



# Episode three: Language recycling

You can find the show notes and link to the podcast at

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/podcast>.

**Duration: 48:11**

**Quote:** This topic is the topic of the moment, and it's growing and it's only going to become more. It's coming up in exams more and more. Sustainability, the environment, global issues, these are things that students who want to pass exams. Your students need it.

**Quote:** You know you go to places and you've run off handouts for a conference for 700 hundred people for a five-page handout, and, and you're gonna hear the trees coming down in Finland.

**Quote:** Our understanding towards our nature, I think, is getting less. When we know less, I think we care less.

**Quote:** We learn English, and how to protect the nature.

**Intro:** The British Council presents the climate connection. Climate action in language education. This is episode three: Language recycling.

**Chris Sowton:** Hello and welcome to the Climate Connection: a British Council podcast focusing on climate action in language education. I'm your host, Chris Sowton. This is episode three: Language recycling, in which we explore what teaching and learning methods can effectively address the climate crisis.

To start us on our journey, our first interview this week is with one of the ELT sector's most highly respected pedagogical experts, Scott Thornbury.

Our first guest this week is Scott Thornbury, a name which may be familiar to many listeners. Scott has written multiple award-winning books for teachers on language and methodology, including the *A to Z of ELT* and *30 Language Teaching Methods* and he's the series editor of the *Cambridge Handbook for Teachers*. He joins us from Spain where he has lived for over 30 years, Scott, thanks very much for joining us today.

**Scott Thornbury:** My pleasure, Chris.

**Chris Sowton:** So Scott, I'd like to begin by asking you about Dogme ELT which you developed, along with Luke Meddings, the materials-light approach to language learning, which doesn't require textbooks and indeed doesn't necessarily even require the traditional physical components of a classroom, such as desks or benches. So could we therefore say that Dogme is one of the greenest, the most environmentally-friendly language teaching methods available?

**Scott Thornbury:** We saw this overabundance of resources as working against the kind of activities or interactions that we thought and based on the principles of the communicative approach. And one of the inspirations behind the Dogme movement initially was the story of



this teacher in Papua New Guinea, he was an Australian volunteer who went to teach in a village, to teach the whole curriculum to kids through English in a village, we're talking about in the 1960s so he probably didn't have a great deal of resources, but anyway, he lost the lot. And so he had to improvise in the village with the kids by taking them outdoors, walking around the fields, doing the math by calculating how many rows of corn, etc, etc, and no print materials whatsoever. And this notion of the kind of emergent curriculum or the contextualised curriculum that didn't rely on imported materials from an educational perspective but, but of course from an environmental perspective because there was no drain on the resources whatsoever. And stories like that had, sort of, inspired me when you, kind of, roll back the whole Dogme thing is, uh, yeah it's been very consistently green if you like.

**Chris Sowton:** How do you see it in the modern world where many people are teaching in classrooms, which are more heavily resourced, approaches like Dogme or resources which are low resourced are actually seen as somehow second rate. How can we change that narrative in order to improve both the pedagogy, but also the environmental aspects of teaching in those situations?

**Scott Thornbury:** To learn a language, you really don't actually need a lot and I think the question as to whether we should use print textbooks or digital textbooks is an environmental one as much as anything else when you think of the wastage of the publishing industry comprises about 11 per cent of freshwater consumed in industrial nations I mean, that's an extraordinary amount of paper and water. Now of course, this is not the coursebooks, the coursebooks are pretty sophisticated productions, think they're not that ecological, and there's a sort of idea that they've got to look smart and glossy and be heavy, and so on, then you say well okay we've replaced those digital textbooks, but that also has an environmental cost, just the production of an iPad and the amount of water that goes into one is absolutely massive. Of course an iPad can be used for lots of other purposes which is not the case for a coursebook and I do think, I mean, I do believe sincerely there has been a sea change in thinking and it's coming through from the younger generation of people being much more critical of all this kind of unfriendly resources that are being imported into classrooms I mean people need. I think that problem is training level to teacher training, teacher trainers to take some responsibility of setting an example, and I've not been good at this myself, I mean, you know you go to places and you've run off handouts for a conference or plenary session for 700 hundred people for a five-page handout, and, and you're gonna hear the trees coming down in Finland.

