

[“I Would Sing for You Rain Songs”: An Ecolinguistic Reading of Ofelia Zepeda’s *Ocean Power*]

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[Abstract] *The purpose of the paper is to explore the collection of poems Ocean Power by Ofelia Zepeda through the lens of the interdisciplinary field of ecolinguistics. The article examines issues such as the role of language in the relationship between humans and their physical environment or in the maintenance of the social and cultural unity of its speakers. It also focuses on how Zepeda’s verses portray selected aspects of environmental injustice, including dispossession, displacement, and cultural impairment. The analysis provides evidence that it is reasonable to define Zepeda’s creative writing as environmental poetry with an eco-justice bent. The bilingual character (English-Tohono O’odham) of the poems can be interpreted as an attempt to resist the demise of linguistic and cultural diversity.*

[Keywords] *bilingualism; ecojustice; ecolinguistics; linguistic diversity; Ocean Power; Ofelia Zepeda*

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[1] Introduction

The global debate on the endangerment of the world's linguistic diversity has been around for about thirty years, starting with the publication of Joshua Fishman's magnum opus *Reversing Language Shift* in 1991. Since then, numerous renowned linguists, linguistic anthropologists, and intellectuals from related scientific fields and in various countries have been exchanging their own thought-provoking ideas on the status of language diversity and the threat of language demise. They have approached the problem from diverse perspectives, regularly stressing the importance of broader sociocultural cognitive contexts by providing evidence that the erosion of language heritage also means the deterioration of culture and human knowledge.

Another key point of view, often taken into consideration when discussing the dynamics in the development of linguistic diversity, is the ecological perspective. Environmentalists and other ecologically-oriented scholars, ecolinguists among them, investigate the complex interaction between the living organisms (including humans) and their physical environment, with a recent focus placed on the so-called environmental justice (also known as eco-justice). Since language is an important aspect of human existence, its relevance cannot be left undiscussed.

The present contribution focuses on the relationship between language and environment as it is depicted in desert poetry by Ofelia Zepeda, a Native American writer, linguist, editor and an enrolled member of the Tohono O'odham Nation. The aim is to provide an ecolinguistic analysis of the collection of Zepeda's verses entitled *Ocean Power* (1995). The article opens with an introduction to the field of ecolinguistics, stressing the main aspects of its historical and theoretical background. Following an outline of Ofelia Zepeda's life and work, it proceeds with an examination of individual poems, many of which are bilingual.

[2] Ecolinguistic Preliminaries

The multilayered relationship between (the world of) languages and the (physical / natural) environment, or between the so-called *logosphere* (a term coined by Michael E. Krauss) and the *biosphere* (also *ecosphere*), has usually been studied within the realm of ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics is commonly described as a product of a new interdisciplinary framework for the investigation of languages which emerged at the turn of 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to Chomskyan linguistics (see Haugen, 1972), and it has gradually evolved into an independent scientific discipline. As the *International Ecolinguistics Association* defines it:

Ecolinguistics explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species, and the physical environment. The first aim is to develop linguistic theories which see humans not only as part of society, but also as part of the larger ecosystems that life depends on. The second aim is to show how linguistics can be used

to address ecological issues, from climate change and biodiversity loss to environmental justice.¹

In general terms, two main research branches of ecolinguistics can be distinguished. The first one, represented primarily by Arran Stibbe and his publications, e.g. *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* (2015), aims at a critical discourse analysis of how the language we use and the stories we tell affect our treatment of the planet. It is important to note that while Stibbe’s approach is regularly applied when analyzing non-fiction writings, there is also a related type of discourse-oriented ecolinguistic research that focuses on fiction, including poetry. Since this new area of investigation is “carried out through the methodology of stylistics” (Virdis, 2022, p. 65), it has been referred to as ecological stylistics (see Goatly, 2017, or Virdis, Zurru, and Lahey, 2021).

