DISCOURSE FEATURES OF THE UNITED NATIONS' ENGLISH PRESS RELEASES ON CLIMATE CHANGE

ĐẶC TRƯNG DIỄN NGÔN TRONG THÔNG CÁO BÁO CHÍ VỀ BIẾN ĐỔI KHÍ HẬU CỦA LIÊN HỢP QUỐC

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Abstract - This study aims to illuminate the discourse features of United Nations (UN) English press releases on climate change to uncover their ecological orientation and role in shaping climate action. Drawing on Ecological Discourse Analysis rooted in Ecolinguistics and Systemic Functional Grammar, the research found a predominance of material processes and strong modal verbs (like "will", "must", and "cannot"), reflecting the UN's proactive role and firm commitment towards climate goals. In general, these press releases promote ecocentric perspectives and collective climate action, demonstrating the influence of institutional discourse in strengthening ecological awareness and international cooperation in response to the climate crisis.

Key words - Ecological discourse analysis; Systemic Functional Grammar; United Nations; press releases; climate change

Tóm tắt - Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu là làm sáng tỏ các đặc điểm diễn ngôn trong các thông cáo báo chí của Liên Hợp Quốc về biến đổi khí hậu nhằm làm rõ khuynh hướng sinh thái và vai trò của các văn bản này trong việc định hướng hành động vì khí hậu. Dựa trên lý thuyết về phân tích diễn ngôn sinh thái, ngôn ngữ học sinh thái và ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống, nghiên cứu phát hiện ra các diễn trình vật chất và động từ tình thái mạnh (như "sẽ", "phải", "không thể") là những đặc trưng diễn ngôn chủ đạo, phản ánh vai trò chủ động và cam kết mạnh mẽ của Liên Hợp Quốc đối với các mục tiêu về khí hậu. Nhìn chung, các thông cáo báo chí này thúc đẩy quan điểm sinh thái trung tâm luận và những nỗ lực chung tay hành động vì khí hậu, qua đó nhấn mạnh tác động tích cực của diễn ngôn của các tổ chức quốc tế trong việc nâng cao nhận thức, cũng như tăng cường hợp tác quốc tế để ứng phó với khủng hoảng khí hậu.

Từ khóa - Phân tích diễn ngôn sinh thái; Ngữ pháp chức năng hệ thống; Liên Hợp Quốc; thông cáo báo chí; biến đổi khí hậu

1. Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the most critical challenges of the 21st century, leaving unprecedented consequences on a global scale. Despite mitigation efforts, the planet continues to approach irreversible tipping points, as highlighted in the *Emissions Gap Report 2024* [1]. The United Nations (UN) has consistently emphasized the urgency of climate action, with Secretary-General António Guterres warning at COP29: *"We are in the final countdown to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius"* [2]. Given the severity of this crisis, effective communication is essential to mobilize global responses. Press releases, as a key medium for the UN, play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, disseminating climate information, and galvanizing political and societal action. However, while climate discourse has been extensively analyzed in news media and political speeches, studies focused specifically on the potential ecological impacts of United Nations' press releases remain scarce, particularly from an ecolinguistics perspective, a new approach in applied linguistics that can examine the influence of language on the interconnected relationships among humans, other life forms, and the physical environment [3].

To this end, the present study aims to clarify discourse features of the UN's English press releases on climate change in the light of Ecological Discourse Analysis, ecolinguistics, and Systemic Functional Grammar, thereby illuminating the form and content of press releases on climate change and the ecological standpoint of the United Nations amidst the climate crisis. With such an aim, this research seeks to fulfilling these following questions:

- What are the layout features of the United Nations' English press releases on climate change (hereafter UNEPRCCs)?

- What are lexico - grammatical features of UNEPRCCs in the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar?

- What are the ecological ideologies conveyed through lexico-grammatical patterns in UNEPRCCs?