**Chris Sowton:** It's changing that mindset, isn't it, certainly when just the expectation that you come armed with this stuff.

**Scott Thornbury:** I've had arguments with people, in Poland I think I was doing some teacher training work and they wanted the hand-out to be sent in advance so that they could print it off. I said I don't do handouts anymore I have a website where I'll upload a PDF of the PowerPoint people can download if they want and they say no, no, no, no, in Poland we have this tradition that you always have to have paper hand-out at a talk

**Chris Sowton:** It's not real unless it's sort of somehow printed, it's not tangible, you know, but I think it's interesting as well kind of thinking about the say the, the sort of TEFL industrial complex and how that changes, you know, how, how that mindset changes and I think there are small things that can come from bottom up but I think it has, it feels like it's got to be the big publishers and government ministries as well making those changes to



textbook provision, and it, as it were, and shifting what it means to acquire language but I guess that's, sort of, an ongoing conversation

**Scott Thornbury:** There are alternatives, I mean there have been initiatives and language teaching methodology going back hundreds of years. People have developed a method of teaching languages which relied on minimal materials like one book, and there's the famous case of this French pedagogue called Jacotot who developed this method. And he didn't speak Flemish but he had a bilingual novel written in Flemish, and French, and that was the course, they just work, work their way through it, sentence by sentence, you couldn't imagine a more eco-friendly course of that of one book

**Chris Sowton:** In a way what you're saying is, and what Dogme is trying to do and some of these other methods used is to almost rewild language learning. We're trying to get back to the heart of what language learning should be because often what we see is the structure of it all it is the books, it is the nice classrooms, it is the tech and all those sorts of things but actually we should be placing language learning at the heart of the process

**Scott Thornbury:** Exactly, of replacing the language learning environmental context at the heart of the process and when you say rewilding, I'm reminded of the initiative that a number of Scandinavian Language Learning in the Wild project where people go out into the street with a particular task. I mean this is learning a language like Icelandic or Finnish or whatever, and they, they prepare for these tasks they go out, they do the tasks they take photos on their phones of the core interactions, they're having with people in the wild, as it were, and they bring these back to the classroom, and this is essentially the material of the course but it's very contextualised, and it's very interactive, and that's where of course the internet comes in where there's a lot of affordances available there; but don't need, that all the paraphernalia of those educational materials that are produced. You don't need all that necessarily to learn a language, I'm not suggesting that's the only way to learn the language through immersion for example, but the fact that people can do it suggests that we should be thinking of methodologies which are more immersive, as it were, in their approach

**Chris Sowton:** Are there things which teachers can add to their classroom practice which, which do make them demonstrable and environmentally friendly?

**Scott Thornbury:** Now what I think, classrooms and contexts which are under resourced and how resourceful the teachers are in handling large groups of learners, sitting in lines at desks with very, you know, with a blackboard and that's about it and, and develop techniques of, first of all, well I mean you could say crowd control techniques, we're using a lot of lockstep through drilling etc and reading aloud, reciting and so on, which is not you know, I mean people have been learning languages like that for some considerable time these are not very communicative. I think they can be combined with communicative activities with like pair work and group work with not too much risk of chaos. I think many teachers are afraid that if they open up the classroom to interactive kind of activities that they won't be able to control it but I mean, it can be done.

**Chris Sowton:** And can I ask you as well, Scott about you, how you perceive the ELT industry's green credentials and how things may have shifted?

**Scott Thornbury:** I am amazed, a whole new generation of teachers seem to be as interested in Dogme as that, you know, when we first started talking about it 20 years ago,



that young people, are more eco-minded than ever and certainly more eco-minded than the older generation so that's very, very encouraging. I have to say, I mean in the light of the pandemic, my own carbon footprint has shrunk to toenail sized, simply because I'm not going around the world on planes, telling people to teach Dogme using low resource, you know, there was, there was, there was talk about hypocrisy. Enormous amount of stuff online, and these same courses use Dogme, and with much, much lower cost to the environment. Something I think, well, you know, I think we've all learned what we can do, what we can't do, what we can get away with, and, and maybe how some of us were, I was, in the old days when it was all getting on planes going all over the place.

