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TREES AS PARTICIPANTS IN NEWS ARTICLES OF BRITISH QUALITY NEWSPAPERS
An ecolinguistics perspective

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Abstract - Humans are dependent on trees in ways that cannot be overstated, especially at times of severe climate crisis. Yet, the investigation of trees as participants in discourse is an under-researched field in ecolinguistics. The study addresses this research gap by exploring the construal of discursive roles of trees within a framework combining ecolinguistics studies (Alexander and Stibbe 2014; Bortoluzzi and Zurru 2024; Fill and Mühlhäusler 2001; Fill and Penz 2018; Steffensen 2024a, 2024b; Steffensen and Fill 2014, Stibbe 2021) and ecocultural identities (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor 2020a; Stibbe 2020). The qualitative small-scale study examines how discoursal roles of trees as participants in news discourse are represented and contextualised in 100 news items published between January and June 2024 in three British quality newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*). The research questions are: How are trees represented in mainstream news in British quality newspapers? What roles are construed for them in relation with human participants? Data-driven categories are discussed on the basis of news values (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017) and value assessment of natural entities (Himes *et al.* 2024). The resulting categories constitute a cline ranging from representing trees as living beings worthy of respect (a minority of instances) to beings functional to human needs, or as valueless and disposable objects. The majority of instances represents trees as instrumental to human needs and purposes, thus revealing a profound anthropocentric bias in news discourse. The results raise awareness on the need for more ecocentric perspectives in news discourse, and have implications for ecolinguistics education.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; trees; participants; news discourse; ecocultural identities.

1. Introduction

Plants are the majority of the living beings on the earth (Bar-On *et al.* 2018). They constitute the fundamental basis of every food chain on the planet thus sustaining the life of all the other living creatures. In affluent, industrial or post-industrial societies, plants tend to be neglected as background (Brkovic *et al.* 2024; Parsley 2020; Wandersee and Schussler 2001) or represented as resources for human needs and thus 'naturally' exploited (Calvo with Lawrence 2022). In recent years, forests have been represented as 'natural solutions' to the human-inflicted climate crisis. Public and media discourse oscillates between neglecting trees and extolling the qualities of trees as credits for 'carbon sinks'[1]. In fact, the importance of trees cannot be overestimated: they contribute to the air animals breathe, the food we eat, they can become materials for our houses, furniture and paper, among many other products; forests have a mitigating effect on the earth climate and on the soil absorption of rain water; they are at the core of human knowledge: cosmologies, religions, mythologies and sciences. Trees are among the most iconic living beings in most cultures. Yet, the literature on trees as represented participants in texts is rather limited in applied linguistics. This paper addresses

[1] *Forestry social science is failing the people who need it most,* 16th May 2024, in "Nature" 629, p. 503.

this gap drawing on the framework of ecolinguistics (Alexander and Stibbe 2014; Steffensen 2024a, 2024b; Steffensen and Fill 2014; Stibbe 2021; Stibbe 2024).

This study is based on the tenet that plant neglect is part of a wider perspective whereby exploitative human behaviour has brought the planet 'on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster' (Ripple *et al.* 2024, p. 812). Ecolinguistics research shows how language use actively contributes to the consumeristic and wasteful behaviour that has brought our affluent society to the present plight. Language, however, can also contribute to critically assessing the way we act, change socio-economic exploitation and prevent climate injustice (Bortoluzzi and Zurru 2024; Fløttum 2017; Lakoff 2010; Stibbe 2021).

For plant experts the term 'tree' is vague and generic, as its definition in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Trees* shows: "Ordinarily our image of a tree is that of a perennial plant capable of attaining at least 6 m (21ft) with a single woody self-supporting trunk, or stem, which is usually unbranched for some distance above the ground" (Hora 1987, p. 11). In mainstream media the term is commonly used to identify photosynthetic living beings that have always been crucial part of human history, culture, science and everyday life[2].

The research questions for this small-scale study are: How are trees represented in mainstream news in British quality newspapers? What roles are construed for them in relation with human participants? The analysis focuses on the discourse roles of trees as contextualized in news items within the time frame January-June 2024 in three British quality newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*). Discourse roles are related to represented identities and connections with other participants in context.

The initial hypothesis is based on news discourse studies: as van Dijk wrote, ordinary people and events become newsworthy only "as the patients of political action or the victims of catastrophes, or individually, in negative terms, for instance in crime news" (van Djik 1993, p. 140). I extended this hypothesis to the representation of trees as participants in news: trees become newsworthy and they are presented as active especially when they are construed as responsible for negative events involving people as victims; when they are the recipient of negative actions or situations, they become newsworthy as passivated participants.

Section 2 of this article offers an outline of the theoretical framework; Section 3 presents data gathering and the methodology for the analysis; in Section 4 data analysis and interpretation are reported, and Section 5 discusses the results and their practical implications, mentions the limitations of the study, and the scope for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this study, trees are seen within a multispecies perspective: all living beings belong to different species forming communities in continuous 'cobecoming'; this "involves the exchange and emergence of meanings, immersion in webs of signification that might be linguistic, gestural, biochemical and more" (Van Dooren *et al.* 2016, p. 2). Trees are seen in their entangled relation with other living beings forming ecosystems as 'ecologies of selves' (Kohn 2013, p. 134). Abram calls this complex and profound interrelation 'interbreathing' (Abram *et al*. 2020).

The study explores the discursive roles of trees in news media within a perspective of ecocultural identities whereby human and more-than-human are considered with respect guided by ecocentric values. Stibbe writes:

[2] The vast literature on trees is beyond the scope of the present article. I just mention here a few publications from a variety of disciplines: Drory 2018; Ghosh 2022; Haskell 2017; Hora 1987; Kohn 2013; Taraglio 1997; Thomas 2014; Trewavas 2014.