- What is the ecological orientation of UNEPRCCs?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA)

Ecolinguistics emerges in response to growing ecological crises and the "ecological turn" in the humanities and social sciences, with the hope of illuminating the effects of language use on the entire ecosystem that all living beings rely on, or to some extent, uncovering how language shapes human attitudes toward nature [3], [4]. Ecolinguistics, then, is understood as "the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms, and the physical environment" [5]. The development of ecolinguistics has been shaped by two primary stains namely the "Haugenian approach" and the "Hallidayan

approach" [6]. As ecolinguistics evolves, the Hallidayan approach has increasingly gained popularity and become the groundwork for many ecolinguistics studies.

In the discipline of ecolinguistics, Ecological Discourse Analysis (henceforth EDA) is viewed as the central approach [5]. By definition, EDA can be interpreted as either "the analysis of ecological discourse" or "the ecological analysis of discourse" [3]. According to Stibbe [4], there are mainly four sequential steps in EDA methodology: 1) the gathering of prototypical texts; 2) the in-depth analysis of linguistic patterns; 3) the revelation of ecological ideologies embedded in discourse, 4) the ecological judgment of ideologies based on the analyst's ecosophy to identify the discourse type (eco-destructive, eco-ambivalent, eco-beneficial).

Over the past decade, research in EDA has expanded significantly, with a notable rise in studies examining environmental discourses, particularly those related to climate change, sustainability, and environmental activism [7]. In recent years, there has been a growing application of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in EDA studies, which analyzes ecological discourse through the lens of pragmatics and semantics, offering insights into how language choices influence ecological perceptions and actions [8]-[10]. These methodological advancements highlight the evolving nature of EDA, which is evidenced by its capacity to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative perspectives in analyzing environmental communication.

To apply the new form of discourse analysis that directly deals with ecological values in language, this study perceives EDA as "the ecological analysis of discourse". In the meantime, Stibbe's framework [4] is chosen as the analytic framework that guides the linguistic analysis and ecological evaluation of discourse.

2.2. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) and Ecological Discourse Analysis (EDA)

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), or Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Michael Halliday, is a linguistic theory that views language as a social semiotic system [11]. According to [11], language is realized through three metafunctions including ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. In functional grammar, the clause is considered "the central processing unit of lexicogrammar", in which the three metafunctions are mapped into an integrated grammatical structure [11].

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is one of the most widely used frameworks in EDA due to its focus on the functional dimensions of language. One of the key contributions of SFG to EDA lies in its ability to unpack the ideational metafunction, which deals with how language represents reality. In ecological discourse, the choice of transitivity processes (e.g., material, relational, mental) can reveal how agency and responsibility are attributed in environmental issues. Stibbe [4] used SFL's transitivity system to examine the representation of non-human participants in environmental texts, revealing how

linguistic choices can either empower or marginalize the natural world. Additionally, modality in the interpersonal function can examine how probable, possible, obligatory, or desirable something is perceived to be, which can show the degree of certainty and commitment of statements made in discourse [4], [12]. The textual metafunction is concerned with creating relevance to the context, organizing information into a coherent and cohesive discourse. According Chen [12], using repetition, a component of lexical cohesion in this function, can exert stronger emotions and reinforce ideas.

Within the normative framework of EDA proposed by Stibbe [4], some lexico-grammatical features are regarded as useful in unmasking the hidden ideologies in ecological discourse, including the arrangement of processes and participants in a clause, the affirmative degree of statements, and the relationships between words (e.g. synonym, antonym, or hyponymy). These features align well with some lexico-grammatical features of SFG, namely transitivity, modality, and lexical cohesion. Therefore, this study is aimed at integrating the well-established linguistic framework of Functional Grammar into the overarching ecolinguistic framework to dig into the lexico-grammatical features of UNEPRCCs, which help clarify the embedded ecological stories, or ideologies in the level of discourse.

