

ECOLINGUISTIC FRAMING IN KENYAN CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTS

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jolls.v15i3.8>

Abstract

Scholarly evidence shows that ecolinguistic studies in Kenya have concentrated on literary texts, indigenous knowledge, and toponymy, with little attention to corporate environmental communications. The purpose of this article was to examine the ecolinguistic framing of corporate environmental reports. The analysis was conducted using a mixed method design, focusing on reports disseminated by corporations and interpreted within the tenets of the ecological framework by Stibbe (2015). Data were collected using the corpus tool, AntConc (version 4.3.2) software for quantitative linguistic data, combined with qualitative observation methods and content analysis. A purposive sample of 36 environmental reports from a target population of 182 reports was selected. The inclusion criteria focused on reports published by corporations listed in the Nairobi Securities Exchange operating in diverse sectors of the economy between 2020 and 2024. The findings revealed that environmental concerns were framed as economic value, an obligation, collective effort, legality, a scientific concept, and crisis, besides being metaphorically understood as a journey and a battle. The study concluded that despite stakeholders' noble aim to disseminate beneficial discourses through environmental corporate communications and other engagements, some of the emergent frames in the corporate reports can be destructive. Significantly, the findings imply that environmental corporate communications could enhance our understanding of the nexus between language and the physical environment.

Keywords: *Ecolinguistics, Framing, Ecolinguistic Frame, Ecological framework, Environmental Corporate Report*

Introduction

Global challenges related to the environment have been studied through the lens of various disciplines, including environmental studies and geography, with studies under applied linguistics/ecolinguistics being minimal (Steffensen, 2024). As such, ecolinguistics applies linguistic frameworks to examine environment-related texts and discourses to reveal any implicit frames evident in environmental communications. Previous studies indicate that corporations risk greenwashing, where language can be manipulated to present sustainability efforts that may be non-existent. To solve the prevailing ecological problems, there is a need to promote discourses that support beneficial environmental corporate communication and resist frames that perpetuate destructive reporting (Vazquez, 2021). Environmental corporate reporting is part of investor relations practice, meant to inform readers

on the impact of company operations on the environment, society, and governance. The reports have an extensive audience that relies on the contents to make business decisions that align with their ethical, environmental, and social values. In light of this, the present article examined corporate environmental reports to identify the ecolinguistic frames through which the beneficial discourses are affirmed while resisting destructive ones.

Literature Review

The ecolinguistic approach has been employed in the analysis of literary texts such as oral narratives, folklore, and stories of traditional ecological knowledge or ecological wisdom (Khasandi, 2023; Simotwo & Ondimu, 2023; Mudogo & Wakoko, 2020). The perspective has also examined online communication strategies in relation to environmental conservation (Isalambo & Sewe, 2014; Kihara, 2020). This implies a gap in the application of the ecolinguistic approach to

environmental communication in the corporate context. Moreover, the language of environmental reporting has been shown to propagate destructive, beneficial, or ambivalent discourses (Stibbe, 2017). For instance, destructive discourses may divert the noble corporate agenda and exacerbate ecological problems such as climate change (Stibbe, 2021).

The Capital Markets Authority (CMA) and NSE regulators stipulate that listed companies should engage in sustainability disclosure and environmental reporting as part of their annual reporting. Thus, local and multinational corporations have adopted environmental sustainability reporting to inform their shareholders about their efforts to alleviate ecological problems and use sustainable methods and practices. Reporting frameworks include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) and the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Reports (TCFD). In Kenya, the sustainability reporting is based on the GRI framework, which emphasises communication regarding environmental, social, and governance performance by corporations as stipulated by the Global Reporting Initiative (2024).

Sustainability reporting is a means for the corporations to engage with stakeholders and prospects by elaborating on their value and business model (Intosai, 2024). The reports may also serve marketing and promotional purposes for prospective investors (Laskin & Nesova, 2022). The reports capture efforts to mitigate impacts of environmental, social, and governance-related risks as well as waste reduction and energy savings. They take various forms and shapes such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reports as well as corporate social responsibility reports (CSR). By investigating framing, the present study integrated aspects of metaphors, identities, and convictions in the corporate reports (Wolniak & Habek, 2015), as stipulated by Stibbe (2021).