**Chris Sowton:** So you think the changes to the ELT industry are going to come sort of top-down and bottom-up so it may be top down changes by publishers moving more of their products online. It may also be bottom up by students putting pressure on their teachers to, you know, this is what we want, we are more interested in the environment than perhaps our teachers are no-one are so it needs a sort of a top down and bottom up approach but also, I suppose, making the most of what we can call a Covid dividend.

**Scott Thornbury:** The other conversation is the kind of centre versus periphery conversations, the idea that everything has to emanate from the Britain, North America, Australia kind of English speaking context and that's only good if the materials come from that context and people don't trust their own expertise locally. This is another argument I've had constantly with people inviting me to fly out to places like Bangladesh to talk to the teachers there I say that I don't know anything about Bangladesh and don't even ask me, I'm sure you've got people out there who are much expert than me. I'm having this actual conversation at the moment about people in India, a publishing company there, who want me to do more and more stuff and I said I'm never, you know, I don't, I have no idea. They said no, no, what you have to say is, she said it was actually quite interesting, so she says 'agnostic methodologically' what you say, that methodology could be applied in any context which is interesting in itself and I think that's a testimony to the Dogme kind of mentality that it is does fit in a global context but at the same time, you know, I mean I do it, because I can do it online and I don't have to get on planes any longer but you've got local people out there who are just as good if not better, much better because they know the context, than some expert who has flown in from overseas but that that mentality that we've got to have at our conference or whatever, this white Anglo-Saxon male.

**Chris Sowton:** Absolutely.

**Scott Thornbury:** Expert it's like a please get over it, you know, move on because it's just for all sorts of reasons, and I think the same mentality applies to the books of publishing too. I mean, I guess we've been spoiled for so long and teachers will maybe some teachers at least, institutions and students too will need to be persuaded that materials don't have to look quite gorgeous and glossy and have to have so many add-ons and supplementary whatsits that we're kind of used to, I'm not blaming the publishing industry to publishing industry, anything you could add to a course book series that gives it a distinctive edge, of course, it's going to make it more attractive to the market. But, you know, as I said before there's maybe there is it has been a kind of sea change in thinking about people looking more suspiciously at things that are sort of shrink-wrapped and, and, you know, with the standard things that the students put in the workbook but with all this other kind of stuff, plastic wrapped in the end of the term, or the year, none of that had never been opened, you know, testing packs and CDs and DVDs and I don't know. So I think there has been a kind of rethinking that a lot of this is very wasteful and maybe there will come a time when,



when, what publishers offer will be judged not just on its educational viability, etc, but on its, its ecological worth.

**Chris Sowton:** Their carbon footprint could actually be the, sort of, of the market opportunity, what convinces someone to, to buy that particular product.

**Scott Thornbury:** Absolutely.

**Chris Sowton:** Fantastic. Thank you very much for your time today, Scott, that was really interesting insights into the environment and English language teaching.

**Scott Thornbury:** Thank you, Chris. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

**Chris Sowton:** Many thanks to Scott for his time. You can find out more about his work and writing on ELT at his website, [scottthornbury.com](http://scottthornbury.com).

**Vox Pops:** I am a teacher educator in Santa Fe, Argentina. I specialise in the field of methodology, and I usually teach lesson planning and material development, among other contents. What I have seen in the past ten years is that young prospective teachers have become more and more committed to raising awareness about environmental issues, environmental care has become a recurrent topic in their didactic projects and materials. And in addition to teaching English, they seek to develop responsible attitudes from their learners. So most of these projects lead to a final task that engages secondary school students in taking action, at least by sharing their views, suggestions and requests in social media. If you're interested, you can see some of these projects in our blog, [teaching English in Santa Fe](#).

**Chris Sowton:** I don't know what your experience of school was like, but meeting a golden snub-nosed monkey was definitely not on my curriculum. However, as we discover in this episode's From the Field at this school in rural China, that's exactly what students at the Voice in Nature English school in Yunnan Province can expect.