2.3. Press Releases

Since its early days in the 20th century, press releases have remained a core communication tool in public relations [13], [14]. According to [13], press releases are short written statements issued by organizations or institutions to share newsworthy information to journalists and, indirectly, to the general public. Specifically, a press release, or news release, is written to introduce a new product, service, or idea; report findings from a recent survey; notify the media about an upcoming event; announce a staff change; or share new information [15].

2.4. Climate Change

According to [16], "Climate change means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods".

Over time, climate change has become one of the most critical challenges confronting humanity today, partly because it has transitioned from being primarily a physical phenomenon to one that is also deeply cultural, political, and social in nature [17]. In a bid to respond to climate change, the role of language in communicating climate change is widely recognized with different social groups shaping the conversation through various language forms and concepts [18].

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design and methods

The present study is designed as descriptive research, employing the qualitative method with the support of quantitative data. The qualitative method lies at the heart

of the analysis of UNEPRCCs' discourse features regarding their layouts, lexico-grammatic patterns, and ecological orientation. Meanwhile, the quantitative method enhances the objectivity of the research by quantifying the frequency of key terms in different lexical domains and the occurrence of grammatical elements being used to convey ecological ideologies in the target discourse. The integration of these methods is expected to provide comprehensive insights into the discourse features of UNEPRCCs while maintaining the facticity of science.

For the implementation of this study, a set of 10 English press releases on climate change and its related issues spanning from January to November of the year 2024 was collected from the UN official website: https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/press-materials. These press releases were selected for their topical relevance, timeliness, and adherence to genre conventions. Limiting the dataset to ten press releases creates a manageable yet sufficiently robust collection for in-depth qualitative discourse analysis. The procedure for the entire research comprises the following steps:

- Review previous studies and theories in an attempt to build an analytical framework for this study.

- Collecting a set of 10 prototypical press releases from the UN's official website.

- Categorizing chosen samples into thematic groups for analysis.

- Identifying some common layout features of UN EPRCCs.

- Carrying out the in-depth linguistic analysis of UNEPRCCs from the perspective of Systemic Functional Grammar.

- Unearthing the ecological ideologies that emerged from the lexico-grammatical features of UN discourse, thus determining the ecological orientation of UNEPRCCs based on the research ecosophy.

- Discussing the ecological influence of language patterns in UNEPRCCs and drawing conclusions that can be theoretically and practically helpful for future EDA and media discourse studies.

3.2. Research instruments

The software Antconc version 4.3.1, developed by Laurence Anthony, was adopted to measure the frequency of key lexical items and grammatical properties in the target data, facilitating the study's quantitative analysis. To facilitate the analysis of processes in the target discourse, the study also utilized the UAM Corpus Tool version 6, which has been well–recognized for its convenience and comprehensiveness in text annotation [19]. While AntConc is a powerful tool for lexical analysis, the UAM Corpus Tool excels in systematic annotation and categorization of grammatical features, especially from a functional perspective using the built-in schemes. Thus, the combination of these two corpus linguistic tools in discourse analysis is expected to strengthen the reliability and objectivity of the research's findings.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Layout features of UNEPRCCs

As press releases are a hybrid genre that blends journalism writing styles and promotional elements of advertisements [13], their layout should be one of the features that make this type of discourse stand out from other genres. Thus, examining the layout of the UN's press releases can reveal the typical patterns of information arrangement used by this organization and its subsidiary bodies in captivating the attention of the press and the public.