The second branch, propagated by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine in their publication *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages* (2000), studies various language communities, forms of language contact, and levels of language vitality and endangerment. It investigates the correlations that exist between the linguistic and biological worlds. As Nettle and Romaine note (2000, p. 27), “there are remarkable overlaps between the areas of greatest biological and greatest linguistic/cultural diversity around the world, allowing us to speak of a common repository of biolinguistic diversity”. For example, the largest number of endemic tongues and endemic species can be found in the tropical and subtropical zones, in countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, or the Philippines (Evans, 2010, p. 17). There are, nevertheless, other (more unfortunate) correlations. Both languages and biological species are fading away at an unprecedented pace, while most of them have not yet been registered by linguistic and biological science respectively. According to David Harrison (2010, p. 10), 80% of plant and animal species remain unknown to science, and 80% of languages still await thorough documentation.

Research shows (see Fill and Penz, 2018) that the logosphere and the biosphere generate an inseparable, yet fragile, complex that is prone to collapse. Hundreds of language communities face the threat of extinction due to the destruction of their natural habitat, as is the case for many native tribes from the Amazon basin. Having been relocated to towns and cities and exposed to dominant languages, the native people assimilate into modern civilization and abandon their traditional tongues as well as many cultural traits. With the loss of these languages, closely linked to the environments to which they have adapted, they also lose an intimate knowledge of these ecosystems and ways in which they function. To regain cultural vitality and well-being, they need to document, revive and stabilize their native languages.

With respect to Ofelia Zepeda’s professional work – related and relevant to the research mentioned above by Nettle and Romaine (2000), Evans (2010) or Harrison (2010) – it is this framework of ecolinguistic thinking that is taken as a perspective for the present article. To emphasize the integrity of Zepeda’s academic and artistic contributions, select-

ed aspects of her curriculum vitae will be presented (see below). The hypothesis is that her poems tell (be it explicitly or implicitly) about language (and cultural) diversity and its dynamics, and portray relations between linguistic and biological worlds.

[3] Ofelia Zepeda – Life and Work

The work of Ofelia Zepeda (born 1952 in Stanfield, Arizona) is eminently suitable for studying through an ecolinguistic lens. As a linguist and anthropologist working in the field of Native American studies, Zepeda’s research and scholarly publications zero in on several ecolinguistic issues, such as language documentation, revitalization and reclamation. Furthermore, in her creative writing she portrays various eco-justice topics, including the relationship between humans (and their communication codes) and wider (physical) environment.

Zepeda holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Arizona, Tucson, where she works as Professor of Linguistics and American Indian Studies. Her professional career has been primarily devoted to the preservation of Native North American languages and cultures. She has authored the first grammar of the Tohono O’odham language (*A Papago Grammar*, 1983), as well as numerous articles on the status and revitalization of various indigenous tongues. Zepeda is a co-founder and director of the *American Indian Language Development Institute* (AILDI), which was established to strengthen and promote the use of Native American languages and the literacy of their speakers. Only rarely is it mentioned that, as a language specialist and activist, she also “played a key role in getting Congress to enact the Native American Languages Act of 1990” (Haworth, 2017, p. 32). The Act was an important political step, as it recognized the language rights of American Indian ethnic groups in the United States and gave them the freedom to “use, practice, and develop” their ancestral tongues.

Being a poet, Zepeda published three collections of poetry, namely *Ocean Power* (1995), *Jewed ’i-hoi / Earth Movements* (1997) and *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008). Her poems frequently appear in journals and various anthologies of American Indian literature. Besides, for more than 30 years she has served as the coeditor of the *Sun Tracks* book series, famous for introducing contemporary Native American writers. Selected poems and prose writings gathered from the 25 years of *Sun Tracks* appeared in the collection *Home Places* (1995), edited by Zepeda in collaboration with Larry Evers.

Zepeda’s literary and editorial work is closely related to her language preservation activities. Her mother tongue was for centuries used exclusively in the spoken form. Nevertheless, the rapid language shift towards English (or Spanish), experienced over the last thirty years, has created a need to record the language in writing. Although the oral manner remains the primary method for language transmission, native languages without orthography and a written body of texts are disadvantaged in the modern world, with its institutionalized educational system; Tohono O’odham is no exception.

