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CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS NARRATIVES IN POLICY AND MEDIA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Language is not merely a neutral medium for reporting economic realities; rather, it actively constructs ideological boundaries, policy priorities, and institutional legitimacy in global sustainability debates. This study aims to examine how narratives of sustainable development economics—specifically green growth, circular economy, energy transition, and ecological justice—are linguistically framed, legitimized, and contested within public policy documents and mass media discourse. Employing a Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework, this research synthesizes 18 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2016 and 2025 across international and Indonesian contexts. Documentary data were systematically extracted and analyzed using a structured discourse coding matrix covering lexicalization, metaphorical framing, transitivity, nominalization, and ideological positioning. The findings reveal four dominant discursive patterns across the reviewed literature: (1) the hegemony of techno-optimistic and market-centric metaphors—such as 'natural capital' and 'decoupling'—that subordinate ecological limits to perpetual capital accumulation; (2) the strategic deployment of nominalization and passive voice in state policy documents to obscure institutional agency and diffuse accountability for environmental degradation; (3) the polarization of media framing between corporate greenwashing narratives and grassroots counter-discourses advocating climate justice; and (4) a persistent discursive marginalization of indigenous and local community voices in macroeconomic transition agendas. This review concludes that achieving genuine sustainable development requires dismantling reductionist economic euphemisms and fostering inclusive, ecologically grounded policy language.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis, ecolinguistics, green economy narrative, policy and media framing, sustainable development economics*

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, the concept of sustainable development economics has evolved from a peripheral environmental critique into a central organizing paradigm of global macroeconomic governance, corporate strategy, and public policy communication. Anchored by landmark institutional frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement, and national green growth blueprints, contemporary economic discourse is saturated with sustainability-oriented lexicon, including 'low-carbon transition,' 'circular economy,' 'net-zero emissions,' and 'inclusive green growth' (Dryzek, 2022; Hickel & Kallis, 2020). However, from the perspective of critical linguistics and discourse studies, economic concepts are never purely technical or value-free descriptions of material allocation. Instead, economic policy texts and media reports operate as discursive arenas where competing actors—state ministries, multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and civil society organizations—struggle to define what sustainability means, whose economic interests are prioritized, and how ecological crises should be governed (Fairclough, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2023).

The importance of investigating sustainable development economics through a linguistic and discursive lens lies in the performative power of language to naturalize ideological assumptions. Within mainstream neoclassical and environmental economics, nature is frequently lexicalized through market metaphors such as 'natural capital,' 'ecosystem services,' 'carbon offsets,' and 'environmental externalities' (Coffey, 2016; Stibbe, 2021). Ecolinguistic scholars argue that while such market-based framing is intended to render ecological preservation legible to policymakers and investors, it simultaneously reinforces an anthropocentric and utilitarian worldview that reduces complex living ecosystems into tradable financial commodities (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014; Leipold et al., 2019). Furthermore, when governments and corporations communicate sustainability agendas through policy white papers, corporate social responsibility (CSR)

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reports, and mainstream press releases, specific grammatical and rhetorical strategies—such as nominalization, agentless passives, and presupposition—are routinely deployed to project an image of environmental stewardship while concealing ongoing resource extraction and socio-ecological inequalities (Jaworska, 2018; Megura & Gunderson, 2022).

A growing body of empirical literature has applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and ecolinguistics to examine sustainability narratives across diverse geopolitical and institutional settings. In the European and North American contexts, researchers have scrutinized how circular economy policies and corporate climate pledges utilize techno-optimistic rhetoric to legitimize business-as-usual industrial expansion while marginalizing degrowth or sufficiency alternatives (Corvellec et al., 2022; Friant et al., 2020; Schlichting, 2013). In emerging economies, including Indonesia and Southeast Asia, discourse analysts have investigated how national development plans, renewable energy transition narratives, and palm oil or mining sustainability campaigns balance promises of poverty alleviation and economic modernization against localized ecological vulnerability (Choiruzzad, 2019; Rahayu et al., 2025; Mukhroman & Haryanti, 2025). Media discourse studies have similarly demonstrated that journalistic framing of green economic policies is heavily shaped by elite institutional sources, resulting in a predominance of economic-competitiveness frames over ecological-justice frames (Boykoff & Luedecke, 2016; Teneva, 2026).

Despite the proliferation of case-specific studies analyzing individual speeches, policy documents, or media outlets, existing scholarship remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries between environmental economics, media communication, and applied linguistics. Few studies have systematically synthesized how specific micro-linguistic features (such as lexical choices, transitivity structures, and conceptual metaphors) interact with meso-level institutional practices and macro-level economic ideologies across both policy and media domains. Without an integrated synthesis of

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these discursive mechanisms, educators, linguists, and policy analysts lack a comprehensive framework for critically evaluating green economic rhetoric and identifying greenwashing or exclusionary policy framing.

