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WAR CRIMES AGAINST THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF CINEMATIC DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY OF THE KAKHOVKA DAM BREACH WITHIN ECOLINGUISTIC FRAMEWORK

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*This article, carried out within the framework of contemporary ecolinguistics, understood as the study of how natural phenomena and human–environment relations are integrated into language and culture, is conceptualizes language as an integral component of ecological systems and highlights the interdependence of linguistic diversity, environmental sustainability, and ideological framing. Particular attention is paid to narrative as an explanatory structure that organizes events in line with cultural values and guides future action. The article examines environmental cinematic discourse as a multimodal site of ecolinguistic meaning-making, defined as the audiovisual narration produced through mise-en-scène, cinematography, montage, and sound design. The empirical focus is on the Ukrainian documentary *See the Sea Bottom* (2023), which addresses the environmental catastrophe caused by the breach of the Kakhovka Hydropower Plant dam during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Using qualitative ecolinguistic discourse analysis, the study explores genre stylistics, evidentiality, and narrative framing, with particular emphasis on interconnectedness and extinction frames. The findings demonstrate that the documentary foregrounds scientific expertise and visual evidence to construct an ecologically holistic narrative of destruction affecting water reserves of Ukraine. While attribution of blame remains implicit, the dominant tonality is one of concern for ecological resilience, cultural heritage, and future restoration. The study concludes that wartime environmental documentaries function as powerful ecolinguistic narratives that transfer ecological principles from scientific discourse into moral and cultural domains, thereby shaping public understanding of environmental crisis and responsibility.*

Key words: cultural heritage, ecolinguistics, ecological resilience, environmental cinematic discourse, evidentiality, genre stylistics, narrative.

Морозова Олена, Морозова Ірина. Воєнні злочини проти довкілля крізь призму кінематографічного дискурсу: дослідження руйнування греблі Каховської ГЕС у межах екологілінгвістичної парадигми

Статтю виконано в межах сучасної еколінгвістики, яка функціонує як дослідження того, яким чином природні явища та взаємини між людиною й довкіллям інтегруються в мову й культуру. У роботі мову концептуалізовано як невід'ємний компонент екологічних систем і наголошено на взаємозалежності мовного різноманіття, екологічної сталості та ідеологічного фреймінгу. Особливу увагу приділено нарративу як пояснювальній структурі, що організує події відповідно до культурних цінностей і спрямовує майбутні дії. У статті досліджено екологічний кінематографічний дискурс як

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мультимодальний простір еколінгвістичного смислотворення, визначений як аудіовізуальна нарація, сформована засобами мізансцени, кінематографії, монтажу та звукового оформлення. Емпіричним матеріалом слугує український документальний фільм «Побачити дно» (2023), присвячений екологічній катастрофі, спричиненій руйнуванням греблі Каховської гідроелектростанції під час російсько-української війни. Застосовуючи якісний еколінгвістичний дискурс-аналіз, у дослідженні розглянуто жанрову стилістику, евіденційність і наративний фреймінг з особливим наголосом на фреймах взаємопов'язаності та вимирання. Отримані результати засвідчують, що документальний фільм актуалізує наукову експертизу й візуальні докази для конструювання екологічно цілісного наративу руйнування, яке охоплює водні ресурси України. Хоча атрибуція провини залишається імпліцитною, домінантною тональністю є занепокоєння щодо екологічної стійкості, культурної спадщини та майбутнього відновлення. У висновках стверджується, що воєнні екологічні документальні фільми функціонують як потужні еколінгвістичні наративи, що переносять екологічні принципи з наукового дискурсу в моральну й культурну площину, формуючи суспільне розуміння екологічної кризи та відповідальності.

Ключові слова: евіденційність, еколінгвістика, екологічний кінематографічний дискурс, екологічна стійкість, жанрова стилістика, культурна спадщина, наратив.

Introduction. Ecolinguistics, broadly understood as a systematic investigation of how “natural” phenomena – including topographical characteristics and the intricate relations among humans, other organisms, and cosmic phenomena – are integrated into languages and cultures (cf. [3, p. 146]), has matured into a dynamic interdisciplinary field within the ecological and environmental humanities and social sciences, inspired in part by foundational work on language ecology as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment [4, p. 225].

Contemporary ecolinguistic scholars foreground language not merely as a cultural tool but as an intrinsic component of ecological systems, analysing how linguistic practices shape and are shaped by human-environment relations and how dominant discourses contribute to ecological degradation or sustainment, as articulated in recent discourse-analytic paradigms that critique environmentally destructive framings and elevate alternatives supporting sustainability [10]. In line with Sune Steffensen’s ecosocial approach, language is further conceptualised as a dynamic, distributed process embedded in human-environment interactions, whereby patterns of linguistic coordination both reflect and actively reorganize ecological relations, enabling either adaptive, sustainability-oriented practices or reinforcing exploitative modes of engagement with the natural world.