#### **From the Field:**

I'm very glad to talk about our programme here in the Yunnan. The Yunnan Province is located in southwest of China. Yunnan is very very beautiful, incredible place. It's very rich, boasting nature and a culture, and we have beautiful mountains, and we have beautiful Yangtze, the upper part of the Yangtze river valleys.

Most of the people move from countryside to the cities. We have less chance to go into nature and have a very kind of close connection with nature, our understanding towards our nature, I think, is less, and our bond, our bond with nature is getting less. When we know less, I think, we care less. Our programmes we're trying to inspire, and support or to encourage more people to learn about nature, to understand nature and its benefits, and its connection with our human beings. So for the English class that teaching curriculum, we try to integrate the nature education curriculum into indoor classes. Meanwhile, we also try to integrate the English learning with nature camps, so we take our students with both kids and their parents into the nature so our courses that the students to understand the nature, like some plants, animals and ecosystems and our heritage.

The students, they enjoy learning outdoor classes, outdoor camps. So I think for most of the kids, most of the time they just either stay at home, or stay at schools, so when they have



the chance to go outside both the parents and the students, the kids, they are very excited. We take them to different places in Yunnan. So, they really think our programme is good for the pupils' growth and as they care about the environment, care about local people and the culture. We want to have more of these kind of places. So not just to learn about English but we need to care about the personal growth and to care about connection with other people and with nature always support other people when we're doing the camps or when we at the class always help each other. So I think it's about interconnection with the world.

**Chris Sowton:** In our second interview this week, we hear from two more highly experienced English language educators, Kieran Donaghy and Ceri Jones, about their thoughts on how to green ELT pedagogy.

Kieran Donaghy is an award-winning writer, international conference speaker and teacher trainer, one of his particular areas of interest and expertise is on the use of images and the visual in English language teaching, welcome to the podcast, Kieran.

**Kieran Donaghy:** Thank you, Chris.

**Chris Sowton:** And Ceri Jones is a highly experienced freelance teacher, trainer and materials writer. She is also one of the cofounders of ELT Footprint, a group dedicated to sharing initiatives and projects, about how the ELT community can be more environmentally responsible, welcome to the podcast Ceri.

**Ceri Jones:** Thank you Chris lovely to be here.

**Chris Sowton:** Ceri perhaps we could begin with you and asking you to outline how and why ELT Footprint came into being, what it does, and what you and your colleagues hope to achieve through it?

**Ceri Jones:** So ELT Footprint came to be in 2019 which was really kind of the year of the zeitgeist of the climate emergency I think. There was a conference in Barcelona in May 2019 the Innovate Conference, and Daniel Barber spoke there and gave a plenary, where he made a climate emergency declaration for ELT and this kind of seemed to galvanise a lot of conversations that had been going on anyway but they were kind of dispersed across social media and as well as actually there face to face in the conference, and so there was a suggestion, how can we bring all of these people in these conversations together. And at the time the thing that seemed to be the most natural was to use Facebook as a space where people were already sharing, and the whole idea was this thing of creating a space for conversation, for sharing, for support. Obviously, all like-minded people involved in education in all kinds of different ways, it wasn't as if we invented anything, it was that the community came together to support each other, I guess. And then from there, some projects have grown through the community, right at the heart of it is, teachers, educators, interested in the topic, wanting to find out more ways to be able to actually do something to take action to feel like we're making a difference.

**Chris Sowton:** I was just going to ask a little bit of a community for like-minded people, what do you think can be done to convince people who aren't like-minded?