Zepeda is among the leading promoters of indigenous language literacy. She teaches courses on Tohono O’odham and American Indian education. Also worth mentioning is

her endeavor to secure the publication of literary texts in the O’odham languages written by Tohono O’odham and Pima speakers. In 1982, she edited a bilingual anthology of Tohono O’odham and Pima-English poetry *When It Rains / Mat hekid o ju*. The revised edition of the text appeared in 2019, again under the supervision of Zepeda, who supplemented the publication with a new foreword. Her own creative writing will be the focus of what follows.

[4] Poems from the Desert

The purpose of this section is to explore Zepeda’s collection of poems *Ocean Power* (1995) through the prism of ecolinguistics. As both the title and its subtitle (*Poems from the Desert*) imply, the collection contains verses that portray segments of the natural world. A closer look reveals that Zepeda’s imaginative lines create a strong and passionate link between the world of people, their languages and cultures (words, poetry) on the one hand, and the physical environment (ocean, earth, and sky) on the other. Robert Berner wrote the following words about her poems:

Zepeda’s imagery captures the most subtle perceptions of the natural world – the smell of coming rain, the taste of dust – and her poems, deriving from tribal, family and personal memories, reveal an intense and characteristically Tohono O’odham consciousness of weather, sky, earth, and water, of the landmarks which measure the passage of the seasons, and of nature in both its positive and negative manifestations. (1996, p. 220)

The collection has received positive reviews (see e.g. Danker, 1996; and Tohe, 1998). Most literary critics have agreed on the fact that its poems encapsulate “the flow between the natural and man-made, between spiritual and materialistic, as well as the anthropomorphic and literal” (Cluff, 1996, p. 94). Zepeda’s poetry can be characterized as observant of the rules and rituals of her people, depicting the Tohono O’odham way of living in the harsh environment of the Sonoran Desert. It is particularly attentive to the delicate features of the rain cycle, with words such as ‘clouds’, ‘moisture’, or ‘rain’ being the most commonly employed expressions in both languages used: English and Tohono O’odham.

The bilingual quality of Zepeda’s poetry is the first ecolinguistically relevant aspect worth mentioning. Seven out of 35 poems that form the collection contain verses both in English and in Zepeda’s ancestral language. One poem (Kots, see below) is published only in Tohono O’odham, which might be viewed as a controversial decision given the fact that the targeted audience may not know the native language.

’Alwi:lto ’amt ’am o ciah
Heg ’o ’as cem hekid ’edgid g huk.
Heg ’at s-ke:g o na:to g kots.
Heg ’o ’edgid g hikckakuḍ.
Heg ’o ’edgid g klalwos.
Heg ’o ’edgid g toha ma:sidakuḍ... (Zepeda, 1995, p. 44)

Tohono O’odham is a Uto-Aztecan language which together with Akimel O’odham, Pima Bajo, Northern Tepehuan and Southern Tepehuan forms its Pimic (Tepiman) subgroup (see Mithun, 2001, p. 539). Like most indigenous North American tongues, Tohono O’odham is an agglutinative language (see Goddard, 1996). Its population base is about 20,000 people, living on both sides of the USA-Mexico border, with most tribal members settled on four reservations in southern Arizona. Although in the early 1980s more than two-thirds of the population spoke the language fluently (Zepeda, 1983, p. xiv), recently the situation has changed due to the relocation of many Tohono O’odhams from desert villages closer to urban centers dominated by English. Although still approximately 15,000 people claim to have some knowledge of the language (Moseley, 2007, p. 89), the number of fluent speakers is decreasing, especially among younger generations who have shifted toward English or Spanish.

The bilingualism of the poems in *Ocean Power* can be understood as an attempt to resist this gradual language shift. As has been mentioned, native language literacy is an important step toward language revitalization and stabilization. In the introduction to the collection of her verses, Ofelia Zepeda remarks that “the O’odham pieces could be meant for the small but growing number of O’odham speakers who are becoming literate. Here, then, is a little bit of O’odham literature for them to read” (Zepeda, 1995, p. 4), no matter that some of the poems (e.g. Ju: kǐ Ñe’i) are rather short.

Wa nt o m-ñe’i g ju:kǐ ñe’i.
Wa nt o ñ-keihi m-we:hejed.

