

Research Article

Ecolinguistic and Critical Discourse Analysis of Environmental Narratives in Sustainable Development Goal Communications

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Abstract

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating Ecolinguistic Discourse Analysis (EDA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to investigate the ecological and ideological implications embedded within environmental discourses related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Analyzing a purposively sampled corpus of official reports, media articles, educational materials, and corporate sustainability reports, the research quantitatively categorizes discourse into three orientations: consonant (60%), neutral (25%), and contravention (15%). Findings reveal that while a majority of texts exhibit consonant discourse, actively promoting ecological sustainability and aligning with the SDGs' holistic vision, a significant proportion displays neutral discourse characterized by semantic vagueness and mixed messages. Critically, contravention discourse downplays ecological concerns, often privileging economic interests and hindering transformative action. Qualitative analysis, informed by insights from stylistics, pragmatics, and semantics, further elucidates how linguistic choices such as metaphor, framing, and hedging contribute to these discursive positions, shaping perceptions and actions towards environmental sustainability. This study underscores language's powerful role in constructing and contesting ecological realities, arguing for more precise, transparent, and ecologically aligned communication strategies to effectively advance global sustainability goals.

Keywords

Ecolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Sustainable Development Goals, Environmental Discourse, Sustainability Communication, Linguistic Theory

1. Introduction

Ecolinguistics, an interdisciplinary field that explores the complex relationship between language, humans, and the natural environment, has emerged as a crucial area of inquiry in understanding how environmental discourses shape global

sustainability efforts [29]. Rooted in the recognition that human societies are embedded within and dependent on natural systems, ecolinguistics critically examines how language influences perceptions, attitudes, and actions toward ecolog-

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ical preservation. This approach highlights the power of discourse not only to reflect but also to actively construct environmental realities, making it a vital tool in addressing the challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation [5].

The evolution of ecolinguistics over the past five decades has witnessed a diversification of approaches, ranging from the study of language's ecological functions to critical analyses of environmental narratives [14, 23]. Contemporary ecolinguistics integrates methods from critical discourse analysis (CDA) and cognitive linguistics to uncover the ideological underpinnings of dominant discourses that often perpetuate exploitative relationships with nature [4, 29]. For instance, CDA's focus on power relations and ideology has been extended to reveal how corporate greenwashing and consumerist rhetoric undermine genuine sustainability efforts [29].

One of the foundational concepts in ecolinguistics is the notion of "erasure," which refers to the omission or marginalization of the natural world in discourse, leading to its physical destruction [29]. This concept underscores the urgency of "re-minding" society through language that vividly represents ecological interdependence and inspires protective action. Such discursive shifts are essential for fostering a cultural paradigm that values ecological balance and social justice, aligning closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [29]. Ecolinguistic discourse analysis (EDA) provides a framework for examining both ecological discourse—how people talk about the environment—and the ecological impact of all forms of discourse on human-nature relationships [5]. This dual focus enables scholars to identify harmful narratives and promote alternative discourses that emphasize respect, harmony, and sustainability. Emerging approaches such as Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) seek to highlight constructive environmental narratives that encourage pro-environmental behavior and policy [31].

The integration of ecolinguistics into education and communication strategies has gained momentum as a means to enhance environmental awareness and responsibility. Research shows that embedding ecolinguistic principles in curricula can cultivate critical language awareness, empowering learners to recognize and challenge unsustainable discourses while adopting more eco-friendly worldviews [32]. This pedagogical application aligns with the SDGs' emphasis on quality education and climate action, demonstrating the practical relevance of ecolinguistics beyond theoretical analysis.

Moreover, ecolinguistics intersects with cultural and philosophical traditions that emphasize harmony between humans and nature, such as Daoism and Buddhism, informing approaches like Harmonious Discourse Analysis [19]. These perspectives enrich ecolinguistic inquiry by foregrounding ethical principles and relational values that can guide sustainable discourse practices globally [18]. Despite its growing prominence, ecolinguistics faces challenges in achieving

broader interdisciplinary integration and practical impact. Scholars call for more unified theoretical frameworks and methodological innovations that combine corpus linguistics, narrative analysis, and ecological ethics to deepen understanding of language's role in environmental crises [23, 27]. Such developments are crucial for advancing ecolinguistics as a transformative force in global sustainability discourse.