> there has been an ecological turn in humanities and social science subjects, where consideration extends beyond humans to other animals, plants, rivers, oceans, forests and the ecosystems that life depends on. This wider ecological perspective brings an additional level of focus: the relationships of humans not only with other humans but with other species and the wider physical environment (Stibbe 2020, p. 416).

According to Stibbe "*ecocultural identity* […] includes consideration of individuals and groups but expands the groups beyond the human world to include other species and the physical environment." (Stibbe 2020, p. 416, original emphasis).

Some of these living beings are at the basis of all life as we know it: Calvo with Lawrence (2022, p. 209) call the "photosynthetic organisms" "the foundation of the biosphere". Yet, in general, humans tend to devote little attention to plants and perceive them as greenery in the background, a phenomenon identified as 'plant blindness' by Wandersee and Schussler (1999), a biology educator and a botanist. The concept was revisited by Brkovic, Sanders and Nyberg (2024) as 'lack of plant awareness'. Calvo with Lawrence remark:

> Most of us, we could say, are 'plant blind'. Plants are not only thought of as less interesting, they are fundamentally given less processing power in our visual system, becoming a mass of crowded, static background greenery.' (Calvo with Lawrence 2022, pp. 25-27).

In the context of discourse, I call the phenomenon 'plant neglect', namely the backgrounding or erasing of plants and trees from texts (Bortoluzzi 2024).

Ecolinguistics is a framework of reference that offers principles and tools to investigate human and more-than-human participants in texts while raising awareness on the anthropocentric perspective humans have vis-à-vis ecosystems and offering alternative views based on ecojustice principles (Fill and Mühlhäusler 2001; Steffensen and Fill 2014; Fill and Penz 2018; Stibbe 2021; Bortoluzzi and Zurru 2024; Stibbe 2024; Steffensen 2024a, 2024b). Ecolinguistics is thus defined by Alexander and Stibbe:

> Ecolinguistics is the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms and the physical environmental. It is normatively orientated towards preserving relationships which sustain life (Alexander and Stibbe 2014, p. 105).

Within ecolinguistics, very few studies analyse how plants are represented in discourse (see Bortoluzzi 2024; Ponton 2023; Poole 2022, Chapter 4; Poole and Micalay-Hurtado 2022). As mentioned in the introductory section, the overwhelming importance of plants on the planet and in human life and societies makes this area well worth investigating, especially at times of climate crisis and from an ecolinguistics point of view. More specifically, to investigate trees as participants in relation to other social actors in news articles means to investigate how objects/phenomena/events and processes/actions are discoursally construed more or less positively or negatively (drawing on critical discourse studies: Reisigl and Wodak 2016, Fairclough 2003, 2014, Social Actor network adapted from van Leeuwen 2008, 2022; see also processes and roles in Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

In the analysis of media discourse, news values make events and incidents worthy of becoming news. The vast literature about news values is beyond the scope of this study (see the seminal work by Galtung and Ruge 1965, and Bell 1991) which draws on the categorisation by Bednarek and Caple (2012, 2017). News values are assessment thresholds which vary according to context, news producers, audience and news text-type, media outlet, etc. and transform an event into a newsworthy item for a certain media outlet at a specific time. Bednarek and Caple focus on news values in relation to actors and events:

> Negativity: Negative aspects of an event
> Timeliness: The relevance of the event in terms of time
> Proximity: The geographical and/or cultural nearness of the event
> Prominence: The high status of the individuals (e.g. celebrities, politicians), organizations or nations involved in the event, including quoted sources
> Consonance: The extent to which aspects of a story fit in with stereotypes that people may hold about the events and people portrayed in it
> Impact: The effects or consequences of an event
> Novelty The unexpected aspects of an event
> Superlativeness: The maximized or intensified aspects of an event
> Personalization: The personal or human interest aspects of an event. (Bednarek and Caple 2012, p. 41)

In Bednarek and Caple (2017, pp. 79-80), Prominence becomes Eliteness, and Novelty becomes Unexpectedness. News values intersect, overlap and can be expressed in a variety of ways (verbally and multimodally) according to the context (Bednarek and Caple 2017, p. 78).

In media discourse, news values mainly focus on human interest (see Section 4). There are, however, other values instantiated in texts based on natural aspects. A study carried out by Himes *et al.* (2024) categorises academic and popularisation articles according to their value assessment of natural elements in texts: "The ways individuals, communities, and societies express, embody, or articulate the importance of nature and people–nature relationships take many forms." (Himes *et al.* 2024, p. 27). They identify three main categories (with complex overlaps between them):

> **Intrinsic values** are "values of other-than-human beings expressed independently of any reference to humans as valuers, including values associated with entities worth protecting as ends in and of themselves" (Himes *et al.* 2024, p. 29).
> **Relational values** are "values of meaningful, and often reciprocal human relationships—beyond means to an end—with nature and among people through nature, where nature is often specified as a particular landscape, place, species, forest, etc." (Himes *et al*. 2024, p. 31).
> **Instrumental values** are "values of other-than-human entities, as means to achieve human ends or satisfy human preferences" (Himes *et al.* 2024, p. 30).

Whereas the study included texts other than news items, it is possible to apply this categorisation to the representation of trees as participants in news items, namely texts informed by news values.

Drawing on Social Actor network by van Leeuwen (2008, 2022) and discourse role representation (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2003; Reisgl and Wodak 2016), the present study analyses the construal of trees as participants in news texts as social actors in relation to other main participants: human, more-than-human[3], artefacts.