I would sing for you rain songs.
I would dance for you rain dances. (Zepeda, 1995, p. 14)

Having addressed American readers with a collection of poems that contain verses they cannot easily comprehend could also be viewed as an intentional political act. The renewed employment of indigenous languages is an essential component of the decolonizing process (cf. Lawson, 2010, p. 182). Due to drastic assimilation programs in the past, native languages in the United States belong among the most threatened in the world; 155 of 175 languages (89%) have no speakers within the youngest age group (Krauss, 1996, pp. 15–20). Therefore, while reading lines in an unknown language, non-indigenous readers can experience incomprehension and social injustice similar to those that native peoples were exposed to during the long decades of language and cultural suppression, and this may eventually help to establish greater cross-cultural understanding. On the other hand, some literary critics (e.g. Cluff, 1996) consider this approach to be counterproductive, disrupting the communication between the author and her potential readers.

Another relevant ecolinguistic aspect of Zepeda’s bilingual poetry is the fact that the verses in Tohono O’odham necessarily evoke the natural environment differently from the English verses. It can be best studied in those poems where the lines in the indigenous language are sequentially translated into English.

Ce:dagim 'o 'ab wu:şañhim.
To:tahim 'o 'ab wu:şañhim.
Cuckuhim 'o 'ab him.
Wepeghim 'o 'abai him.

Greenly they emerge.
In the colors of blue they emerge.
Whitely they emerge.
In colors of black they are coming. (Zepeda, 1995, p. 15)

For example, in the poem Na:nko Ma:s Cewagĭ / Cloud Song (above), it can be seen that Zepeda invents new English adverbials (e.g. greenly) and transforms standard English syntax “to bring the experience evoked by the poem closer to an O’odham perspective” (Lawson, 2010, p. 190). The use of these *uncommon* linguistic forms can be interpreted as the reflection of the *uncertain* presence of life-giving rain in the arid environment of the Sonoran Desert. As Cluff maintains (1996, p. 96), “by using these created forms, Zepeda has shown the importance rain plays in O’odham tribal life: its rare appearance and how the search to capture and control this sporadic occurrence makes us look at the universe in unique ways”. Taking advantage of a poetic form, Ofelia Zepeda illustrates that language diversity demonstrates a multitude of human existences. She shows that the language we speak contributes to our sensual perception of the surrounding physical environment and accentuates the idea that the language-driven perception is unique (cf. Pokorný, 2010, pp. 234–242).

Ocean Power also encompasses poems (e.g. Pulling Down the Clouds or O’odham Dances) where the bilingual texts are not translations, but complement each other. Here, the Tohono O’odham lines take the form of an oratory, a significant poetic form of O’odham ritual songs and speeches (see Bahr, 1975; Underhill, 1993). “Ceremony is a very important concept in Ofelia Zepeda’s poetry” (Ruiz, 2017, p. 3); it generates holy ties between the Tohono O’odham and their homeland in the Sonoran Desert. It takes the form of direct spiritual communication with the earth and the sky. Only if people and their ancestral language are in symbiosis with the landscape and the universe can they thrive.

Ñ-ku'ibaḍkaj 'ant 'an ols g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will hook the clouds.
'Ant o 'i-waññ'io k o 'i-huḍiñ g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.
Ñ-ku'ibaḍkaj 'ant o 'i-siho g cewagĭ.
With my harvesting stick I will stir the clouds.² (Zepeda, 1995, p. 9)

Where the language has been stripped of its cultural and spiritual connections to the land, for example through the relocation of its speakers or because of the destruction of the natural habitat, it tends to erode: the number of its communicative functions is gradually being reduced, as is the number of social domains in which the language may

be used. Simultaneously, there is a disruption in social and cultural unity, in the self-sufficiency and identity of the particular native community (cf. Thomason 2015).

Even in texts without any Tohono O'odham language component, Zepeda often refers to traditional Tohono O'odham cultural resources, many of which have been conditioned by the physical environment of the Sonoran Desert. She incorporates traditional myths (e.g. the poem *Wind*), legends, and other genres of oral literature, stressing the importance of traditional storytelling.