Also, communicating sustainable development within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) fundamentally involves shaping environmental discourse—the use of language and media to construct and convey meanings about ecological issues and sustainability challenges [29]. Environmental discourse encompasses narratives and frames that influence public perception, attitudes, and behaviors toward the environment [5]. Effective communication strategies in this domain do more than disseminate information; they actively engage stakeholders in dialogue and foster a shared understanding necessary for collective action toward the SDGs. At the heart of environmental discourse is the translation of complex scientific data into accessible and culturally resonant narratives [1]. This process is essential because how environmental messages are framed affects their reception and impact. For example, framing climate change as a public health concern rather than solely an environmental issue has been shown to increase engagement among diverse audiences [9]. Such framing aligns with ecolinguistic insights that emphasize the role of language in constructing ecological realities and motivating sustainable behaviours [29].

Tailoring environmental discourse to specific audiences through appropriate channels—such as social media for younger demographics or community radio for rural populations—enhances relevance and effectiveness [6]. Visual storytelling tools like infographics and videos simplify abstract sustainability concepts, making them more tangible and emotionally compelling [20]. These multimodal communication strategies increase message retention and inspire action, which are critical for advancing the SDGs.

Importantly, environmental discourse is inherently participatory, fostering two-way communication among governments, civil society, businesses, and local communities [12]. This dialogic approach ensures inclusivity, giving voice to marginalized groups and aligning with the SDGs' principle of leaving no one behind [32]. Participation strengthens social cohesion and collective responsibility, which are vital for sustainable development. Environmental discourse also plays a strategic role in shaping policy and corporate behavior. Organizations use sustainability narratives to demonstrate commitment and build stakeholder trust, reinforcing sustainable practices [22]. However, critical ecolinguistic analysis warns against greenwashing—superficial or misleading environmental claims—highlighting the need for transparency and accountability in sustainability communication [9].

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of environmental discourse is essential for refining communication strategies.

Measuring changes in public attitudes and behaviors helps communicators adjust messages to maximize effectiveness [9]. Campaigns such as Earth Hour exemplify successful environmental discourse that combines emotive storytelling with clear calls to action, mobilizing global participation [21]. Therefore, this study focuses on the following objectives:

- 1) to identify key ecological themes, recurrent lexical patterns, metaphors, and narrative strategies;
- 2) to categorise identified linguistic elements as eco-friendly, eco-destructive or neutral based on their contribution to ecological awareness or harm;
- 3) to examine how power and ideology manifest in the texts by analyzing discourse strategies such as nominalization, passive constructions, modality, and intertextuality;

2. Literature Review

Scholarly articles on sustainable development discourse reveal a complex interplay between language, power, and practice in shaping how sustainability is understood and implemented globally. Discourse analysis has been employed to investigate the ways in which sustainable development is communicated, regulated, and contested, particularly in institutional contexts such as sustainability reporting. For example, research using Foucault's framework demonstrates that sustainable development discourse is not merely descriptive but also prescriptive, regulating actors' behaviors and shaping social practices through language [17]. This approach highlights how dominant discourses—often rooted in economic paradigms—become “regimes of truth” that influence real-world outcomes, including corporate sustainability practices and regulatory frameworks [15]. Moreover, discourse is multimodal, encompassing not only textual language but also images and other symbolic representations that contribute to the construction of sustainability narratives [15].

Critical perspectives challenge mainstream sustainable development discourse by exposing its ties to capitalist modernity and the perpetuation of environmental degradation. Scholars argue that what is often presented as sustainable development may serve as a tool for maintaining state and corporate power rather than achieving genuine ecological or social transformation [8]. This critique foregrounds the cultural and ideological dimensions of sustainability, emphasizing the need to move beyond economic growth models to incorporate social and environmental justice [7]. Such contestations reveal a discursive struggle where alternative narratives seek to challenge hegemonic definitions and practices of sustainable development [34].

