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ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: EVOLUTION AND SOCIETAL IMPACT

This article examines how environmental discourse has evolved and how it shapes society, focusing on the role of environmental discourse analysis in understanding ecological communication, public perception, and policy development. It traces the historical shift from postwar discussions centred on industry and productivity to later debates emphasising ecology and sustainability. The study highlights key theoretical frameworks, including Foucault's power/knowledge nexus, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, Stibbe's ecolinguistics, Beck's risk society, Dryzek's deliberative democracy, and Zheng's cognitive linguistic models of meaning construction, showing how environmental truths are produced, risks are perceived and communicated, and dominant ideologies are reinforced or challenged through discourse.

The analysis highlights historical shifts in terminology, the importance of framing, the use of first-person pronouns in environmental argumentation, and the emotional dimensions embedded in environmental narratives. The analysis explores the dual focus of environmental discourse: systemic transformation at the collective level and individual responsibility at the personal level. It also addresses contemporary challenges such as the rise of digital communication, misinformation, and the lack of transparency in environmental reporting, which can enable greenwashing and weaken trust. Another critical issue is the dominance of technological narratives, particularly artificial intelligence, which often prioritise efficiency while neglecting well-being and ecological balance in society. By re-centring human and environmental needs, and by promoting fairness, inclusivity, and accessible tools, environmental discourse analysis can help guide more credible and transformative responses to ecological crises.

Keywords: environmental discourse, discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, ecological communication, societal impact.

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АНАЛІЗ ЕКОЛОГІЧНОГО ДИСКУРСУ: ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ТА ВПЛИВ НА СУСПІЛЬСТВО

Статтю присвячено дослідженню еволюції екологічного дискурсу та його впливу на суспільні процеси. Проаналізовано роль дискурс-аналізу у формуванні екологічної комунікації, громадської думки та державної політики. Висвітлено історичну трансформацію дискурсу: від повоєнної орієнтації на індустріалізацію та продуктивність до сучасних дискусій про екологічну безпеку й сталій розвиток. У роботі окреслено ключові теоретичні підходи, зокрема: концепцію влади і знання М. Фуко, критичний дискурс-аналіз Н. Феркло, еколінгвістику А. Стіббе, теорію суспільства ризику У. Бека, модель деліберативної демократії Дж. Драйзека та когнітивно-лінгвістичні моделі Г. Л. Чжена. Зазначені підходи дають змогу розкрити механізми конструювання екологічних істин, способи комунікації ризиків, а також роль дискурсу в легітимізації або критиці панівних ідеологій.

У дослідженні висвітлено історичні зміни в термінології, роль фреймів та специфіку використання займенників в екологічній аргументації, а також емоційні складники, інтегровані в екологічні наративи. Проаналізовано подвійний фокус екологічного дискурсу: системну трансформацію на колективному рівні та індивідуальну відповідальність на особистісному. Розглянуто сучасні виклики, зокрема стрімкий розвиток цифрових комунікацій, поширення дезінформації та брак прозорості в екологічній звітності, що може зумовлювати грінвошинг і підірвати суспільну довіру. Особливу увагу приділено критичній проблемі домінування технократичних наративів (зокрема пов'язаних зі штучним інтелектом), у яких пріоритет ефективності часто витісняє питання соціального добробуту та екологічного балансу. Авторки доводять, що переорієнтація на людські та екологічні потреби, забезпечення справедливості й інклюзивності, а також використання доступних комунікаційних інструментів дозволять аналізу екологічного дискурсу стимулювати більш достовірні та трансформаційні стратегії подолання екологічних криз.

Ключові слова: екологічний дискурс, аналіз дискурсу, еколінгвістика, екологічна комунікація, вплив на суспільство.

