

Capitalist Discourse framing of environmental issues

Givi Amaglobeli ^{1*}

¹International Black Sea University, School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2, David Agmashenebeli Alley, 0131 Tbilisi, Georgia

Abstract. The article discusses the issue of framing of Environmental Issues from an ideological perspective(s). We will try to show how the main ideological paradigms identify, frame and present the basic issues of ecology, in general. The theoretical basis for our deliberation is a concept of discourse analysis, where specific issues are being examined through a language use. For this purpose, we mainly focus on a specific type of discourse – a Capitalist Discourse and try to show how it manages to frame all important environmental issues in a specific manner in terms of justifying the current status quo, that is – economic necessity/utility/profitability principles. The notion of Capitalist Discourse is borrowed from J. Lacan's Theory of Four Discourses, where the notion under discussion is being identified as an additional, fifth type of discourse which is a variation of discourse of the master, which takes a hysterical position in order to create an impression that it stands on the side of those who are subject to the discourse of the master, when in fact, it secretly serves and pursues the interests of the latter. Another endeavor in examining the subject is to focus/identify specific linguistic strategies intended to frame/re-frame the environmental issues using various euphemisms

1 Introduction

In this work, we will try to establish the connection between the real ecological problems and the peculiarities of their description-expression within and among different ideological discourses. The mentioned problem is essentially of a political nature, as on the one hand we have an objective circumstance (fact) in the form of (negative) climatic changes, and on the other hand, interpretation of this fact within a specific ideological framework. In particular, we face its (climate change) denial among the supporters of extreme right wing-reactionist capitalism. The ideological conflict between the progressive and conservative spectrums around the issue is obvious.

Before elaborating on the subject, it would be of a practical importance to provide a specific theoretical foundation for our deliberation. This can be achieved by linking the environmental issues to how they are depicted/framed/expressed linguistically, thus, creating corresponding meanings related to it. Specifically, linguistic problems related to the environmental issues are studied in ecolinguistics, especially critical ecolinguistics. Alexander and Stibbe (2011) define ecolinguistics as the study of the impact of language use on survival that bridges the relationship between humans, other organisms, and the physical environment which is normatively oriented to the preservation of sustainable relationships in life. In other words, ecolinguistics is closely related to how language plays a role in shaping, maintaining, influencing, or destroying relationships between human beings, living conditions, and their

environment. Critical ecolinguistics focuses on discourse related to the environment. [1]

One must take the political aspect of the topic under discussion into account within the context of the environmental discourse. The topic is undoubtedly expressed and understood using specific linguistic strategies that represent ideological differences. The right-wing spectrum, in instance, names the problem in a way that subtly alters its original meaning. After this point, the topic is framed in a way that serves the neoliberal, capitalist discourse's objectives.

The main questions we will pose and try to answer within the given research are as follows:

- Why do different interpretations on environmental issues exist and what are the consequences of those different interpretations?
- What are the specific linguistic strategies in terms of ideological interpretations of environmental issues?
- How does euphemistic language affect the perception of environmental issues in general public?

1.1 Global Warming or Climate Change?

The terminological ambiguity is where the issue's misunderstandings start. This concerns the very term "Global Warming", which the American Republicans, for example, substituted with the phrase "Climate Change." For instance, Frank Luntz, who served as the Bush administration's language adviser, suggested the following in 2003:

* Corresponding author: gamaglobeli@ibsu.edu.ge

It's time for us to start talking about "climate change" instead of global warming. "Climate change" is less frightening than "global warming" According to Luntz, the term "global warming" has catastrophic communications attached to it, "climate change" sounds a more controllable and less emotional challenge." Within this particular logic, "conservationist" conveys a "moderate, reasoned, common sense position" while "environmentalist" has the "connotation of extremism." Climate just changed. No one to blame. [2]

It is not difficult to see that the issue reflects ideological differences between the parties of the discourse. Therefore, it is of a central importance which party establishes the discursive dominance in terms of creating and interpreting meanings related with the subject of discussion. Another crucial point is to determine the connection/relevancy between moral and ideological judgements of a conservative segment. It is obvious, that there exists a clear discrepancy between their (conservative) religious and political views.