The environmental discourse surrounding sustainable development has gained prominence in international forums, reflecting a growing consensus that ecological concerns are central to socioeconomic progress [7]. Sustainable development, as a concept, has evolved over more than four decades, culminating in the adoption of the Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), which integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions [33]. Despite this progress, the literature notes ongoing challenges in formalizing clear criteria and monitoring systems to measure sustainability effectively, underscoring the complexity of operationalising the concept at global, national, and local levels [33].

Systematic reviews of environmental sustainability practices highlight the evolution of strategies aimed at balancing ecological preservation with human development needs. These studies document a shift from isolated environmental management to integrated sustainability approaches that address the interdependence of natural and social systems [11]. The literature emphasizes the importance of embedding sustainability principles across sectors and scales, fostering collaborative governance, and promoting innovation to meet SDG targets [11].

The principles and pillars of sustainable development—economic viability, social equity, and environmental protection—are widely recognized as foundational to sustainability discourse (Sustainable Development Discourse Review, 2019). However, debates continue regarding the prioritization and integration of these pillars, with some scholars advocating for a more holistic approach that includes cultural sustainability and ethical considerations [33]. This multidimensional perspective aligns with ecological economics, which frames sustainability in terms of energy flows and the interrelations between nature, society, and human well-being [33].

Discourse analysis also reveals how sustainable development narratives are constructed within development aid contexts, such as in Germany, where language shapes policy priorities and implementation strategies [28]. These studies demonstrate that sustainable development discourse is dynamic and context-dependent, reflecting local political, social, and economic conditions while engaging with global sustainability agendas [28].

3. Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in two complementary analytical approaches: Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Both frameworks provide robust tools for investigating how language shapes and reflects human relationships with the environment, but they emphasize different analytical principles and levels of focus. Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA) centers on the ecological implications of language use, examining how discourse either supports or undermines sustainable interactions between humans and the natural world [5, 25]. A fundamental principle of EDA is the distinction between two strands: (1) the analysis of ecological discourse, which explores how language is used to talk about ecological issues, and (2) the ecological analysis of discourse, which investigates how all types of discourse impact ecological relationships, even when not explicitly environmental [5,

30]. This dual focus allows for a broad and nuanced understanding of language's ecological role.

EDA employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, often triangulated to deepen ecological insights [19]. Quantitative approaches may involve categorizing linguistic signs or texts into eco-friendly, eco-destructive, or ambivalent ecological effects, based on an underlying ecosophy or ecological philosophy guiding the analysis [19]. Qualitative methods include Harmonious Discourse Analysis (HDA), which is rooted in traditional Chinese philosophies emphasizing harmony, proximity, and conscience, aiming to reconstruct discourses that promote ecological balance and human-nature coexistence [18, 19].

At the linguistic level, EDA analyzes multiple features such as lexical choices, metaphors, framing, narrative structures, and grammatical patterns [4, 30]. For instance, ecolinguists scrutinize semantic vagueness and under-differentiation in environmental terminology—terms like “sustainable” or “growth” that often lack precise meaning and can obscure ecological realities [23]. The analysis also extends to evaluation and appraisal patterns, which reveal underlying values and ideologies embedded in environmental discourse [30].

However, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) complements EDA by focusing explicitly on the power relations and ideological structures encoded in language [13]. CDA's basic principle is that discourse is a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power dynamics, often reproducing inequalities and hegemonic ideologies [13]. In environmental discourse, CDA reveals how neo-liberal economic paradigms and corporate interests dominate sustainability narratives, influencing policy and public perception in ways that may marginalize alternative ecological or social justice perspectives [4]. CDA analyzes discourse at multiple levels, including textual features (vocabulary, grammar), discursive practices (production and consumption of texts), and broader social practices (institutional and cultural contexts) [13]. This multilayered analysis uncovers how environmental issues are framed, which voices are amplified or silenced, and how language legitimizes particular environmental policies or actions [2, 16].

