

Narratives of Sustainability

Interdisciplinary Insights and Ecolinguistic Perspectives

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1. Introduction

A complex, “contentious concept” (Catenaccio, 2019, 208), sustainability is the subject of interdisciplinary interest, spanning several research areas and occupying a central role in recent international literature (Krieg and Toivanen 2021), which attempts to contribute to “th[e] ecological transformation founded on shared democratic values” (Brüggemann, et al. 2023, 5039).

Traditionally grounded in three interconnected pillars – environmental, social, and economic (United Nations 1987) – sustainability has encouraged researchers from different disciplines to engage in increasingly collaborative and interdisciplinary forms of inquiry. Such exchanges allow expertise developed within one field to enrich another, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability-related challenges and objectives.

At the same time, sustainability remains a complex and often contested concept. As Godemann and Michelsen (2011) observe, its meaning and use vary considerably across discourse communities. Rather than referring to a fixed and universally shared idea, sustainability is continuously reinterpreted, adapted, and negotiated according to the needs, priorities, and assumptions of specific sectors and stakeholders (see Niceforo 2024). This flexibility has undoubtedly contributed to the widespread circulation of the concept, but it has also generated important questions concerning its definition, application, and communicative use. In contexts characterised by asymmetrical communication, sustainability may be invoked to legitimise practices, policies, or commercial interests that do not necessarily align with the expectations associated with the concept by wider publics. These multiple, dynamic and often-contested narratives are worth investigating for understanding how sustainability is negotiated across different contexts, especially in light of the central role discourse plays in shaping sustainability-related practices. Furthermore, scholars have increasingly highlighted the importance of dialogue among stakeholders in sustainability communication. As Higgins and

Coffey (2016, 18) observe, dialogue is crucial to fostering mutual understanding and “introduc[ing] new discourses that may open up new directions in how companies contribute to sustainability.” The complexity of sustainability discourse is further amplified by the diversity of actors involved in its production and circulation. Governments, international organisations, corporations, journalists, researchers, and civil society organisations all contribute to shaping public understandings of sustainability, often from different ideological, institutional, and economic standpoints. As sustainability moves across these communicative settings, its meanings are reformulated and adapted to specific audiences and purposes therefore leading to the emergence of a wide range of genres and communicative practices, from policy documents and corporate reports to news media, promotional materials, and public engagement initiatives.

Against this backdrop, qualitative and quantitative approaches to discourse analysis come as valuable tools for assessing the ways linguistic and discursive patterns are deployed in sustainability-related communication across different communities of practice. In particular, the integration of ecolinguistics and corpus-based approaches (Poole 2022; 2018) offers fruitful methodological perspectives for investigating the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability discourse. Drawing on corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, metaphor analysis, appraisal theory, and corpus-assisted approaches, the contributions collected in this volume address sustainability issues from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives across different contexts and offer a multifaceted account of the ways sustainability is discursively negotiated in contemporary society.

2. Content of the special issue

Ruby Rong Wei, Joanna Zijing Yin and Robert Poole examine how sustainability is discursively constructed in China’s official English-language press by relying on a diachronic corpus of more than 35,000 articles published in China Daily between 2013 and 2024. The combination of corpus-based discourse analysis, topic modelling, collocation analysis, and Discursive News Values Analysis, allows for an assessment of the shifts in sustainability narratives across the two six-year periods considered. The findings show that sustainability is consistently represented as a national priority closely linked to economic and technological transformation and innovation. At the same time, while earlier coverage focuses primarily on domestic reform and environmental sustainability, more recent reporting places greater emphasis on economic sustainability, international cooperation, and China’s global role in advancing sustainable development. China’s self-representation shifts from an active participant in sustainability initiatives to a regional and global leader promoting international solutions.

Arianna Del Gaudio’s contribution is an attempt to explore the role played by emotions in

corporate discourse, with a focus on food and beverage companies. Drawing on a manually annotated corpus of corporate reports, CEO letters and sustainability webpages, the study exploits the Appraisal Framework and, more specifically, the AFFECT category to investigate the emotional dimension of climate-related corporate communication. The analysis reveals a strong preference for positive emotional patterns, particularly those associated with inclination, confidence, satisfaction and happiness, which position corporations as proactive, responsible and future-oriented environmental actors. At the same time, the study shows how emotional language contributes to legitimising corporate environmental identities while downplaying tensions, uncertainties and corporate responsibility for ecological degradation. Adopting an ecolinguistic perspective, the article argues that emotions function as powerful persuasive resources through which climate action is reconciled with growth-oriented corporate interests.

At the heart of Maria Ivana Lorenzetti's article lies the observation that sustainability has become one of the most pervasive yet conceptually unstable keywords of contemporary discourse. Combining Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis, the contribution explores how the noun *sustainability* and the adjective *sustainable* are used across four specialised English corpora representing environmental, scientific, social and institutional domains. The analysis of collocational patterns and concordances provides evidence for the use of sustainability as a highly flexible and polysemous concept whose meaning(s) shift(s) according to context while retaining a strong 'normative' appeal. Although environmental concerns remain salient, the findings show that economic, social and ecological aspects frequently overlap, making it difficult to determine which specific idea of sustainability is being communicated. The article concludes that sustainability operates simultaneously as a 'magic concept' capable of mobilising consensus while often remaining semantically underspecified.