In Social Actor network theory, van Leeuwen (2008, 2022) identifies Inclusion and Exclusion[4] as a main dichotomy. Exclusion is not present in this study because only texts including the term 'tree/s' were selected (see Section 3). Van Leeuwen includes Backgrounding in Exclusion (van Leeuwen 2008, p. 28 *et passim*), whereas in the present study backgrounding ("de-emphasized, pushed into the background", van Leeuwen 2008, p. 29) is part of inclusion due to the characteristics of the participants who[5] act in ways that are normally perceived as inaction by humans. Backgrounding is linguistically instantiated in a

[3] The label 'more-than-human' indicates individual or collective natural actors such as plants, animals, parts of the landscape, etc. (Abram 1996).

[4] The capital letter is used only when present in the literature it refers to. The category adaptation used in this study is written without capital letter to underline the difference with the original framework.

[5] In this study I use the pronoun 'who' (generally used for humans) for plants and trees. I still keep the pronoun 'it' to avoid gender choice (she or he); when possible, the inclusive plural 'they' is used.

variety of ways depending on the context: some cases of agentless passive, use of non-finite clauses, nominalizations, etc. (see Bortoluzzi 2024; Fairclough 2003, 2014; Stibbe 2021; van Leeuwen 2008).

As can be expected, Inclusion is represented in a great variety of ways. Two major sub-categories are Activation and Passivation, as van Leeuwen (2008, p. 33) writes: "Activation occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity, passivation when they are represented as 'undergoing' the activity, or as being 'at the receiving end of it.'" In the present study, tree 'activity' is interpreted in relation with other participants and their environment. Trees activate themselves in ways that are not always perceived by humans: they have a continuous influence on their ecosystems, but their actions are only rarely captured by human senses to become newsworthy.

Tree participants are also analysed in terms of nouns and adjectives and nominalisations used to identify them (Fairclough 2003; Reisigl and Wodak 2016). Tree participants can be construed for their generic or specific reference, can be individualised (and even personalised) or rendered a generic mass. They can be functionalised (rendered an instrument for other participants), objectified (construed as inanimate), spatialised (construed as part of the landscape) (see Reisigl and Wodak 2016; van Leeuwen 2008, 2022). Due to the limited investigation of trees as participants (Bortoluzzi 2024; Ponton 2023; Poole 2022; Poole and Micalay-Hurtado 2022), the present study has adapted tools of analysis that were not originally developed for the representation of human participants, as mentioned in Section 3.

3. Data and methodology

To investigate the construal of trees as participants in British quality newspapers, data were selected from *The Daily Telegraph* (DT), *The Times* (TT), *The Guardian* (TG) to obtain a variety of socio-political beliefs and values (the initials identify the newspaper in the examples reported in the following section). The analysis intends to capture present-day usage in British media (at the time of the data analysis) and observe a recent snapshot in news discourse in relation with the research questions. Thus, the time span includes articles published between 1st January 2024 and 30th June 2024. Through LexisNexis (2024) a series of news items were identified using the query 'tree*' (to retrieve both singular and plural occurrences). The results were ordered by relevance (a default setting in LexisNexis). A preliminary analysis of the results revealed that only top-ranking items focused on trees as relevant protagonists of the news item, so the cut-off point at the first 100 full news articles was chosen. The study is qualitative, small-scale, not statistically relevant and it is meant as an initial reflection on a phenomenon (tree representation in news) that, to the best of my knowledge, constitutes a gap in the literature.

The set of 100 articles includes a majority of current news items shorter than 500 words. As can be seen in Table 1, very few news items belong to a special section in *The Times* (2) and *The Daily Telegraph* (1), while *The Guardian* features 33 out of 41 in special sections (Environment, Science, Country Diary, Art and Design, etc.). *The Guardian* also includes the 5 longer articles of the data set: four articles of more than 1000 words and a much longer one (4735 words); these longer articles are popularisations of recent scholarly research. The high number of features published in *The Guardian* sections of Environment and Science is coherent with the environmental policy of the newspaper (see the guidelines by Zeldin-O'Neill 2019).

In general, excluding a few events given great national or international prominence (see Section 4), the news stories focusing on trees are geographically local or/and belong to

special sections. If compared with the other two media outlets, *The Daily Telegraph* gives far less prominence to news items featuring trees (17 articles out of 100), while *The Times* and *The Guardian* have a similar amount of articles, as Table 1 shows.

Quality British Newspaper	Number of articles out of 100	Sections in which articles are published
The Daily Telegraph	17	General news items: 16; Environment: 1
The Times	42	General news items: 40; Features: 1; Bricks and Mortar: 1
The Guardian	41	General news items: 8; Environment: 13; Travel: 6; Country Diary: 4; Art and Design: 3; Science 2; Life and Style: 2; New Weatherwatch: 1; Opinion: 1; Sport: 1
Total number of words		56,762 words

Table 1
Quality newspapers corpus of articles focusing on the word tree* (1st January 2024 – 30th June 2024).

The analysis is qualitative, content-based and data driven (Miles *et al.* 2014). The unit of analysis is the whole news item. Each article was analysed in terms of how the tree or trees are construed as participants. The close analysis of every text was based on the following questions: are trees activated? If so, how? For what kind of processes? Do trees undergo actions initiated by other participants? How are they represented through noun and adjectival phrases (individually or collectively) (see Section 2)? How do human groups and individuals relate to the tree participants through processes? What more-than-human beings (e.g. animals other than humans and elements of the ecosystems) and artificially-made participants (e.g. Hadrian's Wall) relate to trees?

