

A Critical Eco-Linguistic Discourse Analysis of 'The Lorax'

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Abstract

Degradation of the environment and ecological crises are increasingly worrying issues people face globally, yet the mainstream narrative paradoxically endorses a dangerously exploitative outlook toward nature. Children's literature, which greatly impacts growing children, provides a unique groundwork to confront environmental narratives. This paper presents a critical Eco-linguistic discourse analysis (CEDA) of *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. This book is a widely recognized green narrative in children's literature which can be analyzed through Eco-critical lens. Drawing on Arran Stibbe's (2015) framework, the study aims to explore the role of language in shaping environmental values, ideologies, and human-nature relationship. This research adopts qualitative discourse analysis method, to analyzing metaphor, identity, agency and linguistic choices in the text. The findings reveal that the metaphors of consumption show nature as a commodity. The *Lorax* presents criticism of anthropocentric and consumerist ideas. The Once-ler stands for industrial exploitation and ecological irresponsibility. Linguistic choices further emphasize the contrast between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. In this story *The Lorax* character represents ecological agency and speak out against the commodification of nature. The study proposes that sustainable language practices and environmental literacy can be promoted in education by engaging students in eco-critical discussions and eco-centric activities.

Keywords

Eco-linguistics, Discourse analysis, Environmental education, Anthropocentrism, SDG 4

Introduction

In the era of the environmental crisis that is gaining momentum, the language allows to conceptualize human connection to the natural world. In mainstream discourses, anthropocentric and consumerist ideologies can be normalized, where nature is the passive scenery of human development (Stibbe, 2015). The children literature and its shaping power in the early stages of moral and ideological growth is a crucial point of struggle over or support of such discourses (Nikolajeva, 2016). In this regard, *The Lorax* (1971) written by Dr. Seuss has attained iconic status

Submission: 30 July 2025; **Acceptance:** 9 November 2025; **Available online:** November 2025



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as one of the most well-known environmental texts written for children since its first publication in 1971.

An eco-critical analysis of *The Lorax* has been discussed increasingly in research. Khan and Zeb (2023) examined the text using critical discourse analysis and claim that it reveals the capitalist and consumerist reasoning behind the ecological degradation. On the same note, Cetiner (2020) examines how the story brings out the Anthropocene anxieties, including deforestation, species extinction, and pollution through thematic and ecocritical readings. Ismail (2024) argues that the text propagates biocentrism by personifying nature and allowing it to speak. Although these studies shed light on thematic issues, there is limited application of systematic eco-linguistic framework to study how language creates these ecological values. As Ismail (2024) identifies the thematic relevance of the text with environmental literacy, it overlooks the linguistic mechanisms used to support the ecological groundings. However, Cetiner (2020) systematically highlights the linguistic and stylistic features which shape the environmental agency of the characters in the text, it lacks specific eco-critical framework to support the findings as it relies largely on symbolic interpretation. This study thus operates on the Critical Eco-linguistic Discourse Analysis (CEDA) proposed by Arran Stibbe (2014) to bridge the gap in literature. CEDA is a powerful approach to analyze the narratives of how texts talk about the environment, especially, via linguistic tools such as metaphor, agency, and identity. According to Stibbe (2015), dominant ideologies, what he refers to as the stories we live by, are facilitated by narratives, which are either enabling or disabling of ecologically disastrous activities. Drawing on Arran Stibbe's (2015) framework, the study aims to explore the role of language in shaping environmental values, ideologies, and human-nature relationship. The study is framed around two main objectives. First, it aims to examine the way language creates environmental values, ideologies, and the human-nature relationship in *The Lorax*. Second, it seeks to explore how metaphor, identity, and agency contribute to the creation of ecological messages within the story.

Methodology

The study employs qualitative interpretive approach based on Critical Eco-linguistic Discourse Analysis (CEDA) by Arran Stibbe (2014) to examine how language in *The Lorax* (1971) constructs environmental ideologies and human-nature relationships. In 2014 Stibbe introduced the framework for analyzing the language through an ecological lens. In his subsequent works (2015, 2017) he extended scope of this framework. This study draws on Stibbe's framework across these works. The choice of the text was deliberate because it is a well-known children story about the environment. CEDA offered the analytical framework, paying attention to five central discursive features: ideologies, identities, agency, evaluations, and metaphors. Purposive sampling was used to analyse the entire text, its narration, dialogue and symbolic elements.

