
Framing Environmental Narratives in the Documentary *A Life on Our Planet Earth: An Ecolinguistic Study Using Genre Analysis*

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Abstract

Documentaries about Climate Change are important for creating a greater awareness of the issues, both in terms of the environment and ethics of environmental issues. This research examines the ways in which a documentary *A Life on Our Planet* by Attenborough (2020) utilizes linguistic methods as well as documentary methods to convey ecological concerns. The research is guided by an ecolinguistic perspective Stibbe (2015) and documentary genre perspective Nichols (2010). In addition to conducting a qualitative content analysis of the subtitle transcript, the research also examined the use of framing, metaphor, and the expository documentary form. Generally, this research demonstrated that through the combination of Attenborough's authoritative voice and the construction of information and evidence through structured sequences of information, Attenborough creates persuasive arguments regarding ecological crises, human dependence upon nature, and limits of resources. Additionally, the inclusion of linguistic devices within the expository form enables viewers to understand and reflect ethically upon the data presented in the film and demonstrates how documentary films can convert scientific data into compelling stories. This research adds to our knowledge of ecolinguistics and documentary studies by demonstrating how the intersection of language and genre influence environmental communication.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Documentary Film, Expository Form, Framing, Metaphor, Communication of Climate Change.

1. Introduction

Climate change is among the most urgent problems of the twenty-first century that require not only political intervention but also change in the manner of speaking and visualizing the world. Due to ecological effects of industrialization and unreasonable consumption facing the community of the world, the organization of the cinematic presentation of climate change acquires a more urgent character. Communication on climate change is not a mere communication of information, but it creates meaning, values, moral responsibilities. In this respect, the film representation is a very important part of the creation of environmental awareness. They assist the societies in feeling their relationship with the natural world. Media discourse can never be neutral as noted by Boykoff (2011) and Cox (2013); it presents environmental realities in the ideological and emotional light. It affects the audience in the context of the interpretation and action of ecological issues.

One of the strongest ways of conveying ecological crisis is documentary cinema, which has the power to narrate and affect the audience with a narrative approach. In this regard, Eco linguistics offers an informative

input towards the comprehension of the ways in which language creates ecological realities. It explores how linguistic patterns influence human attitudes towards the environment. More specifically, it investigates how certain discourses construct or destroy the web of life. As Stibbe (2021) explains in the “stories we live by”, the central concern of Eco linguistics is rooted in the underlying narratives, metaphors, and frames that influence human thought and behaviors. These stories are embedded in everyday communication and cultural practices. They determine whether human beings consider nature as a living community to coexist with or an entity to control and exploit.

From this perspective, the current study seeks to assess how the discourse of documentary film depicts climate change with a special emphasis on metaphors, frames, and genre conventions. There have been few studies that have already analysed the ways climate change is presented i.e. climatic justice approach (Dreher & Voyer 2015, Viherala 2008). However, the present study employs framing, metaphor and documentary modes particularly expository mode given by Nichols to conceptualize the discourse of Netflix documentary “A life on our planet” by David Attenborough from ecological perspective. It investigates the story of climate crisis through the perception and interpretation of the frames metaphor and mode of narration used in the documentary. The goals of the study are to explore the framing techniques utilized for the climate crisis with reference to the ecolinguistic framework Stibbe (2021) and **Nichols’ documentary modes** to reveal how climate change is metaphorically framed and how these frames and metaphors are communicated and reinforced through Attenborough's Netflix documentary.

This study, through an Eco linguistic analysis of stories and a genre-based inquiry, develops an interdisciplinary approach to the study of environmental discourse. It shows how the ecological meanings of the documentary emerge out of dynamic interactions of language, narrative and style. This method adds to the field of Eco linguistics through the extension of its analytical focus to cover cinematic texts in which verbal and visual narration merge to create moral and emotional feelings. Additionally, it seeks to explore not only as a documentary movie but as a life affirming story that redefines the human role in the biosphere. It examines how such cultural texts can promote ecological awareness and help to rethink the ethics of coexistence in a time of crisis by determining and critiquing the “stories we live by” that underlie its discourse

The study addresses following research questions:

1. What linguistic frames and metaphors are employed in *this documentary* to convey ecological concerns?
2. How does the expository documentary mode structure narration and evidence to present these ecological issues?
3. Why does the integration of linguistic strategies (frames and metaphors) with the expository documentary mode enhance the communication of ecological and environmental arguments?