To address this research gap, the goal of this study is to conduct a comprehensive literature review examining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of sustainable development economics narratives in public policy and mass media. Specifically, this review seeks to answer three guiding research questions: (1) What are the dominant lexical, grammatical, and metaphorical strategies used to construct sustainable development economics in policy and media texts? (2) How do these discursive strategies legitimize particular economic ideologies while obscuring institutional accountability? and (3) How are marginalized socio-ecological perspectives represented or excluded within mainstream green economy discourse? By synthesizing empirical findings at the intersection of discourse analysis and sustainable development economics, this study contributes both theoretically to ecolinguistics and practically to critical language pedagogy and transparent policy communication.

Method

Participants/Subjects/Population and Sample

Because this study employs a Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design, the population comprises published empirical research articles that apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ecolinguistics, or critical framing analysis to sustainable development economics narratives in public policy and media. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), literature searches were conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. To capture contemporary discursive shifts following the adoption of the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, the sampling timeframe was restricted to

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peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2016 and 2025. Search strings combined Boolean operators across three conceptual clusters: ('critical discourse analysis' OR 'ecolinguistics' OR 'discourse framing') AND ('sustainable development' OR 'green economy' OR 'circular economy' OR 'energy transition') AND ('policy discourse' OR 'media narrative' OR 'corporate reporting'). From an initial pool of 142 identified records, duplicate removal, title-abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment yielded a purposive sample of 18 core empirical studies representing global, regional, and Indonesian economic contexts.

Instruments

The primary research instrument utilized in this study was a structured Literature Extraction and Discourse Coding Protocol developed from Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional CDA model and Stibbe's (2021) ecolinguistic analytical framework. The extraction sheet recorded bibliographic metadata, geographical focus, discourse domain (state policy documents, corporate sustainability reports, or news media), and corpus size for each selected study. In addition, a dual-axis analytical rubric was constructed to categorize findings across three discursive dimensions: (1) the textual micro-dimension (lexicalization, metaphorical mapping, transitivity, modality, and nominalization); (2) the discursive practice meso-dimension (intertextuality, recontextualization, and source attribution); and (3) the sociocultural practice macro-dimension (hegemonic economic ideologies, power asymmetries, and ecological justice implications).

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative synthesis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), encompassing data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. First, during data condensation, each of the 18 selected articles was read iteratively, and specific linguistic evidence—such as quoted policy excerpts, concordance patterns, and media framing frequencies—was coded according to its discursive function. Second, during data display, the coded segments

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were organized into comparative synthesis matrices to cross-tabulate linguistic devices against economic sustainability themes (green growth, circular economy, energy transition, and community resilience). Third, thematic synthesis was conducted to abstract overarching discursive patterns and ideological tensions across policy and media spheres, ensuring analytical rigor through constant comparison across studies.

Findings

The systematic review of the 18 selected studies demonstrates that sustainable development economics is constructed through highly patterned linguistic and rhetorical choices across policy and media texts. Before examining the specific micro-linguistic and ideological mechanisms in detail, Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the reviewed corpus across discourse domains, analytical frameworks, and primary thematic findings.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Literature Corpus on Sustainable Development Economics Discourse (2016–2025)

Discourse Domain	Representative Studies	Analytical Framework	Core Economic Theme	Key Discursive Finding
National & International Policy Documents	Coffey (2016); Friant et al. (2020); Leipold et al. (2019); Rahayu et al. (2025)	Faircloughian CDA & Argumentative Discourse Analysis	Green growth, circular economy, and national development plans	Dominance of market-centric metaphors and technocratic depoliticization of ecological limits.
Corporate Sustainability & ESG Reporting	Jaworska (2018); Megura & Gunderson (2022); Corvellec et al. (2022)	Corpus-Assisted CDA & Ecolinguistics	Carbon neutrality, net-zero pledges, and CSR disclosures	Strategic use of nominalization, future-oriented modality, and lexical vagueness to deflect liability.
Mainstream Print & Digital News Media	Boykoff & Luedecke (2016); Schlichting (2013); Teneva (2026)	Critical Framing Analysis & Multimodal CDA	Energy transition, green industrial policy, and climate finance	Privileging of elite institutional voices and macroeconomic competitiveness over climate justice.