Careful reading and manual transcription were used in data collection whereby relevant extracts were coded under CEDA categories. Repeating patterns of language were extracted and analyzed to determine the way in which the story codes the ecological meaning and criticizes anthropocentric and consumerist discourses. The focus was placed especially on the conflict between the destructive capitalistic ideology and the biocentric values, the symbol of moral agency, the metaphorical construction of nature and consumption. The research followed the

qualitative principles of trustworthiness in terms of reflexivity, coherence, and transparency to reveal how *The Lorax* works as a discursive context of environmental education and eco-critical reflection.

Results and Discussion

Challenging Anthropocentrism and Consumerism

A sharp ideological dichotomy between anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives is set up in the story. The dominant anthropocentric ideology, which sees nature as –mere economic resource, is present in the expansionist ideology of the Once-ler. When the Once-ler says, I had to grow bigger, it's this very explicit example. Hence the bigger I got. But *The Lorax* asserts the intrinsic value of the natural world that is unchanged by human profit. "I am the Lorax" is his signature line. Since trees are silent, I speak for the trees, his repeated lines- I am here to talk about the trees. They are going too fast!"- this emphasizes the urgency and a moral duty to save the ecological system. The speech of the Lorax therefore serves as a kind of ideological opposition to the discourse of the Once-ler of a consumerist nature.

Constructing Ecological and Industrial Selves

The characters of the story are built in a way that shows contrasting environmental identities. The Once-ler is shown as a generic and faceless character; he represents corporate and industrial anonymity. As the embodiment of the typical capitalist with his obsession with production, his love of money, and his need for expansion (I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.), he is the picture of the capitalist man. The Lorax on the other hand is described as an ethical and environmental self. He is a guardian and protector of nature and this is his identity. He calls animals his Swomee-Swans, his Bar-ba-Loots, his Humming-Fish indicating the close relationship with them. He further says: They loved to live here. But I, the Lorax, am saying so / They cannot live here. And so I am sending them out.

The narrative is presented as a memory to a small child who is left with the final Truffula seed and the message to the child by the Lorax: UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot nothing is going to get better. The last command says that the reader should help restore the ecology and the real hero of the story is the child. This corresponds to the idea of Stibbe about creating the ecological identities, which promote responsibility and care.

Voices, Actions, and Accountability

The ecological power structure in *The Lorax* is mirrored in the distribution of agency. The main material agent is the Once-ler who is directly involved in degrading the environment. His deeds, which are actively described by the words, such as, I chopped down a Truffula Tree with one chop, are also given special attention, as he is depicted as the source of the ecological damage. When asked to help with production, the extended family of the Once-ler gets drawn into the agentive network as well: "The whole Once-ler Family was working at full bore." Rogue diffusion in a group shows the extent of the group's collective responsibility to defend against environmental damage. The Lorax, on the other hand, grants the voiceless entities with real voices, returning them into the story. It keeps meeting the Once-ler again and again, even though it's not actually there, but it's starting to sound a little bit panicked: "Mister!" he sneezed sawdustly, I am the archetype

of the trees. Using speech-act verbs such as "sadly," "pleading," and "snapping" he confirms his moral stance is different to a physical one. It also marks his downfall and loss of dignity, even though his final gesture of removing and disappearing is metaphorical. In terms of grammar, even nature, trees, animals and rivers are passive and mute.

This shows a crucial tension in the outlook of both the characters. The Once-ler's materialistic narrative which is shaped by industrial action is in sharp contrast with that of Lorax, who shows ethical and discursive agency, his ideals are based on strong moral and ecological awareness.

Linguistic Framing of the good and Bad

Stibbe (2017) stresses the role of the evaluative language as the indicator of ideological correspondence. In *The Lorax*, we find that evaluative adjectives and made-up words indicate powerful moral judgment. In the early accounts of his business the Once-ler is drowning in positive appraisal: "I felt a great leaping of joy in my heart." Truffula tufts are said to be the softest of all and the bright-colored tufts of the Truffula Trees looked mighty nice. These are descriptions that are positive in emotional terms and they are set in contrast with the growing warnings of the Lorax. Negative evaluation becomes predominant as the story goes on.