2. Literature Review

In recent decades, the academic literature dedicated to the topic of media coverage of climate change has greatly increased since other researchers state that the media significantly influence the way people perceive and know the climate crisis by Boykoff and Roberts (2007) and Schafer and Schlichting (2014). Past studies on climate change have majorly taken two orientations of study that were mostly academic orientations. The former is based on journalism and communication science and studies the way climate-related information is created, framed and broadcasted via media. The second movement is also linguistic and examines the role played by language in the construction of climate reality, the support of climate discourse and allowance of climate governance, especially by using techniques like critical discourse analysis and ecological discourse analysis.

Documentaries have been cited as the effective way to involve both individuals and groups in the actions of taking action on climate with the help of images, narration, emotional appeals, and voices of celebrities Manzo (2017). The reviews of documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Gasland*, and *The Age of the Stupid* indicate that it can be more effective to present climate change as a challenge that requires solutions, advantages, and opportunities than as an issue and a threat only as stated by Beattie et al. (2011) Cooper and Nisbet (2016); Howell (2011) Jacobsen (2011), Manzo (2017) and Nolan (2010).

In the context of linguistics, ecolinguistics has become a multi-disciplinary area where various methods are used to advance ecological identities and study language on a more ecological basis Steffensen and Fill (2014). Bang and Trampe (2014) theorize the concept of ecolanguage in two folds: one, use of conventional linguistic sources about ecological texts and discourses, and two, the larger conceptualization about the impact of language in the whole package of ecology. Stibbe (2014) continues this thought and adds that ecolinguistics is focused on studying the whole ecological system and the interaction of itself with the natural environment and separates between the discourses promoting ecological protection and those that are helpful to explore ecological destruction (p. 117).

Much specific attention has been given to metaphors, framing, narratives, and stories in environmental issues in media representations by ecolinguistic research as argued by Stibbe (2015), Kuha (2018), Penz (2022). The assessment of frames is on the basis of whether they evoke intrinsic or extrinsic values that correspond to environmentally destructive or environmental advantageous behaviours. Hansen (2018) used a multi-modal method to understand climate change visual representations, whereas the analysis by Nerlich is largely based on the media discourse analysis, especially on the news coverage of carbon reduction in the UK Nerlich et al. (2012). Penz (2022) shows that there are problems in communicating the uncertainties of climate and providing the population with an understanding of complicated and environmental issues.

Later on, ecolinguistic approaches have been used to analyze climatic change documentaries. Stibbe (2021) suggests that the concept of a story we live by as the combination of critical discourse analysis, cognitive science, social psychology, identity theory, and appraisal theory can be integrated with the concept of ecolinguistics in an integrative ecolinguistic model. With the help of this framework, Abbas and Janjua (2023) analyze the documentary and prove the importance of frame strategies and trigger words that form perceptions of climate change among the audience. Researching their findings, they have discovered that the documentary builds eco-centric signification by using certain linguistic frames, which reinforce environmental consciousness and provoke restructuring in order to follow the trend toward anthropocentric world. This study emphasizes the importance of language-based framing in documentaries as one of the ways to develop eco-centric knowledge about the climate crisis.