Modern research also emphasises the interdependence of linguistic and environmental diversity, demonstrating that the disappearance of languages often parallels and is correlated with environmental destruction – both phenom-

ena linked to economic and political imperialism, colonization, and transformations of language ecologies (cf. [7]), as contextualized in current ecolinguistic frameworks. Building on Peter Mühlhäusler’s ecological critique, recent ecolinguistic research further demonstrates that language loss is not an isolated cultural process but a symptom of wider socio-ecological disruption, in which colonial and neo-imperial economic structures restructure language ecologies, undermine biocultural diversity, and accelerate both environmental degradation and the erosion of locally embedded ecological knowledge. This expansion of the field is reflected in growing scholarly output, including international special issues consolidating ecolinguistics research paradigms and numerous case studies that explore the ecological implications of language use (see, e.g. [9], narrative framing (e.g. [8], and linguistic diversity [2] in the context of global ecological crisis.

Our understanding of environmental challenges and our responsibility for fostering a sustainable future are shaped by the ways environmental narratives are framed, the values they promote, and the degree of audience familiarity with such narratives. Accordingly, this article **aims** at demonstrating how these factors interact by examining environmental storytelling within cinematic discourse, understood as the audiovisual discourse of film narration, specifically, “the discourse of mise-en-scène, cinematography, montage, and sound design used by filmmakers in narrating cinematic stories” [5, p. 85]. The **object matter** of our attention is environmental cinematic discourse produced in the time of Russo-Ukrainian war.

There are many ways of understanding the content of the term “narrative”; in this work, it will be treated in the spirit of Mark Laity, an expert in Strategic Communications and NATO’s spokesman, who maintains that “a narrative is more than just a story. Rather, a narrative contains many stories, and – more importantly – it is an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief, and one that points the way to future actions. Narratives make sense of the world, put things in their place according to our experience, and then tell us what to do” [6, p. 24].

Results. The four components of the environment have assembled at Ukraine’s current moment of mortal danger like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: air, water, land, and biota. On June 6, 2023, it became obvious that water is a weapon of mass destruction, the power of which expands into the areas of the other three Horsemen of the environmental apocalypse in Ukraine – air, land, and biota. On that day, the dam of the Kakhovka Hydropower Plant on the river Dnieper, the main water artery of Ukraine, experienced a catastrophic breach. The Kakhovka dam is the final dam in the Dnieper reservoir cascade (completed in 1956). Its ruina-

tion was an act of ecocide comparable to that of Chernobyl.

Stories of this victim of the Russo-Ukrainian War are told by many media outlets in various genres. To date, there are no prosaic works of fiction that depict this catastrophe, but poetry has responded to it immediately. Poetry can be treated as a kind of very personal diary; however, since poems nowadays immediately appear on the Internet, their addressee is collective. An illustrative example is a poem by Olena Pshenychna, a Ukrainian journalist, screenwriter, columnist, and civil activist. The poem was written on the day of the disaster.

The data for study of environmental cinematic discourse of the time of the war was taken from the documentary which focuses on the environmental catastrophe caused by the breach of the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine in 2023 – “See the sea bottom” / «Побачити дно» (Ukraine, TSN / TCH, October 2023, 52 min.) [1]. We will not focus on the argumentative line, paying more attention to the discursive characteristics of the ecolinguistic cinematic narrative.

Genre stylistics. The Ukrainian documentary *See the Sea Bottom*, created by the television journalist Nataliia Yarmola, is characterised

Пливуть хати.
Я бреду по коліна у спогадах.
Чийсь діди
Кожну цеглу складали мов золото.
Чийсь баби
Посадили черешні і айстрики.
Чийсь тати
Тут ловили на м’якуш карасика.
Чийсь мами
Закопали під деревом пупчики.
Нявчать коти,
Перелякані лагідні мурчики.
Пливуть качки
І нажахано так озираються.
Собачий слід
Заливає вода, він вгризається.
Пливуть хрести
Мертві пишуть, де будуть ховатися.
Кричать птахи:
Ми не маєм куди повертатися!
Пливуть життя
І впадають у море із відчаю.
Біжить дитя
І волочить дитинство скалічене.
Ми всі кричим
Світ продовжує гратися в хованки.
Пливуть хати,
Виривають з корінням нам спогади.
Олена Пшенична, 06.06.2023