Speaking of religious discourse and its attitude towards the Global Warming, Pope Francis called climate change a "human abuse of God's creation" in his encyclical letter and "a sin against future generations" in a public speech. In the film "An Inconvenient Truth", Al Gore also stated the following: "I don't consider this [climate change] a political issue, I consider it to be a moral issue". These public discourses reflect the increasingly popular perception of climate change as a moral violation, that is, an event that violates moral standards (e.g., "to be fair", "do no harm").

However, this moral reasoning does not affect conservative segment, not to mention the proponents of the capitalist exponential growth. Therefore, communication scholars have argued that moral discourses may serve the goal of bridging this divide in public opinion.

The goal of protecting nature and future generations overlaps more with Democrats' beliefs in care and fairness, and the solution to environmental problems often requires increased government regulations, which is contradictory to Republicans' fundamental support for free-market economics. What is interesting in the reasoning brought above is that protection/conservation of nature should be the Conservative value in terms of a religious duty, whereas, it is not.

This is why liberal Democrats tend to care more about the environment than conservative Republicans. Research has also shown that liberals view environmentalism as a moral issue, while conservatives do not. Based on the above mentioned, one may argue, that there exists an ideological inconsistency in the conservative spectrum in terms of protecting the Nature, as a moral-religious duty/virtue.

1.2 Moral Frames for Climate Change

Therefore, the whole discourse of Climate Change must be viewed and examined within the notion of (Moral) Frame, where Framing is defined as a process used "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them

more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" [3].

According to some Linguists, there are conservative and progressive moral systems. The conservative moral system includes a number of ideas that work against environmentalism and against dealing with global warming.

- First, there is the idea that *man is above nature in a moral hierarchy, that nature is there (put there by God) purely for human use and exploitation*. There are other interpretations of the Judeo-Christian Bible (such as the *stewardship metaphor* promoted by former Vice President Al Gore); however, the resilience of the former inhibits changes in practices and beliefs about global warming.
- Second, there is the Let-the-Market-Decide ideology, in which the market is both natural and moral—it's the Decider, who rewards market discipline and punishes lack of it; there should be no authority higher than that of the market. Hence no regulations, low or no taxes, no workers' protections or unions, no tort cases. Thus, environmental regulation and government subsidies for sustainable energy, green technology, and green jobs are seen as government interference in the market, and hence immoral [2].

Likewise, right-wing votership and conservative ideology are better predictors of climate change denial than other demographic factors including gender, age, and education. Thus, the inefficiency of climate change communication tactics that rely solely on disseminating scientific information can be explained. This indicates that the denial of climate change may be motivated by stable ideological elements. To spur action on climate change, communication techniques must overcome ideological hurdles rather than knowledge gaps.

It is also interesting, that "over 90% of books that refute climate change have since been linked to conservative think tanks and climate change counter-movement organizations appear to draw the majority of their financial support from conservative foundations. Conservative opposition to international agreements on climate change is also driven by the perception that such action *threatens the free market economic system*." [4]

According to some data, conservatives are attentive to nuances in how climate change is framed. For instance, denial is higher among conservatives when the issue is referred to as 'global warming' rather than "climate change", whereas liberals are concerned about it regardless of the terminology. Analyses of the content of conservative messages refuting climate change suggest that this group is particularly sensitive to threats to the socioeconomic system.

Consistent with the sensitivity towards protecting the economic system, conservatives are less supportive of a pro-environmental society when this is described at the expense of the economy. Given that conservatives may favour economic concerns, it is logical to assume that framing climate change inaction as costly might influence decisions in favour of the environment. Liberals respond

more favorably to moral issues involving harm and care, or fairness and justice, and conservatives respond more favorably to issues framed by loyalty, authority and respect, and the purity and sanctity of human endeavors [5].

Conservatives' attitudes toward climate change and other environmental concerns shift when the issues are reframed in terms more closely aligned with their values. Conservatives were more likely to support "pro-environmental" ideals when the issues were framed as matters of obeying authority, defending the purity of nature and demonstrating patriotism [6].