The story talks of environmental degradation using coinage of compound words including smogulous smoke, gluppity-glup, and schloppity-schlopp. These monstrosities of neologisms phonetically imitate the ugliness and chaos of pollution and industrial wastes. This can be seen as a form of the salient negativity as described by Stibbe that is the language that renders harm linguistic and emotionally apparent. The other dramatic evaluative scene is the change of the landscape: The pond in which the Humming-Fish had hummed was dry and empty now." It was smoggy so that an air-maker Thneed-maker would gag. These lines support the moral judgment of the industrial activity by the narrator. By the time the Once-ler takes a moment to consider the result, he is regretful: "Now what was left under the bad-smelling sky was my big empty factory... the Lorax... and I." The barrenness of the land serves as a conclusion to the story and moral evaluation.

Metaphors and the Reframing of Human–Nature Relations

The eco-linguistic power of the story is focused on metaphor. The Lorax is an allegorical figure of environmentalism. He is short in stature but has moral authority in his voice, and this voice of the ecological conscience is one that has often been marginalized, though ecologically crucial. The Thneed is a metaphor of consumer capitalism: an item that represents the mass production and artificial desire. Its unclear goal and ridiculous generalization- It is a shirt. It is a sock. It is a glove. It is a hat.--criticize the way marketing creates artificial needs.

The Lorax ridicules the Thneed as a thing that nobody needs, and points to its symbolic position of environmental excess. The factory and super-axe-hacker are symbols of industrial equipment and automation- the things which make ecological destruction even faster. The cutting down machine that chops off the Truffula Trees, four at a time is symbolic of the modern economies, which are all about efficiency and not sustainability. The metaphorical power of the word is the strongest in the text: it is UNLESS. Made out of a mound of stones, it is a symbol of

warning as well as hope. It summarizes the moral lesson of the story into one word and calls the reader to take action and break the cycle of environmental degradation.

The findings show that *The Lorax* presents a sharp criticism of prevailing ideologies in which mankind is superior and economic development should be left unchecked at the cost of environmental integrity. The text has a very specific dichotomy that it creates through narrative structure and carefully chosen language, where the overarching theme of exploitative capitalist growth is symbolized by the Once-ler, and ecological care by the Lorax. The metaphorical manipulation, identity formation, agency attribution, and judgmental language turn the story into an effective instrument of environmental discourse, prompting the readers to question the existing societal values.

These results correspond to the critical discourse analysis by Khan and Zeb (2023) who point out the fact that *The Lorax* reveals the ideology of capitalism and justifies the process of environmental exploitation. They also sustain the reading of Mathew and Abraham (2022), who consider the text to propagate deep ecology and resonate with the values of the Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land). Also, Cetiner (2020) views *The Lorax* as the Anthropocene parable, noting that the narrative is dramatizing the ecological degradation resulting directly due to human activity as symbolic characters and bright images, specifically, the destruction of nature, pollution, and displacement of species. Ismail (2024) also gives importance to the ecocritical worth of the book, as it criticizes consumerism, commodification of nature, and promotes environmental activism, which is characterized through the figure of the Lorax.

The findings of the study presents that children stories can foster ecological awareness; however, the human like tendency of *The Lorax* my presentt human as the only agents to interpret the nature. This paradox highlight the need to analyze the mediation of the relationship between human beings and the nature in the narratives. Furthermore, the findings show that the teacher can engage learners in ecological discussion and by going beyond surface-level moral lessons. Such dialogues can be expanded into participatory or creative classroom activities, e.g., debating the moral position of humans in ecological systems, or narrating parts of a story from a nonhuman point of view. The pedagogical uses of the CEDA framework as a novel method for promoting critical, empathetic, and ethically conscious environmental literacy for the diversity of human–nature relationships, not only as a literary technique.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to the body of existing research since it uses Critical Eco-linguistic Discourse Analysis (CEDA) framework by Arran Stibbe (2014). This method allows exploring the linguistic structures that encode environmental ideologies in a systematic way by going beyond what is said to how it is said. It can be argued that ecological values and critiques are so present in the story as a result of the framing of the evaluation, the distribution of agency, and the Thneed and the Lorax. This adds further educational value to environmental education and to the newly developing field of ecolinguistics. Consequently, the present article promotes ecological literacy and environmental responsibility through children’s literature as a mode of resistance, education and inspiration.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to Isra University Hyderabad for covering conference registration fee and also acknowledge the motivation and support provided by faculty members and administration for completing this work.

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