After a careful observation, there are seven fundamental components in UNEPRCCs, including heading (H), dateline (D), the lead (L), body paragraphs (B), quotations (Q), further information (FI), and media contact information (MCI). Meanwhile, elements like subheading (S), boilerplate (BL), and end notation (E) are more supplementary. The table below shows the distribution of layout patterns identified in UNEPRCCs:

Table 1. *Most popular layout patterns found in UN EPPRCCs*

No.	Layout patterns	Occurrence
Pattern 1	H + D + L + B (+ Q) + FI & MCI	3
Pattern 2	H + S + D + L + B (+ Q) + FI & MCI	3

It is clearly seen that the layout pattern "H + D + L + B (+ Q) + FI & MCI" dominates the examined press releases, which occur three times. The frequent use of this layout suggests UNEPRCCs tend to follow the standard structure of a traditional press release in which the most fundamental components are arranged using the top-down approach that goes from the most to the least important. Another equivalently common layout pattern is·"H + S + D + L + B (+ Q) + FMI & MCI" with three instances. The addition of subheadings after headlines in certain press releases might enable the UN to elaborate on the press release's heading while summarizing the core ideas of the press release. These summaries are particularly useful when the reporters and editors need to have "a quick preview of key information" [14].

Despite being viewed as optional, multimedia elements such as logos, images, photos, graphs, and videos, indeed, play a vital role in making the key messages of UNEPRCCs way more compelling to journalists and online readers as a whole.

Figure 1. *A logo of the United Nations in a UNEPRCC*

4.2. Lexico-grammatical features of UNEPRCCs

4.2.1. Transitivity analysis

In functional grammar, the transitivity system is part of the ideational metafunction (specifically the experiential mode) that enables human beings to construe the world of experience [11]. Within this system, the clause functions as representation, a model for reflecting "goings-on" in both the external world and internal consciousness [11].

In total, the analyzed press releases contain 9335 words, which are then divided into 759 clauses for the analysis of transitivity.
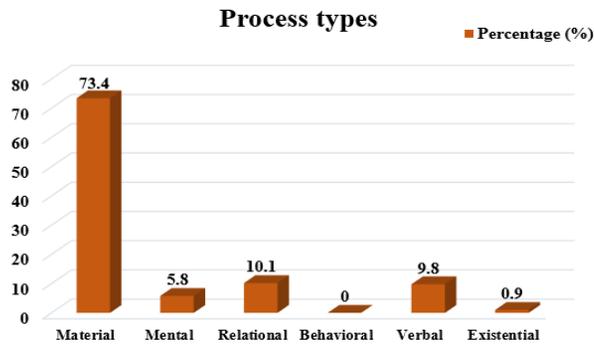

Figure 2. *Common process types in UNEPRCCs*

As can be seen from Figure 2, material processes dominate (73.4%), which reflects the UN's action-oriented discourse on climate change. Verbs like "launch," "strengthen," and "address" emphasize the UN's proactive role in climate initiatives while collective actors (e.g., governments, NGOs) highlight collaborative efforts.

(1) The Brazilian government, the United Nations, and UNESCO are joining forces to strengthen research and measures to address disinformation campaigns that are delaying and derailing climate action [20].

Relational processes (10.1%) are the second most frequent, primarily defining institutional roles and responsibilities, while verbal processes (9.8%) feature quotes from UN officials, reinforcing the UN's authoritative voice. Notably, behavioral processes are absent, likely due to the formal and succinct nature of institutional press releases.

4.2.2. Modality

Modality is the semantic space and region of uncertainty that lies between the positive and negative poles of "yes" and "no" [11]. Modality is a helpful device in EDA as it can evaluate the degree of commitment a speaker or writer expresses in their claims. The occurrence of modal auxiliaries in UNEPRCCs is shown in the following Figure 3.

Modality in UNEPRCCs leans heavily toward high-commitment auxiliaries, with "will" (47.5%) dominating to project certainty and future-oriented pledges (e.g., "we will work with researchers"). "Must" (8.75%) and "cannot" (6.25%) convey obligation, particularly in justice-focused calls.