Articles were manually analysed; the results yielded coherent clusters that contributed to the identification of data-driven categories (discussed in the next section): 1. Trees as active beings performing collective or individual actions; respect is implied or expressed; 2. Individual celebrity trees for local or global community; socio-cultural relevance of trees; 3. Endangered trees in need of protection; 4. Trees as functional to human needs and purposes; 5A. Problematic trees who are a hazard for human communities; 5B. Trees as property; 5C. Trees as passive element of the landscape or object. Some of these aspects are related, but most articles can be categorized as instantiating one category; in some cases, however, there is a secondary and tertiary category. The present article limits its scope to the most prominent category for each news item. As a final step in the analysis, the results were related to the value assessment categories by Himes *et al.* (2024) (see Section 4). The following section is a discussion of the data analysis and interpretation.

4. Data analysis and interpretation

For each article, a dominant point of view of participant trees could be identified; in a minority of instances, a less relevant role was identified (not discussed in the present study). Table 2 summarises the total number of articles in which trees are primarily construed through the data-driven categories that will be discussed in this section and the value that is expressed or implied in the text.

	Representation of participant tree/s	Number of articles	Values Himes *et al.* (2024)
1.	Trees as active beings performing collective or individual actions; respect implied or expressed	6 (1 dead tree)	intrinsic
2.	Individual celebrity trees for local or global community; socio-cultural/media/history/traditional lore relevance	31 (Sycamore Gap tree: 20/31)	relational
3.	Endangered trees and trees in need of protection	22	relational and instrumental
4.	Trees as functional to human needs and purposes: climate crisis electoral campaign target, tourism purposes, human well-being, memorials, resilient fruit crop producers	22	instrumental
5.	5A. Problematic trees construed as hazard for human communities	9	instrumental
	5B. Trees as property	6	
	5C. Trees as element of the landscape or objects	4	
	total	100	

Table 2
Participant trees in newspaper articles (1st January 2024 – 30th June 2024).

The context is mainly British current events, even though some news items refer to other geographical areas. The dominant point of view derives from Western, affluent, industrial and post-industrial cultures and countries. Very few articles mention non-European and non-US countries (e.g. Australia features in a few articles).

4.1. The intrinsic value of participant trees

In the first category in Table 2, trees are represented as having intrinsic value in their ecosystem; the category includes only six articles out of one hundred. Trees (as individuals or collectivities) are construed as participants deserving respect and appreciation *per se*.

Example 1[6] is drawn from the short article (208 words) published in *The Guardian* (section Science) entitled "Plantwatch: the trees that synchronise reproduction around summer solstice". It is an event which sees beech trees as protagonists. The initials refer to the newspaper (as mentioned in Section 3), and the figures in brackets refer to the progressive number of the article in the dataset.

> Example 1 (TG1)
> The summer solstice triggers a remarkable phenomenon in beech trees. All across Europe the beech trees synchronise their reproduction at the solstice, even over vast distances and climates. The solstice has the longest hours of daylight of the year, and an international research team discovered that the day after the solstice all the beech trees become acutely sensitive to temperature, triggering their seed production.

From the very beginning, the article sets the three main participants: the summer solstice, beech trees, an international research team. The more-than-human participants are the actors

[6] Continuous underlining identifies tree participants, discontinuous underlining more-than-human participants, wavy underlining human participants.

of event: “the summer solstice triggers” the collective reaction of trees as the material process of synchronising their reproduction. The human experts are also actors, but they only discover the phenomenon that happens thanks to the more-than-human participants engaged in behavioural processes, and in the material processes of their seed production (“the day after the solstice all the beech trees become acutely sensitive to temperature, triggering their seed production”). The brief article gives emphasis to the exceptional phenomenon happening throughout Europe. The active behaviour of the beech trees is highlighted even in nominalisations: e.g. “reproduction”, “seed production”, “synchronization”, “autumnal leaf change”. The implied agent is never mentioned but clear, and the repetition of nominalisations emphasises the implied agentive characteristics of the beech trees. In this context, nominalisations do not really obfuscate agentivity (Fairclough 2014; van Leeuwen 2008) but they just crystallise it into an ‘active’ noun in which trees are implicitly present. In the expression “bumper crops of seeds which animals disperse”, the noun phrase “bumper crops of seeds” implies the agency of trees while the material process “disperse” in which “animals” are the actors is functional to what the trees need the animals to do for their benefit. The intriguing quality of trees as participants in texts is that their agentivity is implied even though it might not be ostensively present in the text (van Leeuwen refers to ‘actor retrievability’ when suppressed: 2008, p. 30). “Animals disperse” seeds is a material process in which animals are agents, while in fact, it is the result of the activities of trees who need their seed to be dispersed through animals. As van Leeuwen (2008, p. 23) remarks, sociological agency is not always linguistic agency. The news values construed by the action of trees are Timeliness and Superlativeness (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017).

The collective agentivity of beech trees as a community across “vast distances and climates” of the European continent is underlined through the lexical prosody of verbs such as “coordinate”, “synchronise” (and nominalisations) in a sort of collectively active beech tree forest. This article, published in the section Science of *The Guardian,* expresses the inherent value of the more-than-human participants (beech trees, the solstice, animals) probably because it is influenced by the original scientific articles the journalist refers to (see the phenomenon of popularisation in Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2003, Sterk and van Goch 2023).

4.2. Celebrity trees

The second category identified in the data includes trees that are famous for a local, national or even international community. They are generally identified as specific individual trees (or groups of trees) who become special due to their socio-cultural, media, historical or traditional relevance. In general, these trees are construed as closely related to some people or communities in a way that makes the tree a celebrity. The articles included in this category construe participants trees as instantiating news values of Prominence (or Eliteness) derived from humans, Consonance and Personalisation (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017).