Problem Statement. Environmental discourse analysis examines how language shapes our understanding of nature, environmental policies, and practices. Emerging in the late twentieth century alongside growing ecological awareness and the influence of environmental politics, it draws on social sciences and ecocriticism to reveal how narratives, framing, and eco-linguistics influence perceptions and actions regarding critical environmental issues. Despite recognition of its importance, there is still a need to study its development, societal impact, and the increasing complexity of environmental communication.

The multidisciplinary nature of research on environmental discourse compounds the problem. Environmental discourse has been shaped by scholars from linguistics, sociology, politics, and communication and culture studies. The lack of a unifying



framework makes it difficult to evaluate the overall impact of environmental discourse on society. In addition, new issues such as the development of digital communication platforms, misinformation, and the politics of expertise in environmental discourse underline new difficulties. What is needed is a review of research on environmental discourse that traces its evolution, highlights key theoretical approaches, and addresses the societal challenges of the present.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Research on environmental discourse has expanded over the past three decades, reflecting the recognition that language shapes environmental communication. Foundational studies by John Dryzek developed a typology of discourses, from ecological modernisation to radical green perspectives, showing how framing influences policy outcomes (Dryzek, 2013). Critical discourse analysis, advanced by Norman Fairclough, provided methodological tools to examine how power relations are reproduced through environmental language, with his three-dimensional framework applied to policy texts, media, and advocacy materials (Fairclough, 2004). More recently, Arran Stibbe's work in ecolinguistics has emphasised the role of narratives and metaphors in sustaining or challenging destructive practices, arguing that linguistic analysis is vital for promoting sustainability (Stibbe, 2021). Parallel to this, research has increasingly focused on digital media, analysing Twitter campaigns to assess the reach of environmental communication (Murtagh et al., 2014), while Philippe Suignard highlighted how debate structures privilege either macroscopic perspectives, focused on systemic and collective dimensions of environmental transition, or microscopic ones centred on individual behaviour and responsibility (Suignard, 2022).

Another important line of inquiry addresses governance and institutional dimensions of discourse. Shayne Longpre and other scientists identified transparency deficits in corporate environmental reporting, particularly in technology sectors, that undermine credibility and enable greenwashing (Longpre et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Martin Lindstam and collaborators examined dominant narratives around artificial intelligence, showing how speculative approaches can foster reflection on ecological costs and risks of technological acceleration (Lindstam et al., 2024).

Purpose and objectives of the study. The **purpose** of this study is to examine how environmental discourse has evolved and to assess its broader societal impact. It seeks to synthesise insights into the ways environmental communication influences public attitudes, governance structures, and collective action across different historical periods and cultural contexts. By doing so, the study aims to deepen understanding of the role of language in shaping responses to ecological challenges and in guiding policy development. To achieve this, the study pursues several **objectives**: tracing the historical development of environmental discourse; reviewing key theoretical frameworks; analysing dominant themes, narratives, and emotional dimensions that define environmental communication; and evaluating their influence on public understanding and collective behaviour. Additionally, it identifies contemporary challenges, such as digital communication and misinformation, and outlines future directions for research and practice to strengthen the effectiveness of environmental discourse in advancing sustainability.

Presentation of the main material. The evolution of environmental discourse reflects broader shifts in social values, scientific knowledge, and political priorities. In the postwar decades of the 1950s through the early 1970s, the term *environment* was largely tied to socio-economic and workplace contexts rather than ecological concerns. Semantic analyses from the 1950s reveal strong associations with concepts such as *team*, *mobilisation*, and *state-of-the-art*, reflecting productivity, organisational efficiency, and modernisation in society. This usage highlights the dominance of industrial and economic priorities in public and policy discussions, with limited attention to ecological issues during this era (Jin et al., 2024).