Here we give a short list of famous Conservative US politicians who do not believe that Global Warming is real.

- **Donald Trump:**

"The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive".

- **Mike Pence:**

"It's just a few years ago, we were talking about global warming, which is — we haven't seen a lot of warming lately. I remember back in the '70s when we were talking about the coming ice age. And, look, you know, we have — we've had a tough winter. We'll leave the scientific debates for the future."

- **Stephen K. Bannon (Trump's senior strategist):**

The national debt is "not a manufactured crisis like global warming or the health care crisis. This is a — this is an existential crisis." [7].

2 Market Fundamentalism and Commodification of Nature

In general terms, Market Fundamentalism is a quasi-religious belief that the best way to address our needs—whether economic or otherwise—is to let markets do their thing, and not rely on government. Market fundamentalists treat "The Market" as a proper noun: something unique and unto itself, that has agency and even wisdom, that functions best when left unfettered and unregulated, undisturbed and unperturbed. Government, according to the myth, cannot improve the functioning of markets; it can only interfere. Governments therefore need to stay out of the way, lest they "distort" the market and prevent it from doing its "magic." Market fundamentalists protect their worldview by denying that climate change is real or asserting that somehow "The Market" will fix it, despite all evidence to the contrary [8]. Even international organizations, which intend to change the current state of affairs in terms of climate change, internalize the major Capitalist thesis of „growth“, ending up with no effective actions taken. Analysing discourses of the major international organizations (WTO, IMF, World Bank and OECD), it becomes clear, that the global governmentality of climate protection is built on four discursive pillars — globalism, scientism, an ethics of growth and efficiency — that make climate protection function as an empty signifier; that is, they make it possible to integrate climate protection into the global hegemonic order without changing the basic social

structures of the world economy. International organizations can claim to be in favor of climate protection and stick to business as usual at the same time [9].

As a result of this inaction, despite the scientific concern and alarmist rhetoric, the climate parameters keep eroding further. The International Energy Agency even stated that emissions in 2021 increased by 6%, which marks a new world record in terms of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. These data affirm the paradoxical situation we are in and suggest that access to and presence of knowledge and facts does not stand guarantee for effective intervention and action. The divide between knowledge and action can be understood as a classic case of what psychoanalysts call *fetishistic disavowal*: "despite the fact we know well [the truth of the climate situation], we act as if we do not know" [10].

The commodification of nature refers to the process of incorporating biophysical entities and/or information about them into economic systems for the purpose of exchanging the good or service for a profit [11].

The Environment Frame sees the environment as separate from, and around, us. Yet, we are not separate from Nature. We are an inseparable part of Nature. Yet we separate self from other, and conceptualize Nature as other. This separation is so deep in our conceptual system that we cannot simply wipe it from our brains. It is a terribly false frame that will not go away.

Earth itself, whose ecosystems provide us with life, is conceived under capitalism's spell as composed of "real estate." Earth's ecosystems are conceptualized as mere collections of "natural resources" which are to be transformed into "raw materials," "consumer products," and "waste" [12]. The commodity plays the role of the *einzigster Zug* (Unitary Trait) of Capital, its *phallus*, its *master signifier* [13].

2.1 Linguistic strategies of Climate Change Denial

Certain kinds of words frequently used in climate change communication, namely euphemisms, can undermine the objectives of raising climate change awareness and changing behavior.

euphemisms are based on *word substitution*. The substitution replaces one (or several) plain term(s) that are considered as undesirable with other terms that are judged more appropriate.

For instance, here are some terms which constitute an example of euphemistic shift.