The number of articles in this category (31) is skewed by the news items featuring the Sycamore Gap tree, discussed below (20 articles); only 11 articles deal with other celebrity trees. The latter instances include the Melbourne tree rendered famous by the tennis player Novak Djokovic who feels special attachment to it (TG97). Interestingly, to avoid problematic fandom effects for the tree, during the press conference reported in the article, Djokovic never clarifies which is the specific tree he likes. In this case a sort of ‘anonymity’ in celebrity is granted to the tree to prevent negative consequences. Another celebrity tree is the New Zealand ‘walking tree’ (TG5) who became famous through special photo awards. Ponton critiques similar competitions (e.g. ‘Tree of the Year’) as manifestations of the affluent global media culture, rather than environmental beliefs (Ponton 2023, p. 815).

Some events become newsworthy and are widely covered in the media because they encapsulate several news values at once. One such event is the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree which happened in the North of England in September 2023; several months on, in the first half of 2024, the event is still newsworthy. The tree stood on National Trust property near Hadrian's Wall. The articles mention the investigations, the trials, and the two people prosecuted for the crime, but also, and rather prominently, the donation of the tree seedlings to King Charles and, in a separate occasion, to actress Dame Judi Dench.

> Example 2 (TT19)
> The felling of the 15-metre sycamore last September, which stood in a dip on the ruins of Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland National Park, provoked a public outcry.
> The 150-year-old tree featured in the 1991 film Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, starring Kevin Costner. Couples are known to have proposed beside the tree, ashes have been scattered there and many have prayed in its presence.

> Example 3 (DT3)
> The King, who is patron of the National Trust, was given the first of around 100 seedlings propagated from the 200-year-old tree, which will be cared for by expert horticulturists until they are ready for planting as saplings. It is hoped that the tree will become an emblem of regeneration and hope, following the cutting down of the original 15m-tall tree in Northumberland last year.

This is one of the rare instances in which one specific tree is mentioned by proper name (not only by species), and is construed as an individual of a certain age (reported contradictorily as 120 or 300 years old at the time it was felled, see Examples 2 and 3). The tree, now identified through a destructive action ("the felling"), stood near a famous constructions, Hadrian's Wall, and it became famous when it "featured" in Costner's Hollywood film: the tree was also known as Robin Hood tree as it is named in other articles. Example 2 mentions that it used to witness important rites of passage involving human individuals and communities: human participants are the ostensible or implied actors of proposing, scattering ashes and praying, thus the tree becomes spatialised and functionalised (van Leeuwen 2008) for human rites and needs. Emotional language emphatically conveys the outrageous crime that was perpetrated for no apparent reason ("a public outcry", Example 3).

In the data, the Sycamore Gap tree is also related to celebrities other than its Hollywood connection. Most prominently, one of them is King Charles, representative of British heritage as head of state and patron of the National Trust (Example 3); he receives the sapling of the tree that expert horticulturalists managed to propagate. The offsprings of the tree are entrusted upon the King who will plant them in one of the royal parks. Here and in other articles, the propagation of the felled tree is presented as the action of expert humans rather than a process the tree activates. The tree becomes representative of positive human values for the nation; a series of experts and major national celebrities are involved in promoting its propagation so that it can live on as a symbol ("emblem" in Example 3).

The intersection of news values includes the negativity of the original event of felling a healthy tree without permission on National Trust property damaging, in the process, Hadrian's Wall. The high status of the tree and the international media-sphere celebrities related to it give Prominence (or Eliteness) to these news stories which align with socio-cultural constructs of news producers and audience addressed (Consonance). The story is personalised through the exceptional and rare process of individualisation of a tree made special by the socio-cultural interest of groups of people involved at local, national and international level. The geographical and cultural Proximity to news producers and addressed target audience makes this piece of news exceptionally newsworthy if compared to other events involving trees (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017; see Section 2).

This news item is narrated from different perspectives: the reactions of the local and national communities, the trial of the two suspects, the seedlings gathered and cared for by horticulturalists, the sapling donated to King Charles as patron of the National Trust, etc. The tree identity is consistent in the three media outlets: it is a famous beloved individual tree with its own name, it represents national positive values, it is the victim of a crime investigated by the English justice system. Due to its media and socio-cultural status, the Sycamore Gap tree undergoes a process of humanisation and personalisation, thus becoming the passive protagonist of emotional and anthropocentric media and social media stories.

Not one among the twenty articles present in the data mentions the inequality of treatment between this celebrity tree and other trees felled illegally, whole forests cleared for human use, forest areas devastated by polluted air, land or water, or tree plantations damaged by parasites that thrive in monocultures. A variety of other ecological injustices are perpetrated by humans on trees and plants, but it is a Hollywood protagonist that takes the limelight (see Ponton 2023 for a critique).

It is to be expected that the Sycamore Gap tree offsprings (saplings) will hit the headlines in the future as representatives of their ancestor's mediatic fame, and as "emblem of regeneration and hope" (Example 3); the news features will instantiate the news value of human Prominence or Eliteness (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017).

This second category represents a heightened and emotional appreciation for a specific tree expressed in anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ways: the tree is given relevance by human socio-cultural, economic, historical values, thus instantiating relational values (Himes *et al* 2024; Table 2). In their extreme manifestations, the public appreciation for these media-sphere-star trees aligns with the phenomenon of human celebrity fandom (Elliott 2018).