Framing as a technique is a cognitive schema or framework that we use to interpret knowledge and understand our reality such that new meanings are inferred from pre-existing

frames. The frames aid in sense-making and interaction, where previous experiences, expectations, and knowledge construct our understanding of new phenomena. Different scholars have considered framing in the context of environmental issues and discourse, including climate change news and environmental policies (Raimo & Pontona, 2024; Mateau & Dominguez, 2019).

Studies have also focused on the articulation of environmental concerns in different text types, including speeches and reports (Kapranov, 2024; Biwott, et. al, 2024). In Kenya, research into the framing of ecological issues, including climate change has exhaustively covered news reports. Most researchers tend to focus on news discourse in news articles, leaving a gap in environmental corporate communications. Additionally, investigations on corporate discourse based on the ecolinguistic approach are minimal; for instance, Gong (2019) analysed the development frame in the environmental reports of CGTC Company.

Theoretical Framework

Frame theory in Ecolinguistics

Stibbe (2015) sees framing as the replication of a story from one area of life onto another to ease understanding. He proposes the existence of a source frame and a target domain. The source frame is the conceptual domain that provides the particular subject or concept that we apply figuratively to enhance comprehension. On the other hand, the target domain is the semantic domain that we try to understand based on the information obtained from the source frame. From the ecolinguistic perspective, framing is a technique for developing stories that society uses to understand ecology. These stories constitute imaginative patterns and symbols that guide a people's interpretation of the world around them. The framing concept in ecolinguistics therefore encapsulates how language determines society's collective understanding of environmental conservation matters. The frames are realised through images, metaphors, and stories that are used in relation to events or actions to induce reactions.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method research design to gain an in-depth analysis of the ecological frames in the corporate environmental reports. A quantitative approach was embedded to identify the initial data for analysis. The study population was a corpus of all 182 reports disseminated by the 65 companies listed in the Nairobi Securities Exchange in the sampled period. The NSE categorises listed companies into 12 macroeconomic sectors representing different industries; these include banking, construction, energy, insurance, and the agricultural sector. The study purposively picked three reports from each stratum or macroeconomic area to provide a representative sample of 36 corporate reports. The selection was informed by the fact that linguistic data from the same population, such as a genre (the environmental reporting genre), exhibits a level of homogeneity. ESG reports sampled ranged from 2020 to 2024. The study electronically searched for trigger words for each frame based on previous frameworks reviewed in the current study, with Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also guiding the mapping and coding of the ecological frames.

The collection procedure focused on the sections of sustainability/ESG reports that related to ecological or environmental matters as opposed

to other areas such as financial sustainability. The qualitative data analysis process applied Stibbe's framework (2015) of ecological discourse.

Data presentation

To analyze the frames in this study, a codebook was developed for frame analysis based on the already existing framework by Mateu and Dominguez (2019). The codebook outlined the definitions for each frame and allowed for frequency counts of the incidences of the frames in the reports. The codebook was designed based on the quantitative output from Antconc software as well as a human coder. The reports yielded a total of 49,013 words or tokens based on which we investigated the occurrence of frames, their frequency, and context for interpretation. The source frames and target domains were identified as summarized in the next section.

Source Frames and Target Domains

The complex or abstract ideas were environmental issues that the public and other language users need to understand whereas the source domains were the familiar concepts that the public used to interpret ecological problems such as climate change. Occurring between the source frame and target domain is the process of mapping (Lakoff and Johnson,1980).

Table1: Summary of source frames and their target domains

No.	Frame	Target Domain
1.	Economic Value	Environmental conservation efforts
2.	Obligation	Environmental sustainability activities
3.	Science and Technology	Solutions
4.	Collective Effort	Environmental sustainability
5.	Resource	Nature
6.	Legal Certainty	Climate Action
7.	Crisis	Environmental degradation
8.	Journey	Environmental preservation process
9.	Battle	Global warming/climate change

Table 1 presents the relationship between the source frames and target domains drawn from the themes identified in the data. From an ecolinguistic perspective, the source frame facilitates understanding by conceptualizing an area of life in a unique way. This concept is then

used to discuss the target domain, which is the general area of focus in a message (Entman,1993). The analysis above shows that corporate environmental discourse employs source frames and target domains in their communications to their stakeholders and other interested parties. The

identification of source and target domains was instrumental in breaking down the complex scientific ideas of environmental degradation into simple and relatable concepts.