**Ceri Jones:** Okay so first of all, we're not into proselytising, we're into encouraging and supporting and motivating people who are already interested as it were, we're not out there to convert people to our cause, or anything because I think that generally has a kind of



drum-banging negativity to it. But there is that idea of, for many, many global issues that teachers want to say that's not my role, that's not my place, I teach the language, I don't teach the issues, and a very valid standpoint could also be that my students aren't interested in this and why should I? And my comeback on that usually is well if we want to take a really pragmatic line with this, this topic is The Topic of the moment and it's growing and it's only going to become more The Topic of the moment and you look again, really pragmatically at exams, and it's a topic that's coming up in exams more and more, I just did a year ago, kind of a very, very quick survey through the main Cambridge suite exams and found on almost every paper, a question which did have an environmental slant to it: so that sustainability, the environment, global issues, these are things that students who want to pass exams need to be able to talk about, to have the vocabulary to be able to process a text. So even if you don't buy into the importance of it as an issue, your students need it, it's like it's language that they need to have so for me that's kind of like the bottom line salesman's pitch!

**Chris Sowton:** Lovely, thank you, Ceri, and Keiron, if I could come to you. When we think about the global climate crisis, we see the importance of the image, and the visual within that, why do you think it's so important, and how do you see it being used within the field of ELT?

**Kieran Donaghy:** I would say the main reason for using the image in language education is that we're living in an increasingly visual world, that we're living in the age of the image, and that the majority of the texts that our students are encountering outside the classroom are visual texts like photographs or multimodal texts which use visuals such as a website, as an example of a multimodal texts, videos, short films, memes, infographics. These are the types of texts our students are encountering, so we need to bring these into the language classrooms, and use these texts to help students to analyse and interpret these texts. And a very interesting recent development has been the addition of the fifth skill of viewing in the English language curricula in a number of countries including Canada, Singapore and Australia. This skill of viewing is an active process of analysing, interpreting visual texts such as TV programmes, films, videos, paintings, infographics, symbols. And I think, undoubtedly, that this fifth skill of viewing will be added to English language curricula throughout the world. An example of one of these frameworks, would be See, Think, Wonder, which is a visible thinking routine which was developed at Harvard Graduate School by teacher researchers, and this is a very, very simple routine which can be used with any image, and essentially there are three questions that the teacher asked the students. So perhaps if we think of just one image and probably an image which all of the listeners will know so it's the image of a polar bear clinging on to an iceberg, and so we could say to the students, what do you see? And the students would say what they see and they'd say they see a polar bear on an iceberg and then the next question is what do you think? And you said, well I think this may be the result of climate change because and the students give their answer, and they say, what do you wonder? I say I wonder what's going to happen to the polar bear: did the polar bear survive? Did the polar bear manage to get where it was going? Did it the polar bear get any food? I wonder why we don't do more to try to counteract climate change. So, this would just be a one example of a very simple routine that we could use and as I said, this can be applied in any context, the, the second, the second thing I would say is that that's specifically referring to the climate crisis. I would say that a key component of the climate crisis education is what has been termed 'environmental literacy'. And so there's this need to teach concepts such as global warming, sustainable food, green jobs, carbon footprints, etc, and images are extremely useful in the language classroom to illustrate these concepts to our students. And therefore, developing





our students' environmental literacy.

**Chris Sowton:** Thank you, Kieran, and what kind of skills do you think teachers would need support with in order to do this effectively?

**Kieran Donaghy:** There is a need for initial teacher training and in-service teacher training for teachers to receive specific training in visual literacy and multimodality.

**Ceri Jones:** I love all of those visual thinking routines Kieran. And it's the choice of images, I think is vital, as well is, and maybe this is something as well that teachers, but I think even more so, published materials need to take a lot more care of over and that I think we can learn a lot of lessons from journalism, for example, so The Guardian has published articles recently about how they approach images when talking about the climate emergency and the type of images that they find to be more effective. There is an organisation called Climate Visuals that has a free gallery of interesting images from around the world which are not what might be the stereotypical, some of the underpinning principles for choosing images which really are going to get students thinking and responding and wondering, are ones which have some kind of a human story involved, preferably some kind of a local link, which means that the context is familiar to the students, or some kind of a surprise, something which makes them stop and rethink. Pre-Covid there were the horrible bushfires in Australia, and there were lots of different choices of images that could be used to represent that situation and a lot of them were these big images of the bushfires, which were somehow overwhelming it was this enormous disaster and represented in such a way that there's nothing you can do about it, so that the only reaction that they provoked was hopelessness, it was such an overwhelming feeling of despair, that it wasn't something that you'd want to take into a classroom at all. And I saw a story on the BBC which was just for me so touching and just the right way to go in, which was a little video clip, telling homeowners in Australia, how they could help the wildlife that were escaping from these fires, and they were tying fruit kebabs around the trees in their gardens and putting out big pots of water but making sure there was stones in the pot so that if an animal, accidentally fell into the water, they'd be able to climb back out again and it's a tiny little thirty second clip, but it seemed to me to be this kind of glimmer of hope in this horrible story and so that, for example, would be a really, in my mind, a really effective visual text to share with the students. And this idea that doing is possible, that acting as possible, that even in such a terrible situation, you can do something. This is, kind of, another underpinning principle I think of dealing with any of the major global issues which can be daunting for teachers, scary to talk about, is to find a story.