4.3. Endangered trees and trees in need of protection

Over one fifth of articles in the data (Category 3) construes trees as under threat due to human behaviour (climate crisis, war or land exploitation). In Example 4 trees are first presented as strong and resilient participants through relational and behavioural processes (first sentence) and then, due to the exceptional climate circumstances they have to undergo ("water and heat stress"), they become endangered (in "rising numbers of European tree deaths", the nominalisation renders trees just an attribute of the head noun "death").

> Example 4 (TT16)
> Trees are relatively robust in the face of climate change, able to live through a very dry year and still grow quickly.
> However, repeated water and heat stress weakens them and studies have linked rising numbers of European tree deaths in recent years to droughts that have been exceptional in frequency and intensity. A warmer world is also enabling the spread of tree pathogens and pests, such as the bark beetle.

The human responsibility for these difficult circumstances is rarely overtly mentioned, while it is obfuscated by nominalisations or noun phrases ("climate change", "water and heat stress", "a warmer world"). Humans are construed as the experts who analyse these phenomena ("studies"). The causes are 'naturalised' as in "water and heat stress" and "the spread of tree pathogens and pests, such as the bark beetle": more-than-human species are blamed, while human responsibility is laminated, backgrounded or erased. The collective and generic "pathogens", "pests" and the "bark beetle" are some of the participants that humans need to eliminate (TT9, TT48); humans become the agents that will help trees by stopping parasites or pathogens. In Example 5, the noun phrase "the need to be prepared" implies in

context human agency through scientific research and applications:

> Example 5 (TT48)
> The need to be prepared has never been greater. New reports of tree diseases have been doubling every 11 years, one US study found.

> Example 6 (TT47)
> Trees have natural defences against the insects, producing resin and other reactions to resist attacks. But under increased stress from drought and global heating, these defences have not been enough to stop them being overwhelmed.

Trees are presented as actively reacting against pathogens and parasites, but circumstances (never mentioned as human-made) make them prone to be "overwhelmed" even when they are enormous and strong living beings such as the American redwood trees (Example 6).

In all the examples in this category, trees are represented as the resilient, powerful participants who are under threat caused by extreme circumstances. More-than-human agents (climate crisis, pathogens, bark beetle, emerald ash beetle, etc.) are responsible for the threat and hazards trees are subjected to. Humans are construed as having the potential to protect the trees, while their responsibility for the circumstances contributing to diseases and climate stress is never mentioned and is, at best, implied.

Only two clear instances of human responsibility are represented in this category: the two articles (TT58; TT88) about the second most ancient olive tree in the world (4000-5000 years old) who is under threat due to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In these articles the situation is presented as highly dangerous for the Palestinian farmers living on the land which Israeli settlers are fighting to obtain. In the quote, the Palestinian Abu Ali sees the tree as the continuation of life which started well before human memory and continues beyond human generations, in a profoundly respectful relationship across hardships. Some of these hardships are due to human responsibility (wars), others are naturally occurring (earthquakes); hardships involve humans and more-than-humans alike across time:

> Example 7 (TT58)
> The al-Badawi tree, which produces olives every other year, still provides a steady income for Abu Ali. He sells olive oil produced from the fruit and when he prunes the branches he sends the wood to craftsmen in Jerusalem. He intends to pass on custodianship of the tree to his four young sons. "We will all die, but the tree will last. We've had drought, rains, the Nakba [dispossession of Palestinians who became refugees when the state of Israel was established], earthquake, wars. But it has survived them all," he said.

The famous al-Badawi tree is exceptionally referred to by its proper name. However, its representation and the choice of reporting the farmer's voice distances it from the celebrity trees of Section 4.2. Even though this tree provides an income to the farmer, and is functional to human needs, its representation construes the existence of the tree as intrinsically valuable while a profound relational value is established between the tree and humans living on that land. These two articles, therefore, belong to category 3, but share some aspects with category 1 for the intrinsic value attributed to the tree (see Section 4.1.).

Category 3 of tree participant roles instantiates both relational and instrumental values as reported in Himes *et al.* (2024): the representation of trees is functional to human life, but the human-tree relationship depicted show respect for the trees themselves. The category discussed in the next section, instead, represents trees solely as functional to human life.

4.4. Trees as functional to human needs and purposes

In twenty-two articles out of one hundred (Table 2) trees are represented as 'resources' to be used for human needs and purposes (see a critique of the term 'resource' in Schultz 2001, p. 110). Traditionally trees have always been represented as source of building materials (timber), food crops (fruit trees), fuel (wood); however, the data indicate that another function has become relevant for humans: their ability to slow down or counteract the climate crisis. An example is the nominalisation "tree planting goals", one of the election targets in the 2019 political campaign of Conservative and Labour parties (Examples 8 and 9). In fact, the newsworthy information consists in missed targets:

> Example 8 (TT11)
> The failure to meet UK tree-planting goals has prevented the creation of – tree targets woodland the size of Birmingham.
> Tree targets became the surprise environmental issue of the 2019 election campaign, with the main parties jockeying to promise planting the most.

> Example 9 (TT11)
> Carbon Brief said the shortfalls in tree-planting meant potential carbon savings of 8.5 million tonnes of CO2 had been lost. The UK emitted 384 million tonnes of CO2 last year.

In the article, "tree" is mostly used as attribute in complex noun phrases in which the head noun is a human aim, and trees are the means to an end: "tree-planting goals", "tree targets". Example 9 is the final sentence of a short news item and it well represents the point of view of the whole text: the source of and responsibility for carbon emissions are expressed in technical terms which separates the cause ("The UK emitted 384 million tonnes of CO2 last year") from the effects (climate crisis). The focus of the article is on the missed potential carbon savings used as promotional means for the 2019 electoral campaign. The news value of Negativity is construed as a missed solution (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017). Trees are represented as having a mere instrumental value (Himes *et al* 2024) for political and economic purposes in a situation of human-induced climate crisis.

