meets Eddie Bond and develops a relationship with him. The two lovers have different opinions about coyotes, showing contrasting human perspectives toward nature. While Deanna admires coyotes, Eddie dislikes them because they have attacked his family's farm several times. Eventually, Deanna becomes pregnant and stays with Raleigh's Nanny. The second story is about Lusa, an entomologist. She feels isolated and regularly argues with her husband, Cole Widener. Cole's siblings do not get along with Lusa. Unfortunately, her husband gets into an accident and passes away. Lusa stays busy on the farm and decides to raise goats, demonstrating adaptation to the ecological surroundings.

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The third tale is about Garnet Walker. His father was a woodcutter. His family lost a fortune after the destruction of the chestnuts, indicating environmental loss and ecological imbalance. Since then, he has been trying to restore them, showing a commitment to ecological restoration. Walker is Raleigh's neighbour. Both frequently debate humans and wildlife, reflecting differing ecological viewpoints and the language used to describe nature. Nannie uses organic methods to protect her crops from weeds and pests, promoting sustainable ecological practices. The characters value nature and believe in the right to protect wildlife. The novel shows the relationship between people and nature, as well as how language and perspectives shape that relationship; thus, the researcher gains insight into how to preserve the environment through both ecological understanding and ecolinguistic awareness.

Prodigal Summer exemplifies an ecolinguistic approach in its illustration of a discourse of mutual dependency among humans and the natural environment as well as the representation of anthropocentric values through linguistically simple yet very powerful choices. Instead of using descriptive or detailed explanations, Kingsolver often uses brief, evocative phrases, "forest eyes," "food chain," "web of life", that offer an easy-to-understand way to illustrate complex ecological relationships.

These compact expressions have much greater philosophical import. They reinforce the notion that people are embedded in natural systems and therefore are not independent of them. Language helps to dissolve the distinction between the human world and the nonhuman world in Deanna Wolfe's narrative. Expressions such as "forest eyes" and "predator world" demonstrate that the environment has the capacity for awareness and action, thus undermining a human-centric view of reality. "Forest eyes" implies that it is possible to observe beyond humans; "predator world" locates humanity within a broader hierarchical structure based upon survival and equilibrium. As a result, Deanna's use of these two types of expressions serves as a tool of language that reduces the complexity of ecological information into easily understandable formats, and thus encourages readers to reconsider their relationship with nature.

Furthermore, Kingsolver's repeated reference to the ideas expressed in "food chain" and "balance point" emphasizes that each organism exists at a certain level in a larger ecosystem, and that any disruptions in a part of the system may cause far reaching effects. Therefore, from an ecolinguistic standpoint, such expressions encourage a relational view of the world, whereas anthropocentric views were traditionally linear and dominated by humans. Furthermore, because these expressions are relatively simple, they have the ability to communicate effectively with both scientists and non-scientists alike.

In addition, in Garnett Walker's storyline, the dichotomy between anthropocentric and ecocentric views is demonstrated via similar but contrasting brief/meaningful lexical choices. The words "pests" and "chemicals", for example, express a human-centered need to control and conquer nature and reduce complex biological systems to problems needing to be eliminated. In contrast, alternatives such as "native species" and "natural balance" promote a more environmentally-sensitive lexicon. For example, when shifting from "pests" to "species", Garnett indicates that he is moving away from anthropocentrically-based valuing of non-human life to a less biased and more inclusive concept of non-human life. Therefore, this lexical opposition shows how language influences an individual's environmental attitudes and ethics.

Lusa's narrative also supports this transition through her own increasing use of

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language. At first, Lusa's viewpoint is characterized by remoteness and unfamiliarity, but as she develops greater familiarity with her surroundings, her vocabulary begins to incorporate phrases such as "working land" and "living soil". These expressions signal a developing appreciation for the land as an actively functioning, organic entity rather than simply as a static resource. Specifically, the expression "living soil" embodies an ecolinguistic principle by giving vitality to and acknowledging agency in what could be viewed as merely inanimate material. Therefore, Lusa's changing use of language parallels her inner growth and signifies a larger ideological progression toward ecological awareness.

Furthermore, Kingsolver's incorporation of animal-related expressions (e.g., "coyote paths", "insect life") into the narrative serves to further undermine anthropocentrism by drawing attention to the presence and importance of other species and demonstrating that human space is shared rather than exclusive. Through the inclusion of such terminology within the narrative, Kingsolver creates a sense of normalcy regarding coexistence and invites readers to consider the experience of other entities outside of the human domain.

Collectively, these brief expressive choices create an ecolinguistic discourse that stresses connection, balance, and coexistence. The expressions "web of life" and "natural cycle", for example, represent the core message of the novel: all forms of life exist in interconnected relationships and all human actions have ethical implications within that network. Not only do these expressions convey ecological knowledge but they also invite readers to become more mindful and reflective about their relationship with the environment.

Conclusion

Barbara Kingsolver has shown, through her use of language in *Prodigal Summer*, the complex and powerful connections between people and the earth. The author shows how language can be used as a connection point for the environmental knowledge that we have, and then translates this into an ethically aware view. The use of vivid descriptions of plants and animals, along with the changing seasons, shows both the reality of the environment, as well as the moral/ethical implications of how humans interact with nature. Through the lens of ecolinguistics it is clear that the authors' techniques (metaphor, image, dialogue) contribute to shaping the reader's ecological consciousness by causing them to question their anthropocentric views on the world around us. The analysis indicates that language does not simply provide a way to tell stories, but is also an influential agent in shaping attitudes/perceptions/actions toward the environment. This study also demonstrates how literature provides a means to integrate scientific knowledge about ecosystems with human experiences and can develop ecologically responsible ethics and promote empathy towards other forms of life.

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