**Chris Sowton:** And I guess it's coming back to that word that Kieran used, that idea of wonder, for the language learning perspective as soon as students are wondering about something and want to say something, they want the language, they ask their teacher: how do you say this? And that's, that's where you can make them use the language.

**Ceri Jones:** It marries so well and so easily with developing critical thinking, for example. And what we've found quite a few times coming up on the ELT Footprint group for example, are images being shared that are fake. And what a wonderful lesson that can give teachers to take in the image and then get the students to say, you know, is this, is this a real image? Or is it fake? And if it's fake, why? And why did they do it? And then you have the lovely gift of a lesson as well. The visual thinking routines the questions, the questioning things always, it marries with so many things, so the visual literacy the eco literacy, critical thinking, that they all come together in what would be actually a simple framework for a



teacher to work with.

**Kieran Donaghy:** As Ceri said I think in coursebooks the selection of images is very important. There has been a recent tendency to use the same type of image, or in fact the same image, in, in coursebooks, and it can obviously lose its impact when it becomes stereotypical, or, or cliched.

**Chris Sowton:** I was just going to ask, Kieran, does it become one of those images that we just see and, and gloss over, we don't really think about? Does it become a familiar part of our language?

**Kieran Donaghy:** Absolutely. Yeah, because we've seen it so much, we don't really analyse it, that it's very superficial the way that we deal with it, but where it perhaps it's a new image, or it's as Ceri said, an image which tells, there's a narrative behind it, there is a human element, there's something behind it, that this would also be a way of developing what has been termed 'ecological empathy', sort of, empathy towards all living beings, plants, and the planet.

**Chris Sowton:** And one final question to both of you, let's begin with you, Kieran. It's just how do you feel the ELT community as a whole is responding to the climate crisis? And are you optimistic about the future?

**Kieran Donaghy:** I think that the ELT community is responding well, I think ELT Footprint is an excellent initiative which has caused a lot of positive change in the way that teachers are approaching the climate crisis so I can see that in coursebooks are incorporating units related to the climate crisis. So, in general terms I am optimistic about this.

**Chris Sowton:** Have you seen changes in your years of experience working in ELT about how the issue is treated?

**Kieran Donaghy:** I would say I have. Before it was presented in some ways as if it was a hypothesis. Now it seems to be much more explicit, there's no real debate about it it's very clear.

**Ceri Jones:** I like the analogy with technology and the way the treatment of technology has changed in coursebooks so like you're saying you know, it used to be in the unit on the future. And, you know, flying cars, and whatever that would be technology and then it started to be like in the past, we'll talk about technology of the past and then students can fill in what's happening in the present and then it just became pervasive. You don't have a unit on technology anymore. Every single topic that's discussed, we include the media, we include technology it's just, it's a given. And I think that if we can start moving towards sustainability actually being a given so, as you say, in the food unit, there is a discussion of food in general and part of that is the question of the sustainability of food production. In the fashion unit, there's a discussion of clothes and fashion in general and then as part of that, there's the idea of the sustainability of fashion and of fast fashion. And so that it actually is something which will become it, it won't be a topic in its own right, it's just another aspect of life, which is there whatever topic you're talking about. I don't think we're there yet. I think we're still there with the unit in the coursebook which is called The Environment, and all the students are like, we've done this to death, why are we doing The Environment unit?

