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# The Ecological Concerns of Yi People Reflected in The Yi Poems: From The Perspective of Ecolinguistics

Jie Liu, Ting Ye, Zhong Deng

Foreign Language School, Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China

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## Abstract

Poems of Yi People have long been considered a vast reservoir of the distinct cultural and religious happenstances of this very minority. However, few existing studies have taken the ecological view of Yi People into scholarly consideration. This article, hence, explores this very ecological view in the Yi poems from an ecolinguistic perspective, reaching a preliminary conclusion that Yi people believe that all the organisms on the earth enjoy the equality and have feelings; thus humans should cooperate, respect and protect other organisms.

## Keywords

Ecological concerns, Yi poems , metafunction , harmony.

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## 1. Introduction

Yi people have established their distinct cultural institutions and practices that help picture their history and values of the world from their own perspective. Among them, the ecological view is a significant contributor, manifesting the continuous interaction between Yi people and the natural environments that accommodate and support them. There have been many Yi poems alluding to their ecological view. Some of them explain the relation between the origins of people and of animals, some tell a story of cooperation of different species on the earth, and others criticize the pollution and destruction during the process of modernization. With this regard, this paper is aimed to find out what the ecological view of Yi people exactly means and entails as many of the previous analyses and answers seem either ambiguous or unconvincing in association with the absence of a scientific paradigm. This study, therefore, will turn to a comparatively mature and effective research framework, that is, the theory of ecolinguistics, and launch a detailed analysis of the following poems including *Hnewo Teyy*, *Migu*, *The creation epic of the Yi*, *Bitter Buckwheat*.

## 2. Ecolinguistics

### 2.1 An Overview of Ecological Analysis of Language

Ecolinguistics, briefly put, is a discipline that combines ecology with linguistics, so it is an interdisciplinary field of natural science and the humanities (Fill 2001). According to Matthiessen (2009), eco-linguistics studies not only a cognitive structure in the mind of individuals or across a society (social cognition) which influences how people treat each other, other animals, plants, forests, rivers and the physical environment, but also an ecological perspective with reference to an ecological framework (or ecosophy), thus encouraging people to protect the ecosystems that life depends on, and discouraging behavior which damages those ecosystems.

Ecolinguistics is in particular interested in what contributions linguists can make in environmental protection, namely, the "social responsibility" of linguists as we often call it (Halliday 2001), which mainly involves the construction of ecological linguistic laws and green grammar (Halliday 1990; Goatly 1996), critical analysis of environmental discourse, etc. From this perspective, the task of eco-

linguists is mainly to conduct a critical analysis of factors that are contrary to the harmony of natural ecology in the language system (Garrard 2004), or try to change the language system and language use to make the language more suitable to represent the ecosystem and ecological relations in nature. On the other hand, the discourse analysis of eco-linguistics mainly absorbs the thoughts of contemporary critical linguistics, and analyzes and criticizes the “socialized generative consciousness and behaviors” in discourse from the perspective of ecology (Fan Junjun 2005). In a nutshell, the former is about the language itself as an ecosystem, while the latter is about how language acts on the environment.

## **2.2 Influences of Ecology on Language**

Language is a system that communicates meaning, with semantic, grammatical and phonological accessibility and comprehensibility. In addition, language also constitutes the meaning of different modes according to the function of elements, which falls into "the rope of three strands of meaning" in Halliday's terminology. According to ecolinguistics, the significance of this system is the construction of the whole ecosystem. Specifically, language is regarded as part of the whole system just like other systems. Meanwhile, the evolution of other systems is bound to affect language development; and the construction of reality is bound to affect human recognition. Abram (1996:267) further argues that ecology plays a key role in shaping human language in oral cultures, but with writing this role becomes less and less significant. This results in a situation “where our organic atonement to the local earth is thwarted by our ever-increasing intercourse with our own signs”. He therefore advocates using language in ways which bring ecology (or the 'more-than-human-world') back into language: “There can be no question of simply abandoning literacy, of turning away from all writing. Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthy intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves - to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches.” (Abram 1996:273)

## **3. Analysis of Yi Poems**

Many of the world's time-honored nationalities have had many long narrative poems in their early years. These texts are characterized by a concentration of purely natural feelings of the ancient people such as their impulsive artistic or aesthetic feeling and a profound expectation of mysterious enlightenment, thus serving as a textual mirror for the later generations to playback their life, consciousness and the history of their nation. Likewise, Yi poems, which vividly describe the formation of heaven and earth, the emergence of all things, the origin of mountains and rivers and the emergence of human society and the historical evolution of Yi, are incredibly comprehensive and detailed. They show the essential appearance of the life of people in the ancient society of Yi nationality and reflect the ancient Yi people's general understanding of the boundless world and the universe.

