



Watch Your Language! Because Words Help Create Socio-Ecological Worlds

What Is The Issue?

[Language reflects and constructs power and culture.](#)

This impacts how we understand, relate to, sustain, and design the world around us—and, by extension, how we respond to unfolding ecological and climate crises. Research in [ecological linguistics](#) shows that colonial tongues—like English—are saturated in harmful ethics that spread and reinforce [ideas of human exceptionalism and exploitative human-nature relationships](#). These ethics are embedded in educational standards, curricula, and assessments. Therefore, educators need to focus and reflect upon the language they use with students so it is rooted in an ethic of environmental justice and flourishing.

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

- **Students** should learn how popularized language shapes our climate-impacted world. For example, tropes like the [“Wild Wild West”](#) or [“last frontier”](#) framed the Americas as an empty wilderness, inspiring further colonization and commodification. Or the climate change disinformation campaigns of [Exxon](#) and [the G. W. Bush Administration](#) that used “less alarming” language to dissuade public disruption of the fossil fuel industry.
- **Educators & School Leaders** should model and encourage life-giving language grounded in reciprocity to mobilize action-oriented responses to climate change.

Things To Consider

- **Language Constructs Our Worlds.** It is essential to slow down and reflect upon [how language makes the world around us](#). Our society needs [language and ways of communicating](#)—including [Indigenous languages, which hold important knowledge about the environment](#) and others—that help create a sustainable and just future. Language should clearly express what is happening (e.g., [“greenwashing”](#) and [“green colonialism”](#)), what should happen (e.g., [“Just Transition”](#) and [“Rights of Nature”](#)), and how to express [eco-emotions](#). [Practices bound in culturally specific language that validate the role of emotions](#) in making sense of climate change are equally important and should be adopted. Shifting language in these ways can be transformative as they: (1) support more holistic sensemaking—including the [expression of eco-emotions](#), (2) cultivate socio-ecological caring and respectful relationships with all parts of nature, and (3) hold us responsible for realizing a just transition.
- **Terms to Describe More-than-Humans Matter!** Exercising a heightened [awareness of the language we use to describe and define nature is essential](#). Similar to the terminology used to show respect for humans, how we reference the world around us establishes particular types of relationships and patterns of interaction. This is evident across many Indigenous communities around the world who use language that honors the [personhood of Earth and the beings on it](#) (e.g., [“kin,” “ki,”](#) or [“more-than-humans”](#))—rather than reify extractive relations and hierarchies through labels like [“it,” “ecosystem services,”](#) or [“non-living.”](#)
- **Language Use Promotes Accountability.** Linguistic choices should also prompt individual and group accountability for realizing a just climate future. For example, concepts like [“climate reparations”](#) offer shared language for [acknowledging disproportionate impacts of climate change on Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities](#); while [“distributive justice”](#) illuminates pathways for dispersing resources to these overburdened communities. Also, terms like [“degrowth”](#) or [“circular economy”](#) name economic models that normalize healthy consumption.

Attending to Equity

- [Biodiversity and language are bound together](#)—and both are [facing “twin mass extinctions”](#) because ecosystems that are the [most threatened due to climate change are in ancestral communities experiencing ongoing colonization and globalization](#). Also see [this resource on language loss](#).
- As [biodiversity decreases](#), [economic, health, and well-being inequalities](#) increase for humans. Flourishing depends upon biodiversity.
- Focusing on language that aims to cultivate reciprocal and sustainable relationships with [more-than-human beings](#)—that includes plants, animals, and other vital beings in each environment—has the potential to [create a more equitable and flourishing world](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What language do you use to discuss climate change and action? Does it reproduce ecological violence, or does it create reciprocal relationships with nature? How has this shifted over time for you?
- [More-than-human beings communicate with each other](#) and with us. How can we learn to listen to the world around us and better care for the Earth?

Recommended Actions You Can Take

- Make a list of language and messages to use. [Start reading and listening to resources](#) that help normalize it in you.
- [Weave language learning opportunities](#) through your teaching to support language use to develop an ethic of environmental justice and care. Consider what language and stories you might introduce and/or analyze the impacts and histories of with students so that they develop the ability to interpret [climate messages](#) and disrupt extractive and dominant discourses that perpetuate climate change and the natural world.
- [Elevate the climate wisdom of diverse cultures](#) by showing examples of how language can: [contain traditional ecological knowledge](#), cultivate reciprocal relationships with more-than-human beings, and [guide a Just Transition](#).
- Be sure to [cultivate belonging for multilingual learners so they can share their climate expertise](#).

ALSO SEE STEM TEACHING TOOLS:

- #10 [Indigenous Rights & STEM Ed](#)
- #55 [Cultural Diversity in Science](#)
- #80 [Reframing Eco-Anxiety](#)
- #99 [Multilingual Cultural Wealth](#)

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