(2) The race to net zero cannot trample over the poor. The renewables revolution is happening – but we must guide it towards justice [20].
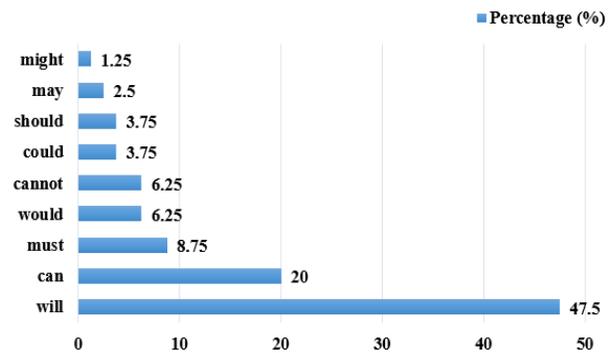

Figure 3. *Modal auxiliaries found in UNEPRCCs*

Lower-frequency modals like "could" (3.75%) and "might" (1.25%) introduce cautious tones but are marginal compared to the prevailing assertive language.

(3) Science tells us that we might hit 1.5-degree warming - the Paris Agreement's goal for limiting warming - within the next 5 years [20].

The emphasis on collective responsibility by using the exclusive pronoun "we" ("we must act") reinforces key climate ideologies like "THE RACE TO NET ZERO MUST BE JUST AND EQUITABLE", resonating with social justice and planetary limits values embedded in the study's ecosophy.

4.2.3. Lexical cohesion

Lexical cohesion "operates within the lexical zone of lexicogrammar" and strengthens the cohesiveness of discourse through lexical choices [11].

Table 2. *The most repeated words in UNEPRCCs*

Keyword	Occurrence	Percentage
climate	145	25.04
UN	74	12.78
energy	73	12.61
global	69	11.92
methane	47	8.12
action	43	7.43
transition	36	6.22
minerals	31	5.35
peace	31	5.35
Secretary	30	5.18
Total	**579**	**100**

Repetition of key terms like "climate" (25.04%), "energy" (12.78%), and "transition" (6.22%) underscores the discourse's focus on energy transition within the broader theme of climate change. A vast array of recurring climate – centered collocations were found in the examined press releases.

Additionally, antonymy (e.g, "sink" or "rise" in "we either sink or rise") creates rhetorical contrasts to stress unity and solidarity in climate action, while hyonymy specifies the superordinate into "vulnerable groups" into "indigenous peoples", "youth", "women" to highlight inclusivity and promote climate justice.

However, some lexical items subtly reinforce anthropocentrism, such as using the "critical energy

transition minerals" as the superordinate of "copper", "lithium", "nickel", "cobalt", and "rare earth elements" to frame nature as a resource base for sustaining human-centered development. Yet overall, most lexicon are eco-beneficial, such as the use of synonyms like "warm" and "heat" or "climate disaster" and "climate catastrophe" undercores climate urgency whereas using "climate disinformation" as the superordinate of "green washing", "outright denial" projects the narrative "Climate disinformation undermines progress".

Table 3. Climate collocations in UNEPRCCs

Climate collocations	Occurrence	Climate collocations	Occurrence
climate change	35	climate disruption	1
climate action	20	climate emergency	1
climate security	11	climate environment	1
climate peace	10	climate executive	1
climate fund	3	climate finance	1
climate goals	3	climate funds	1
climate adaptation	2	climate information	1
climate crisis	2	climate initiatives	1
climate disinformation	2	climate justice	1
climate issues	2	climate plans	1
climate resilience	2	climate policy	1
climate catastrophe	1	climate projections	1

4.2.4. Ecological orientation of UNEPRCCS

According to [4], ideology is one of eight forms of story in ecolinguistics, which is manifested in the discourse level and reflects the worldviews of different groups or members in society. After a thorough evaluation guided by the research ecosophy "Living!" [4], Almost all of the ideologies emerging from the lexico-grammatical patterns are ecologically beneficial.