This is consistent with Habil and Wang (2024) who noted that the use source frames and target domains in climate change communication also aids in sustaining target audience interest as well as ensuring comprehension.

Discussion of Findings

Ecological Frames

The frames used in environmental sustainability discourses and their construction by major actors in the environmental reporting spaces were analysed and their frequency of occurrence in the sampled reports presented as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of ecological frames in the corporate reports

No.	Frame	Frequency	%
1)	Economic Value	64	25.7
2)	Obligation	40	16
3)	Scientific	34	13.6
4)	Collective Effort	25	10
5)	Resource	21	8.4
6)	Legal	19	7.6
7)	Crisis	16	6.4
8)	Journey/Destination	16	6.4
9)	Battle/	14	5.6
Total		249	

The most prevalent frame is the economic value frame that occurs most frequently in the environmental reports. The financial loss or economic value frame has a 25.7 % prevalence in the reports where economic growth is mapped onto climate change control. At 16% frequency in the reports, the obligation frame maps environmental protection and conservation as a concern and primary responsibility for corporate players. The solution target domain has a 13.6% prevalence as it uses science and technology as a source frame to propose solutions. The collective effort and international collaboration frame carried a 10% prevalence. The target domain of environmental sustainability is regarded as an international challenge that calls for cross-border collaboration. The nature-as-resource frame accounts for 8.4% of occurrences in the reports. Legal/Policy frame had 7.6% prevalence, in relation to climate action by corporations while climate change is seen as a crisis in the corporate world, with a 6.4% prevalence. The Journey/destination metaphor at

6.4 % revealed that journey is mapped unto environmental sustainability as a target domain. The battle frame was also common in the reports occurring 14 times with a 5.6% prevalence.

Framing techniques and trigger words

Framing techniques are linguistic devices that aid in bringing out the mental images created by a frame. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), frames may be built on a depiction, catchphrase, metaphor, visual image or exemplar. Identification and analyses of these frames are therefore important since it reveals people's perception about environmental issues and encourage discourses that promote conservation. Linguistic devices make up framing techniques in ecolinguistic studies. For instance, in mapping ecological degradation Obande and Aluhya (2024) identified the use of complex constructions, adversatives, pronominal items and additives. Table 3 indicates the frames with their adjacent framing techniques.

Table 3: Framing techniques and Trigger words per frame

No.	Frame	Framing Technique	Trigger Words	Target Domain
1.	Economic Value	Catchphrases, jargon	Consumption, Financing ,Growth, Cost	Environmental conservation efforts
2.	Obligation	Spin	Commitment, Account, Transparency	Environmental sustainability activities
3.	Scientific	Jargon	Data,Technology Digital, scope	Solutions
4.	Collective effort	Artifacts	Global , Collective Partner , Collaborate	Environmental sustainability
5.	Resource	Spin	Resource, Natural Ecosystem	Nature
6.	Legal	Jargon, artifacts	Policy ,Compliance Regulation	Climate Action
7.	Crisis	Attributes	Challenge, Issue ,Crisis	Environmental degradation
8.	Journey	Metaphor	Progress , Drive Journey	Environmental preservation process
9.	Battle	Metaphor	Combat, Fight, Tackle	Global warming/climate change

In Table 3, the mapping process that matches source frames and their target domains is summarized. The framing techniques employed include the use of jargon, spin, artifacts, attribution and metaphorical framing. The most frequently occurring trigger words per frame were also indicated with their corresponding target domains.

Economic Value Frame

The economic value frame is the most prominent in the corporate reports, realizing environmental challenges both as a cost and an opportunity. The financial impact of environmental challenges such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and waste management is understood in the context of the corporations' financial performance. The frame is revealed in topics such as climate-related costs, increased operations costs, income loss, value erosion, energy costs, and economic growth. From the opportunity-driven perspective, the reports cite environmental concerns as opportunities under themes such as cost savings, alternative energy investments or innovations, profit growth, value creation, and brand promotion. In line with these findings Hiroyasu et al. (2019) posit that this frame

highlights man's benefit from environmental protection or opportunities for further economic gains. However, the study established that support for intrinsic environmental conservation was dominated by the motivation for extra gains from the environment. This frame adopts a transactional approach in its evaluation of ecological issues in the reports. Enacted through finance-related terminology and catchphrases or financial jargon, the frame is realized through words such as "cost," "financial," "growth," and "development." This is in addition to the use of the green metaphor, which adds on to the promotional elements of the environmental reports.