**Chris Sowton:** We've finished The Environment, we've done it!



**Ceri Jones:** Because I think they have this feeling that they're being told things, they don't want to be told things anymore. As Kieran was saying with the visual thinking techniques that students aren't being told things they're not being informed, they're exploring, they're questioning, they're bringing their own experiences and their own judgements into play, and that, that's what textbooks should try to do in fact not transmit information, but encourage the students to bring their own information into play as well.

**Chris Sowton:** Fantastic. Kieran, Ceri, thank you very much for your time.

**Kieran Donaghy:** No, thank you Chris.

**Ceri Jones:** Thank you.

**Chris Sowton:** Thanks to both Ceri and Kieran for their time, please visit [ELTfootprint.uk](http://ELTfootprint.uk) for more information about their work.

**Vox Pop:** I'm an English teacher from Zlatar High School in Croatia. We watched David Attenborough's film, *A Life on Our Planet*, and participated in a panel organised by British embassy in Zagreb, which tackled climate changes. Later, students created online posters to warn local community about the deforestation of a local mountain. We shared the poster on social networking sites. We compared London's environmental strategy with Croatia's capital Zagreb strategy, and discussed what improvements could yet be done.

**Chris Sowton:** As the global climate crisis has intensified, so too has the language used to describe it. Increasingly in the media, we see phrases such as *climate apocalypse* and *climate Armageddon*. In this episode's Green Glossary, we hear from our partners at Oxford University Press about one such word: *ecocide*, and learn more about its origins and formation.

**Sting** The Green Glossary. The Green Glossary. Brought to you by Oxford University Press

**The Green Glossary:** I'm Tania Styles, and I work on etymology at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, researching the origins of English words. As an etymologist, I find *ecocide* a really interesting word. Its basic construction is fairly straightforward: the familiar element *eco-* (referring to the environment) is combined with the ending *-cide*, which we recognise from words like *suicide* and *homicide*. So literally speaking, *ecocide* means 'the killing of the environment'. Now this already seems like quite an interesting choice, to me, because it presents the environment as a living organism and equates damage to death. But looking at the context in which the word was first used shows more clearly why someone might want to do this.

The OED's earliest evidence for *ecocide* dates back to April 1969, when it appears in a local newspaper from Sandusky, Ohio in the United States. It's used in an article about the United Auto Workers Union, who are lobbying the state governor to put laws in place for controlling air pollution. The union rep claims that air pollution causes five thousand deaths in the state every year, and his plea to the legislators is pretty powerful stuff. He says: 'At stake are the health and lives of thousands of citizens, who are innocent victims of our careless indifference'. He goes on to say that neglect of the pollution problem could be described as '*ecocide—crimes against humanity by destruction of the environment*'.



Now rebranding air pollution as ecocide in this context is a stroke of persuasive genius: in this one word, the idea of damage to the environment is wrapped together with the killing of thousands of innocent humans; it's not words like pesticide the speaker intends to bring to mind here, or even suicide—it's genocide. Suddenly, we're not dealing with an unfortunate and slightly dull side-effect of the car industry—we're talking mass murder. And surely no state governor is going to stand back and let *that* happen.

The element ECO- is what we at the OED call a 'combining form'—a linguistic element that combines with other elements to make new words. Because they're effectively building-blocks for words, and not free-standing words in their own right, combining forms are a bit like prefixes and suffixes – collectively known as *affixes*. However, they differ in some important ways. An affix is usually added to an existing English word for one of two reasons: *either* to adjust its sense, *or* to change its part of speech. So for example, to the adjective *kind*, you might add the negative prefix *un-* to change its meaning and make *unkind*; or you might add the suffix *-ly* to it to make the adverb *kindly*. Semantically, affixes are very much secondary to the base-word they're affixed to. In both *unkind*, *kindly* and indeed *unkindly*, it's the adjective *kind* that carries most of the word's meaning, not the affix. But combining forms pack more of a semantic punch—when you put two of them together, like ECO- and -CIDE, each element contributes equally to the sense of the new word you've made.