Table 1. Terms which constitute an example of euphemistic shift

Previous expressions	Recommended expressions
“Climate change”	“Climate emergency”, “climate crisis”
“Climate sceptic”	“Climate science denier”, “climate denier”
“Global warming”	“Global heating”
“Carbon emissions”	“Greenhouse gas emissions”
“Biodiversity”	“Wildlife”
“Fish stocks”	“Fish populations”
“acid rain”	“atmospheric deposition of anthropogenically derived substances”

What is interesting here is that organizations typically use euphemistic names that disguise their real identities and/or agenda that might otherwise be considered harsh or unpleasant (Astroturfing). For instance, several fossil-fuel industry front groups sponsor organizations with misleading euphemistic names such as “*National Wetlands Coalition*”, “*Global Climate Coalition*”, “*Greening Earth Society*”, “*Washington Consumers for Sound Fuel Policy*” or “*American Coalition for Clean Coal Energy*”. **First impressions matter and these organizations seem explicitly dedicated to promoting environmental and climate change issues.** They frequently target legitimate nonprofit and grassroots organizations with whom they can be confused. These euphemistic names conceal the true sponsors' interests and affect public opinion in directions that do not align with climate science.

The companies funding astroturfing organizations can embrace double standards. **They may describe themselves as environmental stewards, while still supporting well-named astroturfing organizations working behind the scenes to promote climate disinformation or at least views that better align with their agenda** [14].

Just as military experts talk of collateral damage to describe the impact of weapons gone awry, so virtually every agency and industry that whacks the environment has developed its own language of damage control.

Euphemisms intended to blur the effects of strip mining, channel dredging, clearcutting, waste dumping etc:

1. “Borrow Material/Borrow Pit.” - to build levees and highways.
2. “Environmental Enhancement.” - when it is paved for visitor parking, concrete picnic tables, a highway that took out an entire neighborhood and nearly one hundred, century-old live oak trees. The parking lot and the picnic tables are called enhancements.
3. “Even-Aged Management.” - When all the trees are cut down at the same time. “clearcutting.”
4. “Land Farming.” - Industrial wastes, an innovative form of agriculture that bulldozes dirt over the waste pits and then discs them around.
5. “Nutrient Enrichment.” - cow manure, pig dung, chicken droppings, and heavy doses of chemical fertilizers that have made an 8,000-square-mile dead

zone at the mouth of the Mississippi River... “pollution.”

6. “Overmature.” – clearcutting [15].

A clear-cut is called a “timber harvest.” Sewage goes by the name “bio-solids.” Soil is referred to as “overburden.”

Such terms confuse rather than clarify. And that, of course, is the point. If we can’t talk straight about environmental degradation, we won’t be able to think straight about it, either.

- **Beneficial Reuse:** In short, the recycling and/or reclamation of dangerous waste. In general, this can be a good thing. But the term elides the possible hazards involved.
- **Biosolids:** Aka, human excrement. This is the waste disposal industry’s term of art for treated sewage, which is often spread on farm fields and pastures. Here’s one recent headline using the term: “Plans for biosolids concern residents of Spotsylvania.” It might not be fit to print, but perhaps the headline writer could have been more to the point: “Plans for spreading shit concern residents of Spotsylvania.”
- **Bycatch:** All of the fish and marine mammals swept up in industrial fishing nets that aren’t intended to be caught. At least 20 percent of what ends up in fishing is thrown away each year.
- **Deforestation:** The destruction of forests by industrial loggers and/or farmers. Environmental groups use the term as often as government agencies and academics. But it seems an overly clinical description for an act of ecological violence.
- **Harvest:** This ancient agricultural term is appropriate when discussing domesticated plants and wildlife. But it slips into misleading language when used to describe untamed game animals, wild fish, and natural (as opposed to farmed) forests. For example, “Louisiana deer harvest up 10 percent over last season.”
- **Fugitive emissions:** Pollution that is released from equipment leaks. These days, often used in the context of the methane releases from natural gas infrastructure.
- **Lagoon:** Livestock industry nomenclature for a pond where animal waste, typically hog shit, is stored.
- **Municipal Solid Waste:** In a word, garbage.
- **Ozone nonattainment area:** A smoggy place.
- **Overburden:** The mining industry’s term for anything above the valuable seams of ore and minerals below ground. This includes soils, grasses, shrubs, trees and anything else in the way of the valuable deposits below.
- **Particulates:** A fancy word for dust, soot, and any other small particles that lead to air pollution.
- **Produced water:** The oil and gas industry’s phrase for the leftover water from a hydraulic fracturing (or fracking) operation. A more commonsense definition would be, simply, waste water.
- **Rapid oxidation:** That is, a fire. Actually, used in some reports by, of all people, the Nuclear Regulatory Agency.