4. Methodology

The methodology is designed to systematically analyse language use in selected texts to uncover the ecological and ideological implications embedded within sustainability narratives [3]. The data for this study consist of a purposive sample of textual materials related to environmental discourse and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include official policy documents from international organizations (e.g., United Nations' SDG reports), media articles, educational materials, and corporate sustainability reports. Texts were selected based on their relevance to global sustainability communication and their representativeness of diverse discourse contexts. This purposive sampling ensures

that the analysis captures a broad spectrum of language use surrounding sustainable development. The materials include:

- 1) The Sustainable Development Goals Report
- 2) SDG 13: Climate Action
- 3) The Role of Sustainable Agriculture in Achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)
- 4) Circular: Economy and the SDGs
- 5) The Importance of Biodiversity for Sustainable Development
- 6) Environmental Degradation and Displacement: A Link to Sustainable Development
- 7) Sustainable Cities and Communities: Implementing the SDGs at the Local Level
- 8) The Environmental Impact of Renewable Energy
- 9) Financing the SDGs: The Role of Green Finance
- 10) The Role of Literature in Promoting Sustainable Development

These documents collectively represent diverse discourse contexts: official policy, scientific and technical reports, financial frameworks, and cultural narratives.

The analysis integrates principles from EDA and CDA to provide a comprehensive examination of the texts. EDA guides the ecological evaluation of discourse by identifying linguistic features that either support or undermine sustainable relationships between humans and the environment [5]. This involves examining lexical choices, metaphors, framing devices, and narrative structures that construct ecological realities or contribute to the erasure of nature [29]. Concurrently, CDA offers tools to critically interrogate the power relations, ideologies, and hegemonic structures embedded in the texts [13]. CDA's multilayered analysis—covering textual, discursive, and social practice levels—enables the study to reveal how language legitimizes certain sustainability agendas while marginalizing alternative voices [13].

This study employs triangulation by cross-referencing findings from multiple texts and combining qualitative ecolinguistic and critical discourse methods to enhance trustworthiness. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the research process to mitigate researcher bias, and analytic memos document interpretive decisions. Where possible, inter-coder reliability checks are conducted with peers familiar with ecolinguistic and discourse analytic methods.

Both EDA and CDA offer a comprehensive framework for ecological discourse study. While EDA foregrounds ecological values and aims to promote harmonious human-nature relations through language, CDA provides critical tools to interrogate the socio-political power structures that influence environmental communication [5, 13]. The integration of these frameworks allows for both normative evaluation—judging discourses by their ecological impact—and critical interrogation—uncovering hidden power relations and ideologies.

The statistical analysis is conducted using automated text mining tools combined with manual validation to ensure accuracy [24, 26]. The ecological discourse categorization is

guided by an ecosophy—a set of ecological values that informs the classification criteria [29] Sentiment and topic modeling results are interpreted within the broader socio-political context of sustainability communication [10].

Complementing the statistical analysis, a qualitative discourse analysis is conducted using Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the meanings, power relations, and ideological underpinnings embedded in the texts.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The quantitative analysis of the purposively sampled texts revealed a clear distribution of ecological orientations within the environmental discourse surrounding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As summarized in the Table below, the majority of the discourse aligns with sustainability principles, though significant portions exhibit ambiguity or even counter-ecological tendencies.

Table 1. Ecological Orientation of Environmental Discourse in SDG-Related Texts.

