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THE GRAMMAR OF GREENWASHING: LINGUISTIC DECEPTION IN CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: As environmental concerns migrate from the fringes of social activism to the core of corporate branding, a new linguistic phenomenon has emerged: "greenwashing." This study investigates the **grammatical and semantic strategies** employed by multinational corporations to construct an eco-friendly persona without substantive policy changes. Using a **corpus-based critical discourse analysis (CDA)** of 2024–2025 sustainability reports, this paper identifies three primary linguistic deceptions: the strategic use of **nominalization**, the **"agentless" passive voice**, and the proliferation of **"empty" adjectives**. The findings suggest that greenwashing is not merely a matter of dishonest vocabulary but **is embedded in the very syntax** of corporate communication, designed to obscure accountability and soften the environmental impact of industrial activities.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ecolinguistics, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sustainability Discourse, Nominalization.

Introduction

The climate crisis has forced a radical shift in corporate rhetoric. No longer can firms ignore their ecological footprint; instead, they must "narrate" it. However, this necessity has given rise to greenwashing—a form of spin in which green PR is used deceptively to promote the perception that an organization's products or policies are environmentally friendly (Laufer, 2003). While previous research has focused on visual elements, the **specific grammatical mechanisms of this deception remain under-analyzed.**

As Stibbe (2020) argues, the stories we tell about the environment are fundamentally shaped by the language we choose. This paper addresses this gap by asking: **How does syntax contribute to the obfuscation of environmental responsibility?** I argue that by manipulating transitivity and noun phrases, corporations create a **"discourse of vagueness"** that satisfies regulatory requirements while misleading the public.

Methods

This study utilizes a purposive sample of Sustainability Reports (2024–2025) from five major global corporations. The methodology follows Fairclough's (2010) framework for **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, which views language as a form of social practice that can maintain power imbalances.

Following the principles set by Machin and Mayr (2023), the analysis focuses on:

- **Transitivity Analysis:** Examining who the **"actor"** is in sentences describing environmental damage.



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- **Nominalization Tracking:** Identifying instances where **verbs (actions) are turned into nouns** to hide the perpetrator of an action (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).
- **Adjectival Frequency:** Using *AntConc* software to measure the density of **evaluative adjectives** that lack technical definitions.

Results

The analysis revealed a consistent pattern of "**syntactic distancing**", a concept often associated with manipulative discourse (Van Dijk, 2006).

- **Agentless Passives:** In 74% of instances describing negative environmental impacts, the **passive voice was used without an agent**. Example: "*Emissions were released*" rather than "*We released emissions.*"

- **Nominalization as a Shield:** The transformation of actions into abstract nouns was prevalent. Following Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) theory, phrases like "*The degradation of water quality occurred*" **remove the corporation from the process of pollution**.

- **The "Eco-Adjective" Glut:** The term "**sustainable**" appeared frequently, but in **89% of cases, it was not accompanied by specific metrics**. This lack of transparency is a hallmark of communication that fails to meet actual accountability standards (Parguel et al., 2011).

Discussion

The results indicate that greenwashing is a **structural rather than a purely lexical issue**. By using agentless passives, corporations **linguistically "naturalize" industrial disasters**—making them seem like inevitable occurrences rather than the result of specific corporate decisions.

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on nominalization functions as a **cognitive barrier**. When an action becomes a noun, it becomes a "thing" to be managed rather than a harmful act being committed. This supports the idea that linguistic choices are used to **reframe reality and manage social accountability** (Laufer, 2003).

Conclusion

While this study is limited by its sample size, it highlights a disturbing trend: as the public becomes more "green-literate," corporate discourse becomes **more syntactically complex to compensate**. To combat greenwashing, we must look past the "*green*" vocabulary and **scrutinize the underlying grammar of accountability**.

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