As categorized in Table 4, all ecological ideologies in UNEPRCCs are labelled as ecological beneficial according to the guiding principles of the ecosophy "Living!" except the "climate change is a challenge" which contains ambiguous nuances in terms of its long-term ecological effects. There remain a few eco-ambivalent elements in linguistic patterns and their meaning across the examined press releases, such as the representation of natural resources as inanimate resources for human's green transition, weak agency of certain participants stemming from the passivisation. This type of discourse is particularly pervasive in green discourse like "corporate greenwash" or "greenspeak," which includes some aspects against the analyst's ecosophy like animal abuse or resource exploitation, but aims to protect the environment [4].

However, it would be hasty to think UNEPRCCs will fall into this category, as it is not easy for an institutional document to be entirely eco-beneficial from the deep ecology's stance when it must take into account all relevant stakeholders on a balance scale. Furthermore, it is undeniable that UNEPRCCs has made great efforts to shift towards a more ecocentric worldview by upholding the core ecological values such as sustainability, equity, inclusion, and solidarity in their discourse. This can be best

exemplified by the salience of marginalised and vulnerable groups in climate change, including women, youth, indigenous people, developing countries and small island nations, and by the integration of sustainable development goals and ecological principles like environmental and planetary limits. As such, from an ecolinguistics perspective, UNEPRCCs is more of an ecological-beneficial discourse in which some ideologies can be adjusted for stronger and more convincing ecological narratives than an eco-ambivalent one.

Table 4. Ecological ideologies revealed in UNEPRCCs

	Ecological ideologies	Type
Climate change framing	Climate change is a risk.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change is an emergency.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change is a catastrophe.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change is a challenge.	**eco-ambivalent**
	Climate change is a risk multiplier.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change is primarily driven by human activities.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change hinders sustainable development progress.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate change exacerbates conflict drivers and other existing crises.	**eco-beneficial**
Climate literacy and science	Climate disinformation is a threat to global progress on climate action.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate disinformation requires multilateral cooperation.	**eco-beneficial**
	The 1.5° threshold is the critical line of defense for human survival.	**eco-beneficial**
Climate action	All nations are on the same boat.	**eco-beneficial**
	Climate action is the 21st century's greatest opportunity to accelerate the achievement of all sustainable development goals.	**eco-beneficial**
	The cost of climate inaction is insurmountable.	**eco-beneficial**
Climate mitigation and adaptation	Critical energy transition minerals pave the way to climate change mitigation and shared prosperity.	**eco-beneficial**
	Methane mitigation is a critical, cost-effective path to impede the near-term climate disasters.	**eco-beneficial**
	Clean energy is a gift.	**eco-beneficial**
	Existing economic systems are incompatible with planetary limits.	**eco-beneficial**
Climate justice	Developing countries must be key beneficiaries of critical energy transition minerals.	**eco-beneficial**
	The race to net zero must be just and equitable.	**eco-beneficial**
	The climate needs of indigenous peoples, women, youth and other vulnerable groups must be fulfilled.	**eco-beneficial**

5. Conclusion

Grounded in Ecological Discourse Analysis, Ecolinguistics, and Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study identifies recurrent lexicogrammatical patterns that reflect the United Nations' eco-beneficial ideological positioning on climate change. The analysis shows that climate change is discursively represented as a life-threatening phenomenon with potentially catastrophic

consequences, while the United Nations is portrayed as a proactive actor in climate advocacy and a credible mediator that seeks to balance responsibilities among stakeholders in climate-related conflicts.

From the perspective of public relations, the structural layout patterns identified in the data provide insights into the conventional organization of a typical United Nations press release. These findings may contribute to a better understanding of how institutional press releases are strategically structured to convey authoritative information and maintain public engagement in international communication contexts.

More broadly, the study highlights a set of eco-beneficial narratives that may contribute to ongoing efforts to address climate denial discourse in the global communication landscape. From an educational perspective, incorporating these eco-beneficial narratives and lexicogrammatical patterns into educational and language-learning materials could help strengthen climate literacy and foster critical environmental awareness among students.

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