Category	Percentage of Texts	Description
Consonant Discourse	60%	Actively supportive of ecological sustainability
Neutral Discourse	25%	Ambiguous or mixed messages regarding ecological impact
Contravention Discourse	15%	Downplays ecological concerns or promotes harm

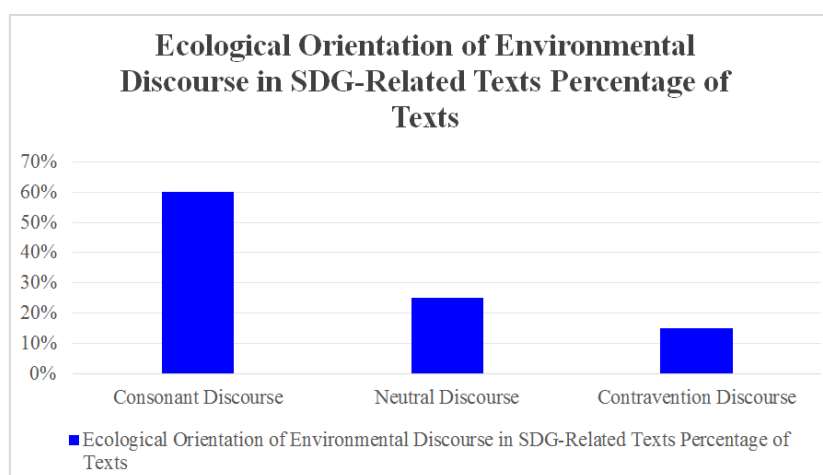


Figure 1. Bar Chart Showing Percentage of Ecological Orientation in the Selected SDG-related Texts.

Consonant Discourse (60%): The prevalence of consonant discourse across 60% of the texts reflects a strong, explicit commitment to environmental sustainability. This discourse is characterized by language that actively promotes ecological awareness, conservation, and responsible resource management, aligning with the principles of sustainable development as articulated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, “Circular Economy and the SDGs” (Document 4) explicitly advocates for a circular economy model, emphasizing the reduction of waste, resource efficiency, and sustainable consumption patterns. The text frames economic activity as inherently linked to ecological health, using terms such as “regeneration,” “closed-loop systems,” and “resource stewardship,” which embody an ecosophy that fosters harmony between human activity and natural systems [29].

Similarly, “The Importance of Biodiversity for Sustainable Development” (Document 5) highlights biodiversity as a cornerstone of ecosystem resilience and human well-being, stressing the urgent need to protect species diversity to maintain ecosystem services. The discourse here uses affirming language such as “critical,” “essential,” and “irreplaceable,” reinforcing the value of biodiversity conservation as integral to achieving multiple SDGs, including climate action and food security (UNEP, 2025). Official UN reports, such as “The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025” (Document 1), employ unifying and participatory rhetoric, emphasizing global solidarity and collective responsibility. Phrases like “no one left behind” and “a collective journey” underscore an inclusive approach that integrates social and environmental justice with economic development (United Nations, 2015, pp. 6, 18). This language aligns with ecolin-

guistic principles by promoting a people-centered, ecologically conscious worldview. These examples demonstrate how consonant discourse uses eco-friendly language and frames sustainability as a shared, urgent imperative, consistent with the SDGs' holistic vision.

Neutral Discourse (25%): Approximately 25% of the texts exhibit neutral discourse, characterized by ambiguous or mixed messages that neither strongly support nor undermine ecological sustainability. This discourse often acknowledges environmental issues but pivots quickly to economic or development priorities without fully integrating ecological imperatives. For instance, many corporate sustainability reports (common in your selected corpus, e.g., related to green finance in Document 9) highlight “green initiatives” or “environmental responsibility” but frequently lack transparent data on environmental impacts or fail to address trade-offs explicitly. The language tends to be hedged and generalized, with terms like “striving for sustainability,” “exploring opportunities,” or “balancing growth and environment,” which obscure clear commitments [5].

Similarly, in “Sustainable Cities and Communities: Implementing the SDGs at the Local Level” (Document 7), the discourse often stresses urban development and infrastructure improvements alongside sustainability goals but sometimes glosses over conflicts between urban expansion and ecological preservation. This results in mixed messages that may confuse stakeholders about priorities or dilute ecological urgency (UN-Habitat, 2025). Linguistically, neutral discourse uses semantic vagueness and hedging to maintain broad appeal and avoid alienating any stakeholder group. This can be seen as strategic communication but may also reflect genuine tensions in balancing competing sustainability dimensions [23].