A different news item shows how agentivity and individualisation (van Leeuwen 2008) can be used to pursue economic interests while presenting them as an ecological behaviour. The article is about treehouses for tourists: trees are transformed into human habitations for recreational purposes and a comfortable and original location. The owner of one such property is reported to say:

> Example 10 (TG2)
> 'We start by selecting a specific tree and then design the house to tie into the space. Part of the fun is to have the trees decide how the design needs to be: their size, shape and location determine everything. They are the boss, ultimately.'

Agentivity is enacted by the company owning the trees ("we"), but then, it is discursively shifted on to the tree who is given the opportunity "to decide" the design of the treehouse. The structure "Part of the fun is to have the trees decide […]" imply that human experts take responsibility for what is to be done (the choice of deontic modality "to have to" obfuscates the source of human agency). Trees are identified as "the boss" by the person who actually plans where and how treehouses must be built. They are construed as individualised ("specific tree") because they are selected by the site owner as a suitable tourist treehouse; therefore, their being 'special' is not intrinsic but commodified. The example shows how verbally expressing that a tree is an individual actor influencing human choices and actions does not necessarily, in context, result in the recognition of the intrinsic value of tree. The

tree is given agency to become functional to human purposes: the tourist industry becomes a means for humans to get 'in touch with nature' by living in a treehouse. Trees are commodified as the contact with 'nature' is (see Heuberger 2018 about anthropocentricity).

In this category trees are represented as functional against the climate crisis (either as electoral campaign targets, source of resilient fruit crops or carbon sinks), as tourist locations, source of timber, and human memorials. They are used for human wellbeing, national and international pride and competition, to alleviate or solve economic problems, to landscape a golf-course or parkland. The values instantiated are instrumental to human purposes (Himes *et al.* 2024). The category that follows enhances the instrumental value of trees rendering them problems or inanimate entities.

4.5. Trees as hazards, property, or elements of the landscapes

This category, subdivided into three sub-categories, represents tree participants either as problems or as inanimate entities; trees are objectified in different ways. As shown in Table 2 (Section 2), 5A includes (potentially) problematic single or collective tree participants, in 5B trees are objectified as human property that can be eliminated, in 5C trees are construed as inanimate elements or landscape backdrop. These sub-categories are grouped together because they are the extreme represention of trees as instrumental to human purposes or, in some extreme instances in sub-category 5C, worthless objects.

This is the category that was expected to be the most frequent, given the overwhelming relevance of Negativity as news values (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017) and the human tendency to identify plants as objects or to ignore them (Wandersee and Schussler 2001, Parsley 2020). In fact, only 5A (9 articles) and 5B (6 articles) present trees as problematic or entirely objectified; out of these, 5 instances span across the two sub-categories and deal with the incident of the tallest magnolia tree in Britain felled by its 'owners' because considered a hazard and a liability for humans (Example 11).

> Example 11 (TT74)
> The owners of the house commissioned a tree surgeon to inspect the magnolia, and he found it in a state of decay. The owners feared that it could fall, damaging their property or neighbouring ones, leaving them liable. […]
> The council stated that it 'contributes significant visual amenity' to the area and had 'rarity value' as an example of an 'unusual tree'.
> Neighbours had, however, complained that the tree had grown too big and made a mess, with reports that its petals filled five wheelie bins every year.

The magnolia is represented as undergoing the inspection by an expert; then it was decided to take it down with the approval of the town council even though it contributed to "significant visual amenity" and had "rarity value" as an "unusual tree" (Example 11). The short article includes both voices for and against the felling of the tree who is identified as a highly valuable tree for the community (instrumental value). Its potential representation as a hazard is strangely enhanced by the fact that the tree "made a mess" every spring when the falling petals of its flowers became rubbish and filled five bins. The natural process of blossoming carried out by the tree as actor (earlier in the article mentioned as "pink blossom" visited by "nature lovers" every spring) is transformed into a problem because the tree actively "made a mess". This is one of the few instances in which the activation of a tree is reported as negative, as in the initial hypothesis (Section 1). The divergent points of view offered in the news story are due to the special quality of this famous tree (believed to be "Britain's tallest magnolia", TG33, TT63), a culturally and media related value (instrumental and partly relational). Even its national celebrity status does not save the "magnificent magnolia" from

construing it as "a hazard" that needs to be felled. Identity construal is the same in *The Times* and *The Guardian* since it probably derives from the same news agency report.

In a few instances of category 5A, human responsibility is implied when trees become problematic, as is the case in an article about forest restoration in Africa, published in the Environment section of *The Guardian*:

> Example 12 (TG26)
> Misguided tree-planting projects are threatening crucial ecosystems across Africa, scientists have warned. Research has revealed that an area the size of France is threatened by forest restoration initiatives that are taking place in inappropriate landscapes.

Human responsibility is obfuscated by complex nominalisations ("misguided tree-planting projects", "forest restoration initiatives"); "scientists" are represented as warning against these projects which threaten "crucial ecosystems". Under the action of human mismanagement, trees are construed as a potential hazard for "intact ecosystems" that support other plants (savannahs and grasslands). A measure taken to counteract a human-induced crisis (desertification) creates new problems due to misguided measures.

In sub-category 5B trees are bought, sold, eliminated as human property. Objectification and commodification of trees in these instances is complete. In the last sub-category (5C), trees become inanimate elements of the landscape or part of the furniture (as the "potted trees" of TT91). In the three sub-categories trees have mere instrumental value (only the 2 instances of the magnolia tree include as secondary value the relation to the community). In some articles, trees are construed as disposable objects that can be discarded when they are perceived to be useless for humans.