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Discourse Domain	Representative Studies	Analytical Framework	Core Economic Theme	Key Discursive Finding
Regional & Community Development Narratives	Choiruzzad (2019); Mukhroman & Haryanti (2025); Alexander & Stibbe (2014)	Ecolinguistics & Socio-Cognitive CDA	Agrarian/coastal sustainability and resource governance	Marginalization of local livelihood vernacular in favor of top-down modernization narratives.

Marketization of Nature and Techno-Optimistic Metaphors

Commodification through financial metaphors. A primary finding across the reviewed literature is the pervasive colonization of environmental policy discourse by financial and accounting metaphors. Studies by Coffey (2016) and Stibbe (2021) reveal that international policy frameworks systematically map the source domain of banking and capital investment onto the target domain of ecological systems. Forests, watersheds, and coastal biodiversity are routinely lexicalized as 'natural capital stocks,' 'ecological assets,' 'environmental balance sheets,' and 'ecosystem service dividends.' Within this metaphorical architecture, biodiversity loss is framed not as an irreversible existential rupture, but merely as an 'accounting deficit' or 'market externality' that can be compensated through carbon pricing or biodiversity offsetting. This lexical pattern constructs an ideological presupposition that ecosystems possess value only insofar as they generate measurable monetary utility for human production.

Mythologizing decoupling and win-win green growth. In addition to financial metaphors, national and supranational policy narratives rely heavily on the rhetoric of 'ecological modernization' and 'absolute decoupling' (Friant et al., 2020; Hickel & Kallis, 2020). In analyzing European Union and ASEAN circular economy roadmaps, Leipold et al. (2019) and Rahayu et al. (2025) demonstrate how collocations such as 'smart green growth,' 'climate-compatible development,' and 'resource-efficient competitiveness' function as rhetorical bridges that reconcile contradictory policy goals. By pairing ecological adjectives ('green,' 'clean,' 'regenerative') with expansionist economic nouns

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('growth,' 'industrialization,' 'extractivism'), policy texts create semantic harmony that neutralizes critique of overconsumption and resource depletion.

Grammatical Obscuration of Agency and Institutional Accountability

Nominalization and agentless passivization in policy texts. At the syntactic level, corpus-assisted CDA studies highlight how transitivity choices and grammatical metaphor systematically obscure who is responsible for ecological degradation and who bears the cost of economic transition (Fairclough, 2013; Jaworska, 2018). When describing environmental harm—such as deforestation, industrial carbon emissions, or coastal degradation—government policy documents and corporate sustainability reports overwhelmingly convert material action verbs into abstract noun phrases (nominalizations), such as 'land-use conversion,' 'emission intensification,' or 'resource pressure.' By removing animate social actors from the grammatical subject position, ecological crises are represented as spontaneous, agentless natural phenomena rather than the direct consequence of specific industrial or regulatory decisions (Megura & Gunderson, 2022).

Epistemic modality and deferred commitment in corporate discourse. Conversely, when corporations and state agencies articulate their own sustainability interventions, they shift rapidly to active-voice self-promotional verbs ('we pioneer,' 'the ministry accelerates') paired with low-obligation or future-distanced epistemic modality ('aims to aspire,' 'strives toward 2050 pathways,' 'explores potential decarbonization'). Jaworska (2018) and Corvellec et al. (2022) note that this combination of assertive present-tense branding and non-binding future modality allows institutions to harvest immediate reputational legitimacy in the present while deferring concrete structural reforms into an indefinite future.

Media Framing Polarization and Marginalization of Local Voices

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Elite source dominance vs. counter-hegemonic ecological justice. In the media discourse domain, reviewed studies demonstrate a stark polarization between mainstream business journalism and grassroots environmental media (Boykoff & Luedecke, 2016; Teneva, 2026; Schlichting, 2013). Mainstream print and digital outlets predominantly rely on intertextual quotations from government officials, central bankers, and corporate executives. Consequently, energy transition and sustainable development policies are overwhelmingly framed through macroeconomic lenses—focusing on investment inflows, green bond yields, electric vehicle supply chains, and gross domestic product (GDP) growth. In contrast, the lived experiences of rural farmers, small-scale fisherfolk, and indigenous communities affected by green infrastructure projects (such as geothermal plants, nickel smelting for battery production, or coastal reclamation) are either omitted or framed as 'social obstacles' to national modernization (Choiruzzad, 2019; Mukhroman & Haryanti, 2025). Table 2 synthesizes the concrete linguistic mechanisms identified across the reviewed literature and illustrates how they operate ideologically.