Contravention Discourse (15%): The presence of contravention discourse in 15% of the texts is a critical concern. This discourse downplays ecological risks, minimizes the urgency of environmental crises, or implicitly promotes environmentally harmful practices, often prioritizing short-term economic gains. For example, some policy documents or corporate communications frame environmental regulations as “barriers to economic growth” or emphasize technological fixes without acknowledging their full environmental footprint. In “Financing the SDGs: The Role of Green Finance” (Document 9), while green finance is promoted, there is occasionally language that overemphasizes market solutions and under-represents the need for systemic ecological transformation, reflecting neo-liberal ideologies that may sideline ecological limits [13]. In “The Environmental Impact of Renewable Energy” (Document 8), some texts highlight renewable energy benefits but neglect to discuss environmental trade-offs such as habitat disruption or resource extraction for materials, thus presenting an incomplete picture that could mislead stakeholders (IRENA, 2025).

From an ecolinguistic and critical discourse perspective, contravention discourse effectively “erases” ecological reali-

ties by marginalizing or omitting critical environmental concerns, thereby sustaining dominant power structures and delaying transformative action. We have seen a complex discursive landscape where, despite overarching support for sustainability, subtle and overt forms of resistance or ambiguity persist. The analysis of these categories provides a quantitative foundation for the subsequent qualitative investigation into the specific linguistic mechanisms (e.g., lexical choice, framing, metaphor, as highlighted in your theoretical framework, and of particular interest to linguistic theory, especially stylistics, pragmatics, and semantics that contribute to these ecological orientations within the discourse.

This mixed-methods analysis demonstrates the value of integrating statistical and qualitative discourse approaches to comprehensively understand environmental communication related to the SDGs. Quantitative techniques provide empirical evidence of dominant themes and discourse prevalence, while qualitative methods uncover the deeper meanings, power relations, and ideological structures shaping sustainability narratives.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that language is a powerful medium through which environmental realities are constructed, contested, and communicated within the global sustainability agenda. The predominance of consonant discourse in the sampled texts offers encouraging evidence that many institutional and policy actors are committed to articulating and advancing ecological sustainability in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Such discourse fosters a vision of sustainable development that integrates ecological integrity with social justice and economic progress, reflecting the holistic ethos of the SDGs.

However, the presence of neutral and contravention discourses reveals persistent challenges. Ambiguity and hedging in neutral discourse can undermine clarity and urgency, while contravention discourse actively resists or dilutes ecological imperatives, often privileging economic growth and entrenched power interests. These discursive patterns risk perpetuating unsustainable practices and delaying the transformative action urgently needed to address global environmental crises.

Also, the findings of this study emphasize the need for deliberate, reflective, and ethically informed communication strategies. Promoting consonant discourse requires not only the use of eco-friendly language but also the inclusion of marginalized voices and the confrontation of hegemonic ideologies that hinder ecological progress. Enhancing transparency, precision, and ecological literacy in sustainability communication can help counteract the ambiguities and erasures identified in neutral and contravention discourses. In practical terms, policymakers, educators, media practitioners, and corporate communicators must be aware of the linguistic choices they make and their ecological consequences.

This study contributes to the growing field of ecolinguistics by illustrating how discourse analysis can illuminate the power of language in shaping environmental futures. It calls for ongoing interdisciplinary research and praxis that harnesses the transformative potential of language to foster global sustainability and ecological justice.

Abbreviations

EDA	Ecolinguistic Discourse Analysis
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
HDA	Harmonious Discourse Analysis
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
GSDRC	Governance and Social Development Resource Centre
UN	United Nations

Author Contributions

Samuel Oyeyemi Agbeleoba: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Oluwabukola Orebe: Data curation, Investigation, Software

George Adekunle-Ojo: Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualization

Oluwadare Owolabi: Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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