Huts are floating.
I am wading knee-deep in memories.
Somebody’s grandfathers
Laid brick by brick as if they were golden.
Somebody’s grandmothers
Planted cherry trees and asters.
Somebody’s fathers
Used to fish for crucians here baiting the hook with crumbs.
Somebody’s mothers
Buried umbilical cords under a tree.
Cats are mewling,
Sweet scared purry things.
Ducks are swimming
Looking around, terrified.
Water fills in dog’s footprints,
They sink deeper and deeper.
Crosses are floating
The dead are writing where they’ll be buried.
Birds are screaming:
We have nowhere to come back!
Lives are floating
And falling into the sea with despair.
A child is running,
Dragging its crippled childhood behind her.
We are all screaming
The world continues playing hide and seek.
Huts are floating,
Uprooting our memories.
Olena Pshenychna, 06/06/2023

by the absence of explicit intertextual or interdiscursive allusions and adheres to the conventions of classical journalistic reportage. Its narrative structure prioritises factual documentation, chronological coherence, and evidential transparency rather than symbolic layering or artistic self-referentiality, thereby reinforcing its credibility. By avoiding overt references to other media texts, political discourses, or cinematic traditions, the documentary foregrounds the event itself and the voices of those directly affected, positioning the film as a testimony-oriented account whose authority derives from direct observation, expert commentary, and eyewitness narration rather than from intertextual resonance. Nataliia Yarmola does not dominate the narrative either, and in the few cases when she appears on the screen, she is either walking on the sandy bottom of the Kakhovka reservoir that emerged after the flood or talking to the witnesses, or rather human victims, of the catastrophe.

Evidentiality. The documentary strongly relies on different kinds of evidence, which can be roughly called mimetic (i.e. showing) and diegetic (i.e. telling). The documentary “See the sea bottom” keeps the scenes of the disaster in the main focus: people, animals, buildings are all shown in detail sufficient to enable the viewer to feel part of what is happening. However, aerial shots are also incorporated into the film. The documentary includes interviews with experts, both individual and collective (Volodymyr Osadchii, director of the hydrometeorological institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; Ivan Moisienko, doctor of biological sciences, botanist; Olexii Vasyliuk, head of the Ukrainian group of environmental protection; Ivan Rusev, Director of the national park “Tuzlivski Limany”; Yuri Kvach, doctor of biological sciences, head researcher of the institute of marine biology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; Oleh Pashchenko, director of the Kakhovka Hydropower Plant, among many others). To the latter there belongs the friendly and very open talk of the journalist Nataliia Yarmola with the inhabitants of the village Marianske, when they are telling her about their collective effort in order to provide water for the crops when they learned about the disaster. In these sequences, the inhabitants recount their collective effort to construct an improvised dyke in order to create a temporary pond capa-

ble of supplying water for agricultural needs, an initiative undertaken immediately after they became aware of the disaster and witnessed the rapid retreat of water levels, thereby foregrounding communal agency, adaptive resilience, and locally grounded ecological knowledge in response to sudden environmental collapse. They also share their concerns about the future and recollect the past.

In terms of the general tonality of the film “See the sea bottom”, the attribution of blame plays a secondary role, though it is surely present. The dominant tonality of the documentary is that of concern, encompassing not only the immediate and long-term consequences of the flooding and subsequent draining of the affected region but also its historical dimensions, thereby situating the environmental catastrophe within a temporal continuum that highlights past interventions, present suffering, and the potential trajectories of ecological and social recovery. The decision to build the Kakhovka Hydropower plant was taken by Stalin in 1946, after the victory over the fascist Germany, when he decided to have a victory over nature by turning the sacred land of the Ukrainian people – “Velykyi Luh” (the Great Meadow) – into the largest reservoir in the world. It was equivalent to ruining Notre-Dame de Paris or the Colosseum.

Going back to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse metaphor, the breach of the Kakhovka dam is shown in the documentaries to have affected: air and land (sand storms, so characteristic of deserts, were expected); animal and bird species (eighty-three species of animals which are in the Red Book are on the brink of extinction; the Black Sea dolphins are under threat); water (people were deprived of drinking water and water for irrigation; there was a danger of polluting and desalination of the Black Sea).

Conclusions. The environmental problems underpinned with a general war frame are shown in the documentary “See the sea bottom” as politically and culturally embedded. The ecological principles of interdependency, holism, and resilience are transferred from scientific (theoretical and applied) to moral, cultural and political spheres. However, there is a more specific frame employed in the documentary under study. The Ukrainian documentary relies extensively on scientific evidence and the testimony of experts to construct its narrative, particularly through the deployment

of interconnectedness and extinction frames, which foreground the systemic relationships between human activity, ecological processes, and species survival. By integrating empirical data with visual documentation and expert analysis, the film not only elucidates the environmental consequences of the Kakhovka dam breach but also situates these consequences within broader ecological, social, and temporal contexts. In addition to its scientific grounding, the documentary strategically appeals to cultural and moralistic values, invoking collective memory, ethical responsibility, and the intrinsic

worth of both human and non-human life. Through this combination, the film positions environmental knowledge and ethical evaluation as mutually reinforcing, demonstrating how evidence-based discourse can be mobilised to foster public awareness, moral reflection, and culturally informed engagement with ecological crises. The restoration of the dam is not planned, but creation of a water reservoir is. The reservoir, though, will not span over “Velykyi Luh”, the national heritage, an equivalent of Khortytsia, but instead will let nature attain its original status.

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