As combining forms go, ECO- is an extremely productive one. The OED covers almost a hundred words formed from it, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and new combinations are appearing all the time. Many English combining forms are borrowed from Latin or Greek: bio- (in *biodegradable*), for instance, is from the Latin word for 'life', and anthropo- (in *anthropology*) is from the ancient Greek word for 'man'. However, this isn't the case for ECO-, at least not directly. It's a shortening of two closely related English words: the noun *ecology* and the derived adjective *ecological*. How do we know this? Well, a big clue is the fact that a significant number of ECO- words have earlier equivalents containing the adjective *ecological*: for instance, before the word *econiche* came into usage around 1958, the established term was *ecological niche*, and had been since 1917; and the word *eco-footprint* doesn't turn up until ten years after the fuller term *ecological footprint* had come into use. This indicates quite strongly that ECO- was formed by shortening – or *clipping* – the word *ecological*, to make longer expressions like these easier to say and write.

The English noun *ecology* was borrowed from German in the mid-1870s, and within a few years, *ecological* had been formed, by adding an adjective suffix. The original German word *Ökologie* was a relatively new one at the time: it had been coined just 10 years earlier by the scientist Ernst Haeckel as a name for the new branch of biology that had started to focus on the relationships between living things and their environments. Haeckel's word is made up of two elements: the ancient Greek word for 'house' or 'dwelling' and the German equivalent of *-logy*, which we know from the names of other branches of science, like *geology* and *biology*. Etymologically speaking, *ecology* is the study of our home then—our home planet, you might say. So at a deep level, ECO- words like ecocide share an underlying metaphor with some later environmental themes, like Greta Thunberg's rallying cry 'our house is on fire'.

The earliest English formations in ECO- date back to the early 1900s. They tend to be restricted to specialist scientific and technical registers: some of the earliest eco-words are



certainly terms I'd never come across myself until I started to do the research for this podcast. But the late 1960s was an important time in the history of the combining form ECO-, thanks to the rise of environmentalism as a political issue. During the sixties, as public awareness of environmental concerns grew, existing technical terminology in the area started to be used more widely, spreading from specialist scientific journals and out into newspapers, documentaries, and general conversation. This is demonstrated quite nicely by the word *ecosystem*, which started life among research biologists in the 1930s but has now become part of our everyday vocabulary: in fact, it's become common enough that you can describe *any* complex system of relationships as an ecosystem, like a business organisation or a sector of the economy.

Alongside this popularisation of existing vocabulary, a large number of new ECO-words were born at the end of the 1960s; and ecocide is part of this baby boom. From 1969 onwards we see a real eco-explosion in English, giving us new words for environmental damage (like *eco-catastrophe*, *eco-vandalism*, and of course *ecocide*), as well as words for environmental activism (with *eco-advocacy*, *eco-activist* and *eco-protest*), green travel and tourism (which brings us *eco-traveller*, *eco-camper*, *eco-lodge*), and green products (*eco-bottle*, *eco-bulb* and *eco-house*). And then of course, in the wake of positive terms (like *eco-conscious*, *eco-savvy*, and *eco-friendly*), you get the inevitable backlash, with negative words like *eco-babble*, *eco-fascist*, and *eco-nut*.

The popularity of *eco*-words isn't just restricted to English: the equivalent element is similarly productive in many European languages—not just in German which we've talked about, but also in French, Spanish, and Italian. This productivity can even be seen in the brand-names of environmentally-friendly cleaning products and the names of companies, and it shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. New words in ECO- crop up all the time: and a few we have our eye on at the moment are *eco-anxiety*, *eco-bling*, and *eco-cred*. As we continue to monitor the language for new arrivals, it looks as though ECO-words will be keeping us busy at the Dictionary for some time to come.

**Chris Sowton:** Thanks again to all our guests this week. For show notes, bonus material and previous episodes please visit the show website [www.britishcouncil.org/climate-connection](http://www.britishcouncil.org/climate-connection) and join us next time for Episode 4: Where's a CLIL, there's a way in which we'll be looking at how to achieve a good balance between environmental content and language in our teaching. Until then, goodbye.