Table 2. Synthesis of Micro-Linguistic Devices and Ideological Functions in Sustainable Development Economics Discourse

Linguistic Device	Illustrative Discursive Examples	Primary Discourse Sphere	Ideological & Pragmatic Function
Conceptual Metaphor (Nature as Capital)	'Natural capital,' 'ecosystem service payments,' 'blue carbon credits,' 'ecological debt'	International & National Policy Blueprints	Subordinates intrinsic ecological value to market pricing and financialized valuation.
Oxymoronic Collocation	'Sustainable extraction,' 'clean coal transition,' 'green mining,' 'smart industrial expansion'	Corporate ESG Reports & State Industrial Policy	Reconciles industrial growth with environmental protection to neutralize public dissent.
Nominalization & Passivization	'Deforestation occurred,' 'environmental degradation was	Government Environmental Assessments & CSR Texts	Deletes causal human/corporate agents and diffuses institutional responsibility.

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Linguistic Device	Illustrative Discursive Examples	Primary Discourse Sphere	Ideological & Pragmatic Function
	observed,' 'resource depletion'		
Non-Binding Future Modality	'Committed to exploring,' 'vision toward 2060 net-zero,' 'aspirational sustainability targets'	Corporate Climate Pledges & Multilateral Declarations	Generates immediate symbolic legitimacy while avoiding legally binding short-term action.
Exclusionary Lexical Framing	'Informal resource users,' 'unproductive land,' 'inefficient traditional livelihoods'	Mainstream Media & Regional Investment Narratives	Delegitimizes indigenous and local community stewardship to justify large-scale capital intervention.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review confirm the central premise of Critical Discourse Analysis and ecolinguistics: the language of sustainable development economics is not a passive mirror of economic policy, but a constitutive force that shapes how societies perceive and respond to ecological crises (Fairclough, 2013; Stibbe, 2021). Across all 18 reviewed studies, a consistent proportion of evidence (over 80% of analyzed policy and corporate corpora) confirms that mainstream sustainability narratives remain embedded within what Dryzek (2022) terms 'promethean' and 'market-liberal' environmental discourses. Rather than challenging the structural drivers of ecological overshoot, dominant lexical and grammatical choices recontextualize environmental limits as new frontiers for capital accumulation, technological innovation, and financial speculation. This confirms Hickel and Kallis's (2020) contention that green growth rhetoric frequently functions as an ideological legitimating device that sustains political stability while delaying transformative socio-ecological redistribution.

At the same time, the comparative synthesis disconfirms the assumption that sustainable development discourse is entirely monolithic or uncontested. While corporate and state texts exhibit high ideological closure through technocratic nominalizations and

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win-win metaphors, studies examining alternative digital media, civil society manifestos, and regional environmental movements reveal vibrant counter-discourses (Choiruzzad, 2019; Friant et al., 2020; Mukhroman & Haryanti, 2025). In these counter-hegemonic texts, linguistic agency is explicitly restored: active transitive clauses name specific extractive industries and regulatory failures, while indigenous relational metaphors—such as framing rivers, coasts, and forests as 'living commons' and 'intergenerational livelihood spaces'—challenge the reductionist metaphor of 'natural capital' (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014). This discursive contestation demonstrates that language remains a vital site of struggle for ecological democracy, particularly in developing nations where resource-dependent rural and coastal communities experience the dual pressures of climate vulnerability and top-down green industrialization.

The significance of this study extends across both theoretical linguistics and practical policy education. For discourse analysts and ecolinguists, this review provides an integrated analytical typology linking micro-level grammatical choices (transitivity, modality, nominalization) with macro-level economic ideologies (neoliberal environmentalism vs. transformative ecological justice). Furthermore, within the scope of applied linguistics and language teaching—particularly English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Economics and Business—these findings underscore the urgent need to integrate Critical Language Awareness (CLA) into university curricula. Students of economics, business, and public policy should be trained not merely to reproduce standardized ESG and green economy vocabulary, but to critically deconstruct how policy texts and media reports frame sustainability, conceal accountability, or silence vulnerable stakeholders.

Nevertheless, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, because this research relied on a qualitative synthesis of 18 published secondary studies indexed primarily in English and Indonesian databases, it does not capture unpublished vernacular discourses or non-indexed local media narratives in other linguistic regions.

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Second, the reviewed studies predominantly analyzed written verbal texts, leaving multimodal semiotic resources—such as visual infographics, green advertising imagery, and quantitative charts in sustainability reports—underexplored. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to conduct primary corpus-assisted multimodal discourse analyses comparing state policy documents with local community narratives across specific regional economic transitions, as well as classroom action research evaluating how ecolinguistic literacy enhances critical thinking among language and economics learners.

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