In the 1980s and 1990s, environmental discourse shifted toward ecological themes. Terms such as *forest*, *grassland*, *carbon dioxide*, and *nature* became central, reflecting growing political and societal concern for sustainability and conservation. This transformation paralleled global developments in environmental awareness, policy frameworks, and the integration of ecological considerations into mainstream socio-economic debates (Jin et al., 2024). The introduction of *sustainable development* by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 illustrates both the promise and the ambiguity of this shift. While celebrated as a groundbreaking ecological framework, it has also been criticised for reinforcing economic growth and legitimising continued resource exploitation. Such semantic tensions highlight the complexity of environmental discourse, where ecological imperatives intersect with economic priorities, underscoring the need for critical analysis of its societal implications.

Environmental discourse analysis draws on a diverse set of theoretical frameworks that illuminate the relationships among language, power, and environmental governance. Michel Foucault's work is foundational here, particularly his concepts of the power/knowledge nexus, governmentality, and biopolitics. These ideas help explain how institutions produce and control environmental knowledge, how policies regulate behaviour under the guise of sustainability, and how population management intersects with ecological concerns (Foucault, 2013). His theories allow scholars to critically assess how environmental "truths" are constructed and how power relations shape ecological narratives.

Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis provides another key framework. His three-dimensional model – text analysis, discourse practice, and social practice – offers a comprehensive method for examining environmental texts (Fairclough, 2004). His emphasis on ideology, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity highlights how scientific, political, and economic discourses intertwine to shape environmental communication. His approach reveals how dominant ideologies are reproduced in environmental debates and how language can reinforce or challenge existing power structures.

Arran Stibbe's contributions through ecolinguistics expand the field by focusing on the narratives and metaphors embedded in everyday language. His concept of the "stories we live by" underscores how discourse can either sustain ecologically destructive behaviours or inspire sustainable practices (Stibbe, 2021). The scholar's distinction between positive and negative framing demonstrates the power of language to encourage ecological harmony or justify exploitation. His work bridges linguistics and ecology, showing how discourse analysis can be used as a tool for cultural and behavioural change toward sustainability.

Ulrich Beck's risk society theory adds a sociological dimension to environmental discourse analysis. He distinguishes between natural and manufactured risks, emphasising how modern societies grapple with human-made threats such as pollution and climate change (Beck, 2004). His ideas of reflexive modernisation and the global risk society highlight the need for critical reflection on modernisation's unintended consequences and the transnational nature of environmental risks. This framework helps explain how risk perception shapes environmental discourse and policy, while also stressing the importance of individual responsibility within collective ecological challenges.



John Dryzek's work on environmental politics and deliberative democracy provides a democratic framework for analysing environmental discourse. His typology of discourses – ranging from ecological modernisation to green radicalism – illustrates how different narratives frame environmental problems and solutions (Dryzek, 2013). His approach highlights how democratic processes and institutional design can integrate ecological values into governance, ensuring that environmental discourse contributes to more equitable and sustainable policymaking.

Honglian Zheng's cognitive linguistic framework offers a perspective by focusing on the internal meaning-making processes through which environmental discourse is constructed. Grounding the analysis in cognitive linguistics, Zheng highlights the dynamic process of conceptualization as the mechanism through which environmental meaning emerges (Zheng, 2022). Two fundamental theoretical models are offered: a cognitive model of meaning formation, and semantic mechanisms, demonstrating how meaning construction operates at both micro and macro levels of environmental discourse analysis. At the micro level, the models offer practical guidance for discourse analysis, while at the macro level they enable exploration of the semantic origin and hierarchy of environmental discourse. This framework equips scholars with conceptual tools to critically examine how cognitive processes shape ecological understanding and to trace the pathways through which language can either entrench destructive environmental narratives or facilitate their transformation into more ecologically responsible forms.

Together, these frameworks form the theoretical background of environmental discourse analysis, enabling scholars to critically examine how language shapes ecological understanding, governance, and collective action.

