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A Corpus Linguistics Analysis of Ecosystems Vocabulary in the Public Sphere

Over the past few decades there has been a growing body of research into the language used to discuss environmental issues. Research has included analysis of discourse features such as nominalization, passivization and modality (Schleppegrell 1997, Goatly 2001, Kuha 2009), as well as analysis of the semantics of environmental vocabulary such as 'nature', 'pollution' and 'carbon' (Mühlhäusler 2001, Nerlich and Koteyko 2009, Dillon 2010). Some studies are based on small samples of texts collected by the authors; others are based on larger corpora but focus on a small selection of linguistic features. Until now there has been no corpus linguistics study of a broad range of vocabulary related to the environment: our research aimed to fill that gap.

We carried out a study of over one hundred lexemes related to ecosystems and the environment. Our aim was to examine how these lexemes are used in public discourse, to discover their key collocates, and to consider how corpus evidence can indicate the evaluative uses of certain terms (cf. Hunston 2007). The study used purpose-built corpora of language relating to ecosystems – from academic websites, government websites, NGO websites, news media and blogs – and compared these with UKWaC. The interface used was Sketch Engine, which facilitated several aspects of the study:

- The Thesaurus feature helped us to generate a list of lexemes related to ecosystems and the environment. (These were then checked and supplemented by experts in the environmental field.)
- The Word Sketch feature allowed us to identify statistically significant collocates of these lexemes.
- The Sketch-Diff feature allowed us to compare the collocates of related lexemes such as urban/rural.

In addition, random samples of concordance lines were manually scrutinized in order to identify the subjectivity or objectivity of the texts, and the positive, negative or neutral connotations of particular lexemes as used in context.

We will present a selection of our findings, including:

- Evidence for the conceptualization of the environment: for example the framing of nature as a commodity in phrases such as 'ecosystem services' and 'heritage assets'; and the concept of nature as either including or separate from humans.
- Evidence for the subjective, emotionally charged or sceptical use of particular terms such as 'climate' and 'science'.
- Evaluative uses of terms such as 'green', 'wilderness' and 'expert'.
- The avoidance of stating agents that cause environmental problems, even in the language of environmentalists.

By combining statistical analysis with manual analysis, we offer both a quantitative corpus analysis and a qualitative discourse analysis of environmental language in the public sphere. We argue that conceptualization of the environment differs according to text type, but that there are several recurring themes in the public data that we examined.

References

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