Obligation Frame

This frame highlights the commitment that corporations have to environmental stewardship. The listed companies introduce their environmental sustainability reports by reiterating their efforts towards environmental conservation. In some instances, the projects, products, or services that have been developed to address climate change, waste management, or pollution are explicitly mentioned. The obligation frame was also captured as part of social responsibility

and responsible citizenship. The findings corroborate Sabet's (2014) observations concerning moral framing of environmental concerns. He established that moral frames used words that invoked a sense of ethical responsibility, duty, or obligation.

The frame also echoes Huang et al.'s (2022) findings on the association of climate change with moral, ethical, and religious standards in public communication. This frame presents environmental concerns as a moral obligation that organizations are expected to observe. The obligation frame is constructed through spin as a framing technique. Based on Fairhurst and Sarr's (1996) spin entails creating a biased perception through connotations that may be positive or negative. In the reports, this technique was used to evaluate the corporations' environmental efforts positively.

Scientific Frame

This frame focuses on the integration of scientific research and technologies to alleviate environmental challenges. It enlists various innovations that companies have implemented currently or are planning to launch in an effort to reduce negative environmental impact. This preference for scientific solutions is evident in scientific jargon and tech-based terminology. The frame was also evident in Martin (2021), where it was problematized as it regards nature as a machine that can be assembled or dismantled at will. Stibbe's (2021) argument deepens the disconnect and brings out the anthropocentric angle of the frame. This allows for misplaced optimism that a techno-fix such as carbon capture and storage, nuclear fusion, hydrogen cars, or geoengineering could solve environmental issues without any change to the larger social and cultural systems that underlie all the issues. (Stibbe, 2021, p. 64).

The alienating effect of the scientific frame is also consistent with Tallam (2025) findings in media discourses. The research concluded that the frame enhances the credibility of the information provided but that may be at the expense of reader interpretation since technical jargon is utilised. Also apparent in the Mateu & Dominguez (2019) framework, the frame presents

science and technology as the solution to environmental challenges. This frame is manifest through the use of scientific jargon and catchphrases. The use of technical language and terms depicts the corporations as credible in their sustainability efforts and capable of solving the problems through research and innovation. However, this technique can conceal eco-destructive activities and may discourage further scrutiny from readers. This was also emphasized by Mason & Mason (2012) who noted that corporate environmental reports employ ideological persuasion at the discursive levels, which influences readers' opinions.

Collective Effort Frame

Environmental concerns are also regarded as challenges that require collaborative efforts at international and local levels. Represented in all macro sectors of the economy, the frame highlights the need for private and public partnerships, cross-border collaboration, and strategic alliances to enhance the impact of conservation efforts. This frame was also realized as a human-driven frame that conceptualizes human beings as responsible for alleviating the situation. In the same vein, the frame portrays environmental challenges as international problems that necessitate management at a global level. This frame also featured international regulatory frameworks and awards that the corporations had received. This interpretation was attributed to the notion that environmental challenges are a global dilemma that calls for cross-border collaboration to avert it (Olausson, 2009).

The collective effort frame in some instances constituted an adaptation or mitigation aspect that was to be achieved at an international scale. Environmental issues are in this case, framed as a global predicament that calls for joint efforts at an international level. The frame is realized through artifacts which construct the frame, where it manifests through global legitimization. The corporations highlight their collaborative efforts undertaken jointly with other entities for global recognition such as the Paris Agreement or ISO. Artifacts however, may contribute to greenwashing by altering the

perception of the reader to interpret the report as an indication of corporate eco-friendliness. The frame is manifest through trigger words such as Collaboration, partnership, global, shared responsibility.

Resource Value Frame

The significance of natural resources is also captured in the reports. This is realized through themes such as crucial resource, fragile resource and finite resource in reference to water, biomass, clean energy and agricultural land. The beauty of nature though rarely occurring in the reports is also a theme that resonates with the ecological value attached to nature. The frame is consistent with the maintaining value and avoiding waste frame realized by Norris (2023) in his study of company value translation. The frame emphasized to stakeholders the level of scarcity of the natural resources.