Within contemporary environmental discourse, a distinction is drawn between macroscopic and microscopic perspectives (Suignard, 2022). The macroscopic orientation emphasises systemic and collective dimensions of environmental transition, focusing on national and international policy, governance frameworks, and large-scale societal transformation. In contrast, the microscopic orientation highlights individual practices, personal behavioural change, and subjective experiences of responsibility. This dual structuring not only organises the discourse but also shapes the arguments and narratives that emerge. For instance, the first-person pronoun *I* is typically associated with discussions of personal practice, whereas *we* signals collective or systemic concerns. Such semantic distinctions reveal how environmental communication mobilises both individual responsibility and collective action, creating a dynamic interplay that influences public perception and policy development (Suignard, 2022).

Environmental communication is characterised by a remarkable diversity of themes and narrative strategies, reflecting the multifaceted nature of ecological issues and the varied audiences to which environmental messages are addressed. Analysis of communication datasets illustrates how environmental discourse extends beyond traditional ecological topics to intersect with social, cultural, and educational contexts. By weaving ecological concerns into broader human experiences, environmental communication enhances its relevance and resonance with diverse audiences (Panchagnula, 2025).

The emergence of digital communication platforms, particularly social media, has fundamentally transformed the landscape of environmental discourse. They enable campaigns that foster public engagement and cultivate environmental citizenship, understood as active participation and responsibility in addressing environmental challenges. Measuring the impact of online activity remains complex: metrics like followers, retweets, and likes are often used as proxies, but debates persist over whether these interactions represent genuine participation or superficial engagement. Evaluating media influence, therefore, requires distinguishing between low-effort digital actions and deeper forms of involvement that reflect commitment to environmental values, with discourse shaping shared responsibilities and motivating collective change (Murtagh et al., 2014).

Environmental discourse highlights the need to integrate diverse cultural perspectives to ensure that practices are effective, fair, and inclusive. Collaboration across societies is essential because strategies that succeed in one cultural context may not easily apply in another, making cross-cultural sensitivity vital for cooperation and policymaking. Institutions and nations play key roles in shaping this discourse by establishing transparent and fair policies, with institutional responsibility ensuring trust and legitimacy across boundaries and national accountability aligning practices with the diverse needs of populations (Tapo et al., 2024).

One of the biggest problems in today's environmental discourse is the lack of transparency in reporting impacts. Without clear and standardised reporting, it is hard for researchers and the public to measure ecological footprints or verify companies' claims, which can lead to greenwashing and weaken trust. On top of this, current research tools often do not scale well to newer, complex systems, and accessible tools for independent developers are limited. This creates a gap between well-funded corporations and smaller researchers, slowing the spread of best practices. To make environmental analysis more credible and fairer, there needs to be both transparent reporting and easy-to-use tools that allow wider participation and diverse perspectives (Longpre et al., 2024).

Contemporary environmental discourse views technological progress, especially artificial intelligence, as inevitable and necessary for solving global challenges, including sustainability. While these views highlight efficiency, they often overlook alternative priorities such as wellbeing, sociality, and ecological balance. A growing trend is to re-centre environmental and human wellbeing in visions of progress, critically reassessing the promises of technology while recognising its risks (Lindstam et al., 2024).

Conclusions. The study shows that environmental discourse has evolved from being tied to industrial and economic priorities in the mid-20th century to becoming a central part of ecological and political debates today. Theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Foucault, Fairclough, Stibbe, Beck, and Dryzek provide powerful tools for understanding how language shapes environmental knowledge, governance, and collective action. These perspectives reveal the interplay between individual responsibility and systemic transformation, highlighting how discourse mobilises both personal practices and collective strategies in response to ecological challenges.

At the same time, contemporary discourse faces new pressures and opportunities. Digital platforms have expanded participation but raised questions about the depth of engagement, while cultural diversity underscores the need for fairness and inclusivity in global environmental governance. Challenges such as transparency gaps, methodological limitations, and the dominance of technological narratives point to areas where discourse must adapt. By re-centring human and ecological wellbeing, fostering collaboration across scales, and ensuring openness in environmental analysis and discourse, discourse can become a more effective driver of sustainability and transformative change.

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