Repetition and/or parallelism of verses is yet another poetic device capable of reinforcing the symbiosis of *human-language-environment* interaction (cf. Satten-López, 2020, p. 4). In fact, aboriginal spirituality does not isolate *people* from their *language* and their *land* (or the *world*); they form a 'trinity' (cf. Zuckermann, 2020), an indivisible whole, a synchronization of energies:

The people converge energies.
They call upon the night.
They call upon the stars in the darkness.
They call upon the hot breezes
They call upon the heat coming off the earth.
They implore all animals.
The ones that fly in the sky.
The ones that crawl upon the earth.
The ones that walk.
The ones that swim in the water.
They implore them to focus on the moisture.
All are dependent... (Zepeda, 1995, p. 12)

The belief in the interconnectedness of everything means that from the native viewpoint, all the elements creating the entirety are endowed with life (see Abram, 1996). There is no division between living and non-living things. If this interdigitation is in harmony, if all the elements function in their proper ways and they care about each other; for example, there is no barrier ruling out the possibility of mutual communication of people with vegetation or stones. However, if this balance is violated by human encroachment, the connection gets lost:

Barrel cactus,
hanging in uncactuslike manner,
upside down in between tree trunks and large branches.
They silently scream,
"My roots are still good, put me in the rocky soil."
The screams are inaudible.
Even if every curved thorn joins in,
the Park Service employees don't hear them.
Or if they do, they ignore them.
Too busy repairing concrete... (Zepeda, 1995, pp. 21–22)

It has been mentioned in the definition of ecolinguistics given above that one of the issues studied by ecolinguists is how linguistic science addresses ecological issues such as climate change. As a well-trained linguist, and at the same time a speaker of a native language, Ofelia Zepeda knows that native tongues encode practical knowledge, resulting from people’s centuries-long cultural adaptation to their natural environment (cf. e.g. Harrison, 2007). For example, they contain knowledge and survival methods well suited to cope with wildfires or floods. Due to global warming, these natural disasters are becoming more frequent, having strong impacts on fragile habitats such as the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, Zepeda’s homeland (see Evans, 2021, p. 9). In her poem *The Floods of 1993 and Others* (see the previous and the following extract), Zepeda evokes how the modern, non-indigenous approaches, caring for nothing but profit, fail to stop the destruction brought by the sudden flood:

Grasses caught in tufts of all sizes, hanging from every limb that was in the water’s path.
All debris carried by water, reshaping a canyon.
Limb caught upon limb in wild, frozen dance postures.
Sand piled in places and manner unaccustomed.
Nature’s features reshaped, molested by a watery monster.
Touching everything except the U.S. Park Service picnic tables.
Heavy concrete remains steadfast in the midst of nature’s war zone.
(Zepeda, 1995, p. 24)

In addition, Zepeda’s poetry tackles problems related to the environmental justice movement. This recent ecocritical approach defines the ‘environment’ more inclusively as “the places in which we live, work, play, and worship” (Adamson, Evans, and Stein, 2002, p. 4). Environmental justice is then defined as “the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (Adamson, Evans, and Stein, 2002, p. 4). It is clear that the environment is no longer viewed as an isolated, uninhabited natural territory, somewhere outside settlements, but as the place where our *home* is. It should be regarded as the intersection of ecological, sociocultural, political, economic and religious concerns, the so-called Middle Place, as Joni Adamson (2001) has it, while the word ‘healthy’ refers to all possible aspects of the well-being of people, derived from human rights.

In this sense, the right to use the indigenous language should be conceived as one form of environmental justice. Knowledge of the ancestral tongue has been proven to contribute to the well-being of a person, while in contrast, loss of the traditional tongue can become the cause of serious trauma (cf. Zuckerman, 2020). Here again we can see the significance of those poems by Zepeda that contain the component of the Tohono O’odham language (e.g. Ba:ban Ganhu Ge Ci:pia, Cewagĭ, or Ka:cim Şu:dagĭ) because they enlarge the corpus of Tohono O’odham texts, and as such they contribute to Tohono O’odham literacy.