Legal Frame

The policy or legal framework frame is also prevalent in the reports. The frame is realized through themes such as, environmental management policies and procedures, national and international regulations, best practice as well as industry-specific laws. The reports highlight environmental protection as a practice done to meet the legal expectations of their specific industries besides national and international standards. This is depicted in the quoted international standards, climate policies and environmental regulations. According to Bogojevic (2023), the legal framing of climate action is enacted in policy and other regulations. These laws and regulations are presented as a response to climate change; however, the frame fails to connect the policies with the actual steps to be taken.

The legal framing of environmental concerns is associated with the standards and regulations employed by corporations. The framing technique used in this case is the employment of legal jargon and artifacts which map environmental sustainability as a legal requirement. Companies may utilize this frame to appeal to shareholders and customers by enlisting their level of compliance with regulators and best practices. The awards, certifications and standards also form part

of the discourse that enlists the achievements of the respective corporations. This serves to present the corporations in a positive light with regard to environmental sustainability activities.

Crisis Frame

Environmental concerns are also described as a crisis that affects organizational strategy, company operations and governance in the corporate reports. This frame emphasises the urgency with which companies need to address environmental challenges. It elaborates on the magnitude of the environmental issues facing industries and the need to develop solutions for the same. This is corroborated by Jabeen (2024) in his study where crisis framing was examined as a problem for humans as well as the planet. Crisis framing has been cited as a technique utilized by authors to appeal to the emotions and memory of the reader. Furthermore, the frame enhances the magnitude of the environmental concern to push audiences to action (Jabeen,2024).

Journey Metaphor

This frame occurs across the sectors, citing the efforts towards environmental sustainability as a journey. This metaphor reveals the progressive nature of the conservation and environmental protection activities, implying that corporations are working towards a certain destination or target. Phrases in reference to this include roadmap, driving, journey, path and stride. In consensus with the findings of the present study Martin (2021) argues that the metaphor is partially structured to conceptualize the solution to environmental degradation as a destination.

In the study, climate change is realized as a journey. Through the use of metaphor, environmental sustainability is regarded as a journey as indicated by words such as progress, drive, journey and path. Progress is the most prominent trigger word with 48 % prominence followed by all forms of the word drive. Journey occurs 12 % of the time whereas roadmap accounts for 4 % of the manifestation. The conceptualization of environmental sustainability as a journey implies the need for continuous improvement in addressing environmental challenges. The reports suggest that incremental steps need to be taken in a common direction.

Battle Frame

Environmental protection is also metaphorically framed as a battle or war. The reports cite environmental challenges as a phenomenon that needs to be confronted, based on the warfare terminology used. For instance, climate change is regarded as a battle, fight or emergency that needs our urgent attention. The growing environmental crisis is also interpreted as a security threat where stakeholders are urged to engage in activities that shield the planet, its resources and people against the negative effects of environmental degradation. The same frame was identified by Wabnig, (2024) as an adversarial frame which brings out the need to coexist and manage resources. According to Wabnig, (2024), battle framing highlights the role of preparation and planning in order to deal with environmental challenges.

Climate change is metaphorically framed as war. Its occurrence features trigger words such as combat, and fight. The frame maps the concept of war on to environmental problems especially climate change. This may be aimed at enhancing understanding of climate change and other environmental concerns. The war metaphor assigns a new idea onto environmental sustainability, to make its implications seem more significant to the audience.

Conclusion

The present study analysed the various

frames used in the interpretation of environmental concerns. It has identified the source frames and the respective target domains that readers are likely to employ when examining the reports. The findings showed that the major framing techniques used to realize the target domains entail spin and jargon as the most prevalent framing techniques, apart from use of attributes, metaphors and artifacts. The distribution of various trigger words also contributed to the realization of the frames. There was consistency in economic value framing of environmental concerns such as climate change. The presence of metaphorical framing also demonstrated efforts to enhance understanding of abstract ideas using preexisting source frames. Thus, the study established that environmental concerns were framed as economic value, a moral obligation, a crisis, a journey, legality, a battle and collective responsibility. In addition, Scientific framing was employed in framing the solutions to the environmental crisis. This implies an inclination towards economic gain, impression management and compliance with the legal requirements with limited efforts towards overcoming the problems. It also brings out the need to examine the reports closely prior to publication to ensure that the frames and framing techniques used are promote only ecological values or beliefs that promote conservation as opposed to degradation.

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