### **3.1 Types of Ecological Analysis**

In ecological discourse analysis, discourses can be divided into three types: beneficial discourse, destructive discourse and ambivalent discourse (Stibbe, 2015). Beneficial discourses are discourses that will protect and even improve the life-sustaining relationships among humans and other organisms, while destructive discourse can harm this sustainable relation. For example, some discourses are filled with anthropocentrism with words implying that human beings are the dominant power of the world so we should just concentrate on the development of ourselves at the expense of other organisms and the ecosystem. Ambivalent discourses are those that have discourses describing both conflict and harmony between humans and the ecology. In this article, the poems we choose for analysis are beneficial discourses because they manifest Yi people's respect and protection of the nature. According to M.A.K. Halliday, language doesn't reflect reality passively but contribute to the construction of the world on its own. Language is a result of choice and it can reflect the ideology and value. The ideology and values will influence people's inclination of actions. The spread of

beneficial discourses and criticism are able to help people develop positive attitudes toward the ecosystem and lead people to take actions that will protect the sustainable relationship instead of polluting the environment or exploiting the resources.

Second, we will use the theory of metafunction (or the transitivity system) of the Systemic Functional Linguistics as our tool for ecological discourse analysis. We won't give a specific explanation about SFL because many papers have introduced and proved the availability of this analysis method. Systemic functional linguistics was proposed by M.A.K Halliday and it is composed by ideational function, interpersonal function and linguistic function. Above the three, ideational function including experiential function and logic function, and experiential function is composed of material process, psychological process, relational process, behavioral process, existential process and verbal process. Therefore, SFL can be used in ecological discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis and other kinds discourse analysis.

### 3.2 General analysis of ecological discourses in Yi poems

In *the Creation Epic of Yi* (A book describes the creation the world and the origin of the earth), there we choose some ecological discourse describing the naming of the 28 stars: "The sky was divided into nine parts/ The earth nine parts / South and east/ North and west/ Twenty eight stars/ Each other corresponds to/ Five Cyan/ Five red/ Five white/ Five yellow/ Five green/ And three black/ Twenty eight stars/ Each has two names / First is Tuju / Also named the throstle star / Second is Luolu/ Also named the owl star/ third the jiwu/ Also named the cyan leopard star/ Fourth is Jina / Also named fire worm star/ Fifth is Jizuo star/ Also named the red leopard star/ Sixth is Jimo star/ Also named the cyan jackal ...."

We find that all the 28 stars were named after 28 kind of animals such as throstle, owl, leopard, worm, jackle .... The use of animals to name the stars suggests Yi people respect and owe the animals; they hold the view that these animals are sacred and will be blessing lives of humans. In Migu(one masterpiece of the four Yi epics describing the creation of the world), there exists a similar phenomenon. In chapter eight: *Farming*: when the gold guided humans to fire the cultivated land filled with buckwheat, they decided to start on the rat day instead of the other zodiac's days to avoid the zodiac's suffering from the fire, which demonstrates Yi people's protection-oriented sense of other physical organisms in nature and the sense of treating other organisms equally for they think animals also have their own feelings like human-beings. Also in this chapter, the sparrow helped people complete the farming activity by collecting the seeds that were lost in an accident fire of the granary. That actually discloses their attitudes toward the animals: gratitude, for the sparrow have helped them in the farming. And we can also infer from the discourses that Yi people believe that other organisms in the physical environment can cooperate with humans, and the relation between humans and other organisms is partnership instead of ruler-subject relationship. That is why Yi people respect and protect these animals instead of simply pursuing their own development without mediating others' development on the mutually shared Earth. In the poem Hnewo Teyy (one of the five masterpieces of most popular epics among the Yi people), the chapter entitled *The creation of human beings* maintains that human beings were created together with other animals: three kinds of grass, white polar, wine, frog, snake, eagle, bear and monkey. The same origin of other creatures and human beings pointed out in the epic leads us to think that Yi people treat human beings and other creatures as equal beings, just like two babies with the same mother. Yi people's appreciation of this poem may illustrate their value or their acceptance of the ecology value in the content. Also among the poems, it is said that tiger and crow are two types of fetish animals for Yi people. They appraise the wisdom and strength of animals and the creativity of plants. Through the analysis of the meaning of several poems, we are close to Yi people's ecology view: all organisms have feelings just like human beings; the relation between the two are cooperation, and we should treat them equally by respecting and preserving them.

### 3.3 Analysis of "Bitter Buckwheat"

There goes the poem, we numbered them into 19 clauses.