Importantly, in her poetry Zepeda also portrays other topics related to environmental (in)justice, including land dispossession, displacement, cultural impairment, and water rights. For example, in the poem *Suitcase of Saints* (1995, p. 41), she remembers the

Hia-ceḍ O’odham (or Sand Papago), a distinct band of the Tohono O’odham whose members were forced to leave their territory to make way for the establishment of Organ Pipe National Monument in southwestern Arizona. As Goodall (2006, p. 76) summarizes, the “major effect of dispossession is the deep disturbance which it has caused to social, political, cultural, and spiritual processes within indigenous societies.” As a consequence, the Hia-ceḍ O’odham ceased to exist as an independent group, having lost its own political and sociocultural identity.

In the final and eponymous poem of the collection *Ocean Power*, Zepeda tells a story about “two O’odham men who came too close to the ocean as they were being deported back to Mexico from Arizona” (1995, p. 86). Since the Gadsden Purchase in 1853 which established the southern border of the United States, the traditional Tohono O’odham territory has been divided between two countries. In the days before contact, the Tohono O’odham made a regular pilgrimage to the ocean to ask for power. However, the colonization of their mother land and its split into two parts uprooted many of the original cultural traits. The two men clearly never joined the pilgrimage, nor were they spiritually ready to do so:

We are not ready to be here.
We are not prepared in the old way.
We have no medicine.
We have not sat and had our minds walk through the image of coming to this ocean.
We are not ready.
We have not put our minds to what it is we want to give to the ocean.
We do not have cornmeal, feathers, nor do we have songs and prayers ready.
We have not thought what gift we will ask from the ocean.
Should we ask to be song chasers.
Should we ask to be rainmakers.
Should we ask to be good runners or should we ask to be heartbreakers.
No, we are not ready to be here at this ocean. (Zepeda, 1995, p. 84)

The border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, built during the presidency of Donald Trump to reduce illegal migration, seems to impact the Tohono O’odham Middle Place even more. The Natives predict severe ecological and spiritual damage:

Farmers and ranchers living near the border rely on water sources located on the Sonoran side. Likewise, the wall would disrupt the natural flow of rainwater washes and animal migration along the water. The cultural and human impact would also be severe. As many tribal members are Catholic, each year the Tohono O’odham make a spiritual pilgrimage to the town of Magdalena in Sonora to pray to and touch the statue of St. Francis, their patron saint. Tribal members visit relatives on the Mexico side daily, and there are sacred sides and cemeteries located in Mexico as well. (Montiel, 2017, p. 23)

It is beyond doubt that the construction of the US-Mexico wall may also have serious anthropological and/or linguistic consequences, including the erosion of the cultural and

language vitality of the Tohono O'odham. Having no chance to visit their relatives on the other side of the border means that the Tohono O'odham will lose access to other Tohono O'odham speakers and elders knowledgeable about traditional life. This could result in the disruption of the Tohono O'odham collective identity.

[5] Conclusions

Ecolinguistic studies provide information on the process of language endangerment in relation to the vitality and maintenance of natural habitats. They bring information about ecological and cultural knowledge embedded in linguistic systems, about what to do and not to do to keep the planet linguistically, culturally, and environmentally varied and sustainable.

In harmony with her academic work, Ofelia Zepeda's piece of creative writing, bilingual in its character, reifies the importance of the world's linguistic and cultural diversity and the role of language in the relationship between humans and their physical environment. Although this topic is not explicitly and straightforwardly depicted in Zepeda's poems, and many relevant aspects such as the 'colonization of language' are only evoked or presented indirectly, it should be understood as an important component of the environmental and eco-justice orientation of the text. As such, Ofelia Zepeda's verses represent an example of the so-called "supraliterary intentions of contemporary native poetry" (cf. Blaeser, 2006, p. 251) in which the employment of the native language is to be viewed as an intentional act transcending the aesthetic function of literature, its main aim being the expression of native resilience.

[Notes]

- 1 See <http://ecolinguistics-association.org/>, retrieved March 30, 2022.
- 2 These lines (from the poem *Pulling Down the Clouds*) refer to a ritual known to the Tohono O'odham as 'fixing the earth', the aim of which is to call down rain.

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