5. Discussion: trees as participants in news discourse

Humans depend on plants and trees in ways that cannot be overstated; yet, with a few exceptions, plant discourse has been a neglected area in ecolinguistics and critical discourse studies (Bortoluzzi 2024). This paper contributes to addressing the importance of plants and trees as life-sustaining beings on the planet. Raising awareness on how we construe plants and trees in discourse is an important step towards finding ways to heal our human relation with the living planet at times of human-induced climate crisis. Language and communication have a crucial role in this (Fløttum 2017).

The limitations of this research study are many: the amount of data (one hundred news articles), the range of newspapers (three British quality newspapers), text-types included in the study, the time-range investigated (from January to June 2024), as well as the qualitative-only methodology of analysis. Further research would need to explore social media data, popular newspapers, news media outlets belonging to socio-cultural contexts other than the British one; quantitative analysis would offer statistically significant perspectives. Notwithstanding its limits, the paper sheds light on phenomena which have implications for media practice and ecojustice awareness.

First of all, the data yield results partly contradicting the initial hypothesis that trees are represented as activated especially when negative events happen (trees falling on cars, for instance). Even though Negativity is pervasive in news discourse (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 2017), instances in which trees are construed as responsible for accidents are only a few. Probably when trees are perceived as potential hazards to humans, they are generally cut down, as the magnolia tree in Section 4.5. Trees tend, instead, to be represented 'victims' (see the Sycamore Gap tree, Section 4.2.) or endangered participants in need of human protection (Section 4.3.). Thus, the second part of the hypothesis is confirmed: trees who are endangered

or recipient of injustice are discursively represented as passivated or as part of nominalisations ("tree felling"). However, the data results yield a far more complex picture.

In the three quality newspapers, trees as participants are discursively represented in similar ways for the same news event; this similarity is probably influenced by the fact that news items are remediated from texts released by news agencies, with some exceptions. The most remarkable variation between the three newspapers is a more limited number of articles published by *The Daily Telegraph* (17) as compared to *The Times* and *The Guardian* (respectively 42 and 41 news items). The articles in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* are all short features (less that 500 words), mostly published as local news. *The Guardian* articles, instead, belong to a variety of sections; among them, science-based publications are popularised in Environment (13 articles) and Science (2 articles) (see Table 1, Section 3). This remediation of scientific research for a wider public (Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2003; Sterk and van Goch 2023) also includes the 5 articles longer than 1000 words, and confirms the greater attention of *The Guardian* towards ecological topics (Zeldin-O'Neill 2019).

The data-driven categories derived from the analysis reveal underlying values which are mostly anthropocentric. Only one category represents trees as intrinsically valuable participants: it includes 6 articles out of 100; the other 94 articles represent trees as relevant only in relation to humans or, more problematically, as functional to human needs and purposes. The categories (reported in Table 2, Section 4) are the following:

1. Trees as active beings performing collective or individual actions; respect is implied or expressed;
2. Individual celebrity tree/s for local or global community; socio-cultural relevance of tree humans;
3. Endangered trees and trees in need of protection;
4. Trees as functional to human needs and purposes;

5A. Problematic trees who are a hazard for human communities;

5B. Trees as property;

5C. Trees as objects or passive elements of the landscape.

These categories form a cline that was mapped onto the three main categories of natural values identified by Miles *et al.* (2024): at the ecocentric end (6 out of 100 items) trees have an intrinsic value as ecosystemic participants; in the central section of the cline trees are valuable in relation with human individuals or communities (31 out of 100); then, 22 instances represent trees as valuable both in relation to human communities and as instrumental for human needs; at the extreme end of the cline (41 out of 100), trees have just an instrumental value for human beings.

The overall perspective offered on trees is profoundly anthropocentric because news values are. This characteristic of news discourse is never explicitly mentioned in media studies research; rather, it is implicitly normalised. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dominant perspective we have on trees in the news is functional and instrumental to human communities rather than an ecocentric and ecocultural perspective. Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor (2020b) write:

> The lack of earthly self-awareness in an increasingly human-centered world is reflected in the invisibility and deniability we assign to our environmental interlinkages, impacts, and interdependencies. And this lack of wakefulness is reified in the largely unabated extractive and destructive orientation that powerful interests and the majority of governments maintain toward the planet. (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor 2020b, p. xvii)

The analysis gives evidence that news reporting represents and reinforces human-centred values even when the main participants are more-than-human beings and entities. Discursively this is expressed both through the prominence of human participants as actors that influence decisions and action on trees, but also, trees are represented as activated on the basis of human purposes, needs and wants. Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 23) writes that there is no neat fit between sociological and linguistic agency; the results of the analysis show there is no neat fit between ecocultural and linguistic agency. As instantiated in the data, news values normalise and reinforce an inherently anthropocentric view of events (Heuberger 2018; Lakoff 2010) and offer little leeway to convey alternative ecocultural and ecocentric perspectives.

The study shows the complexity of investigating more-than-human entities adopting frameworks of analysis developed for human individuals and societies; this implies the need to adapt discourse concepts such as agency and activity in a flexible way for more-than-human participants. These considerations point towards the need for further ecolinguistics research in analytical frameworks (or their adaptation) to investigate more-than-human participants. The study also raises awareness on the anthropocentricity of news values in news discourse: ecolinguistics studies can contribute to professional awareness in media communication responsibility; at times of climate crisis, ecological justice and ecocentric perspectives can re-harmonize our relation with ecosystems. Finally, ecolinguistics and ecocultural education contribute to showing how language is constitutive of our world views and impacts on our values, beliefs and actions.

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