Buckwheat, you make no sound(1)  
 You vessel of the earth's richness(2)  
 You are drinking the milk of starlight(3)  
 As you remember the blazing light of day(4)  
 Buck wheat,you push your roots down(5)  
 Into the land's most reproductive zone(6)  
 You are the primal metaphor and symbol (7)  
 You are the rolling sun of the highlands(8)  
 Buckwheat, you are full of spirit -nature(9)  
 You are the direction ordained in our face(10)  
 You are an ancient language(11)  
 Your fatigue is an encroachment of dreams(12)  
 You are the only prayer by which(13)  
 Our invocation can reach the side (14)  
 Of nature spirits and ancestors(15)  
 Buckwheat, your invisible arms(16)  
 Are tender and long(17)  
 We yearn for your caress and sing of you(18)  
 Just as we sing of our own mother(19)

In the poem, there are 19 clauses and 15 sentences. Among the 15 sentences, (1) (4) (6) (18) are material processes, (3) is a behavioural process and others left are relational process. As for the logic function, all of them are constellations or extensions. Most of them have the same structures. Frequency is a significant feature of this poem. About the interpersonal function, (4) is a question sentence, others are all declarative sentences. The declarative sentences are used to describe the author's love and respect toward the bitter buckwheat. And two pairs of interpersonal relationship are: (1) the author and the bitter buckwheat; (2) the author and the readers. The author takes use of the poem to express his appraisal and love of mother-like bitter buckwheat. In this way, his ecological view as well as his values and ideology are exposed and spread to the readers. In this communication between them, the most important thing is the positive attitude hiding in the beneficial discourses towards ecology system, which is transmitted to a number of readers and such a positive influence will be produced on the reader's ecological view shaping. In addition, for textual function, there are 11 thematic structures, all of which are simple theme. Among the 11, 8 themes are "bitter buckwheat" or "you"(refer to bitter buckwheat) , 1 is a part of bitter buckwheat: "her arms", 2 are "we".

Therefore, the features of this poem are: (1) most processes are relational processes; (2) the extensive use of metaphor; (3)most themes are "bitter buckwheat". The relational process serves the metaphor of the buckwheat and the author uses this method to show his respect and love for another creature in the world. The author uses "you" ,the second person, instead of third person "it" or just use the name: "buckwheat", which can function as a metaphor between buckwheat and human beings. By comparing bitter buckwheat to humans, he regards buckwheat as a person who can talk to face to face, then leads to a kind of feeling that the author is expressing his praise and admiration of another person. He treats the buckwheat as equal as human-beings and think she is sensible, and she has soft arms, memory and can drink milk. What's more, words used in the poem like "push", "fatigue" and "caress" are words describing human beings' actions. In this way, the poem keeps the view that all creatures enjoy the equality and other organisms are not accessories of humans for they can cooperate with human and have feelings. Then we come to our conclusion: ecological attitudes in this poem are:(1) All organisms are equal; (2) All organisms have feelings; (3)Human should respect and protect nature and other organisms in it.

### 3.4 Ecological discourse analysis of “ A Tree in Jjile Bule”

Table 1 Results of the analysis of “A Tree in Jjile Bule”

Logical function	Constellation and extension					
Ideational function (numbers)	Material process	psychological process	relational process	behavioral process	existential process	verbal process
	8	0	2	2	5	0
Interpersonal function	The relation between writer and readers					
themes	Tree, shadow of tree, key, branch, leaf, storm, hue, hair and earth wall, darkness, dream like...					

In this poem, most processes are material process and existential process. The interpersonal function is about the relationship between the writer and readers. The logical function involves constellation and extension. The themes include tree, shadow of tree, key, branch, leaf, storm, hue, hair and earth wall, den of fantasy, darkness, dream like. In the material processes, the tree, leaf, storm are agents, this is the choice of the grammar which indicates that these subjects are the agent of actions as human being. We can see the author’s attitude from his grammar choice, that is he takes these subjects with a tendency of equality with mankind. Because in many discourses, human-beings usually are the subject of actions. From the perspective of the themes, most of them in the discourses are the subjects besides human-beings, there hides a piece of information: the positions of these subjects including the inanimate ones shows the author’s respect for other organisms. The poem actually is a mirror of the author’s ecological view and proves Yi people hold the ecology view: all organisms are equal and human should respect them.

## 4. Conclusion

After analyzing several Yi poems from the perspective of ecolinguistic by the way of ecological discourse analysis, this paper got the content of Yi people’s ecological view: (1) All organisms are equal; (2) All organism have feelings; (3) Human should respect and protect nature and other organisms in it. This ecological view reflected in the discourses has guided Yi people to form the sense of environment protection and the equality of all organisms, and it will continue to influence Yi people’s ecological view and actions in the future. Ecological discourse analysis will lead more people to mediate the relationship between humans and nature to seek a better balance between the two so as to improve the living and development conditions of all organisms in the world.

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