Laura Narisano's article examines the discursive construction of greenness in sustainability discourse by comparing the use of *green* and *verde* in British and Italian newspaper articles. Drawing on a comparable corpus of sustainability-related news texts, the study analyses the collocational behaviour of these terms through Word Sketches and concordance analysis. The article shows that metaphorical uses predominate in both languages, especially in relation to the semantic domains of economy and finance, policy, energy, and technology. At the same time, the analysis provides evidence for significant cross-linguistic differences; indeed, while the Italian *verde* retains both literal and metaphorical uses, the borrowed adjective *green* functions as a more specialised marker of sustainability, often associated with technical and international legitimacy. The article also seeks to explore more creative extensions such as "shades of green," "*più* green/greener," and "dark green/light green," showing how colour-based metaphors are exploited to construct different degrees of environmental commitment.

Fabio Cangerò's article investigates how sustainability reports construct persuasive

corporate identities and negotiate organisational legitimacy through language by relying on a 455,269-token corpus of sustainability reports published in 2023 by companies listed in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. The study combines Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis, Appraisal Theory, Critical Genre Analysis and Narrative Identity Theory to reveal a tendency to represent corporations as agentive and responsible actors through the extensive use of first-person plural pronouns, material process verbs and evaluative adjectives; in addition, futurity and science-based discourse are shown to reinforce corporate credibility, ethical positioning and epistemic authority while limiting alternative interpretations. The article further demonstrates how sustainability reports construct coherent narrative identities by linking past achievements, present commitments and future aspirations within a unified storyline. Also, it suggests that sustainability reporting increasingly functions as a hybrid genre that blends informational and promotional purposes, serving not only as a tool of accountability but also as a mechanism of identity negotiation and reputational management.

Anna Meyer's article investigates how the UN Sustainable Development Goals have reshaped sustainability discourse in the mining sector through a corpus-assisted ecolinguistic discourse analysis of sustainability reports published by major multinational mining companies before and after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. The analysis reveals that the SDGs have strengthened the institutionalisation of sustainability discourse, increasing explicit references to SDG-related language; however, the findings also show that environmental concerns remain systematically subordinated to economic priorities, with corporate discourse foregrounding business continuity, technological solutions, and institutional legitimacy while frequently backgrounding or erasing the more-than-human world.

Drawing on a specialised corpus of 234 sustainability-related articles published in *The Conversation* between 2012 and 2024, Lorenzo Zannini and Martina Russo investigate how the concepts of sustainability, development, and growth are discursively framed in expert-authored public communication. The combination of theories from Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, framing analysis and ecolinguistics, enables the authors to observe the conceptual overlap within socio-economic, institutional, and business-oriented narratives and reveal the backgrounding of ecological perspectives in favour of economic and policy-oriented framings, reflecting the constraints and expectations of public-facing academic communication. Overall, while sustainability is commonly framed as a challenge, growth is more frequently problematised as a source of inequality and ecological pressure.

Bionotes

Giuseppe Balirano, PhD in English for Specific Purposes, is Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Naples L'Orientale, where he serves as Rector's Delegate for Lifelong Learning, eLearning and Multimedia Enhancement. He is President of the Italian Association for the Study of English (AIA), Principal Investigator of the Monitoring Group on Hate Speech Online, and Director of the BeTwiXt book series. His research focuses on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies, online hate speech, humour, masculinity studies, queer cinema, AVT, and the discursive construction of organised crime.

Paola Catenaccio is Full Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Milan. Much of her research explores the role of discourse in shaping contemporary environmental and societal challenges, with particular emphasis on sustainability, climate change communication, corporate environmental discourse, urban regeneration, and the discursive construction of contested technologies. Drawing on discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and argumentation theory, she investigates framing, metaphorical representation, legitimisation strategies, and narrative construction of sustainability in both specialised communication and public discourse. She has published extensively on environmental and sustainability discourse and serves on the editorial board of *Environmental Communication*. She is co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Framing Sustainability: Discourses of Nature and the Environment across Contexts* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Francesco Nacchia, Tenure-track Research Associate of English Language, Translation and Linguistics (ANGL-01/C) at the University of Naples L'Orientale, holds a PhD in (Euro)languages and Specialised Terminology from the University of Naples Parthenope. He is currently working on a project in discourses of identity and ideology on social media in Anglophone contexts, which investigates (multimodal) representations of cultural, minority, and gender identities in digital environments, with the aim of identifying ideological forms and discriminatory practices while promoting more inclusive communication. His main research interests include corpus linguistics, multimodal critical discourse analysis, and critical metaphor analysis. He has published extensively on the discourse of alternative eating habits, as well as on the role of metaphor and specialised terminology in promotional wine-tasting discourse, with a specific focus on personification.

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