- **Reclaimed Water:** Treated wastewater that is then reused for agricultural uses or even, in some places, as drinking water. Especially in drought conditions, this is a smart stewardship of resources. But the term obscures the fact that it refers to recycled sewage.
 - **Resources:** A catch-all meaning air, water, forests, fisheries. Innocuous, perhaps, but it suggests that all of the world exists for the benefit of humans
 - **Regeneration Harvest:** A term common in the logging industry. Involves cutting down trees, sometimes through clear cutting, and then replanting for future cutting.
 - **Research whaling:** The term used by whalers from Japan or Iceland to explain their commercial whaling practices.
 - **Routine exceedances:** Refers to an industrial plant's regular violation of clean air or water standards. "Persistent pollution" would be more to the point.
 - **Surface Mining:** The coal industry's preferred term for what many people call mountaintop removal coal mining.
 - **Take:** Meaning to kill, usually through hunting or trapping. For example, "The bill ... would allow hunters to take one bobcat per year."
 - **Incidental Take:** Accidentally killing an animal. Usually used in reference to birds or animals listed as threatened or endangered.
 - **Valley fill:** The mining industry's term for the leftover rock that is then dumped into a valley [16].
3. J. Huang, J.Z. Yang, H. Chu, *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health.* **25**, 5210 (2022)
 4. R.E. Dunlap, P.J. Jacques, *Americ. Behav. Scient.* **57**, 699 (2013)
 5. S.K. Stanley, A. Klas, E.J.R. Clarke, I. Walker, *PLoS ONE* **16**, e0246058 (2021)
 6. C. Wolsko, *Framing discourse around conservative values shifts climate change attitudes* (2016)
 7. C. Davenport. *Climate Change Denialists in Charge* (2017) (Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/27/us/politics/climate-change-denialists-in-charge.html>)
 8. S. Tong, E. Tamagawa. *The Big Myth' explores the belief that free markets are a fundamental American right* (2023)
 9. C.P. Methmann, *Millennium: J. of Intern. Studies*, **39**, 345 (2010)
 10. O. Mannoni, *I know well, but all the same, Perversion and the social relation.* USA (2003)
 11. R. Gunderson, *Commodification of Nature.* (Wiley Online Library 2017)
 12. K.O. Matthews. *Pathologies of Capitalism: An Interview with Michael Arfken* (2018)
 13. F. Chicchi. *Phantasmagoria of the Thing: Aporias of the New Capitalist Discourse.* ResearchGate (2016)
 14. G. Grolleau, N. Mzoughi, D. Peterson, M. Tendero. *Ecological Econ.* **193**, 107307 (2021)
 15. O.A. Houck. *Tulane Environ. Law J.* **15**, 129 (2001)
 16. J. Mark. *Eco Euphemisms Confuse Our Understanding of Environmental Destruction - What's in a word?* Earth Island Journal (2014)

3 Conclusion

Results/recommendations of the given work can be provided in the following order:

- Analyzing the very language that anti-environmentalist segments of society uses and their ideological basis is of a crucial importance. It has a practical importance in terms of establishing a discursive legitimation for environmental issues. It will help in terms of identifying a strategy in dealing with radical/reactions views regarding the environmental issues.
- Euphemistic Language that conceals the reality of Global Warming is used mainly by the Conservative segments of societies which serves specific ideological goals.
- Global Warming denial (Fetishistic Disavowal) is linked with the notion of Free Market efficiency and growth
- Within this specific economic thought, Global Warming is being portrayed as a negative factor (in terms of "economic growth")

References

1. T. Yuniawan, F. Rokhman, R. Rustono, H.B. Mardikantoro, *Humaniora*, **29**, 291 (2017)
2. G. Lakoff, *Environ. Communic.*, **4**, 70 (2010)