Despite the fact that communication in climate change has received much attention in media, linguistics, and documentary studies, the area has mostly been addressed independently. The role of documentaries in influencing public participation has been examined in media studies, frames and metaphors contributing to ecological views on the world have been dealt with by ecolinguistics, and genre conventions (triggering expository mode, with authoritative narration and evidentiary structures) have been found in documentary research Stibbe (2015). However, we have given minimal attention to the role linguistic strategies serve to display the concrete documentary mode and the question of the interaction of framing, metaphor, and expository story has not been debated extensively. This paper bridges that gap by examining the documentary analyzing both ecolinguistic and expository mode to uncover how structures, reinforcement, and legitimization of frames and metaphors are achieved using narrative and evidentiary conventions. By doing this, it would be a contribution to ecolinguistics as it demonstrates the interaction between language and documentary form to form convincing, ethically grounded environmental reports and would provide a more holistic perspective on climate change communication.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze this documentary Attenborough (2020), this study uses two complementing theoretical frameworks: documentary genre theory Nichols (1991) and ecolinguistics Stibbe, (2015). A lens for analyzing how language creates environmental realities and influences how ecological challenges are perceived is provided by ecolinguistics. Stibbe (2015) emphasises the importance of metaphor and framing in conveying sustainability and environmental responsibility, arguing that discourse both reflects and and shaped human relationships with the natural world. Researchers can understand how language choices in environmental narratives convey ethical, scientific and emotional relevance by recognising frames of crises, interdependence and finite resources. Metaphors like “all the evaluation undone” or a series of one-way doors” help to make difficult ecological concepts understandable and compelling, encouraging awareness and action Stibbe, (2015)

Using Nichol’s conceptualization of documentaries as dynamic social structures, the study simultaneously places this documentary within a documentary genre. According to Nichol’s (1991), documentaries are dynamic institutions made up of texts, viewers and a community of practitioners, with narrative techniques and conventions that change over time. He identifies three interconnected viewpoints that influence the creation and interpretation of documentaries: the spectator, the text, and the filmmaker. From a textual standpoint, documentaries follow an informative logic in which reasoning is supported and audience comprehension is guided by narrative structure, editing and commentary that provides the audience with an interpretation of historical and environmental (Nichols,1991).

This study investigates how language, metaphor and narrative norms combine to create compelling and morally conscious environmental storytelling by fusing ecolinguistic analysis with Nichols’ documentary framework. A comprehensive comprehension of how this documentary frames crises, conveys ecological information, and creates meaning within the documentary genre is made possible by the combination of these two frameworks.

4. Research Methodology

In order to examine linguistic and narrative techniques in the documentary, this study uses a qualitative research design. It focuses on framing, metaphor and documentary mode. Without discussing audience reception or interpretation, the goal is to investigate how language and genre contribute to ecological consciousness. Because it enables a thorough, context sensitive analysis of textual and discursive elements, qualitative research is suitable as stated by Crewell and Poth, (2018).

The documentary’s subtitle transcript, which offers a trustworthy textual record of Attenborough’s narration, serves as the study’s data source independent of audiovisual elements Using ecolinguistic principles, the textual dataset is examined, paying particular emphasis to how linguistic decisions- specifically, metaphor and framing- create environmental meaning Stibbe (2021). Ecolinguistics is especially useful how examining how environmental challenges are portrayed and conveyed through speech because it highlights how language shapes human-nature relationships stibbe (2021).

The analysis is conducted on two related dimensions. In accordance with accepted methods in ecolinguistic analysis, the study first defines and classifies prevalent ecological frames and metaphors such as crisis, interdependence, and scarce resources stibbe (2021). The rhetorical and evaluative role of each frame in expressing ecological concerns is analysed. In order to comprehend how narrator’s authoritative voice, evidentiary arguments, and global framing support the film’s persuasive and instructive objectives, the documentary’s expository mode as- denied by Nichol (2010)- is examined. This involves paying attention to how historical sequencing, voice of authority narration, and evidentiary editing arrange facts and visuals to support the main point Nichol (2010).

In order to give comprehensive knowledge of the documentary’s narrative techniques, he methodology combines linguistic and genre-based analysis. The study takes into consideration both the macro level

narrative structure and micro level language choices collectively construct the film’s ecological message by fusing frame/metaphor analysis with documentary mode analysis. A strong framework for comprehending the documentaries is then established by interpreting the results in light of theoretical insights from ecolinguistics and documentary studies by Stibbe (2021), Nichols (2010).

5. Data Analysis

The transcript of this documentary serves as the primary data. In this part, qualitative discourse analysis of the documentary focused on how linguistic framing, metaphor, and documentary mode work together to communicate ecological concerns. The existing analysis draws on the documentary’s subtitle transcript and is guided by ecolinguistic theory Stibbe (2015) and Nichols’ (2010) expository documentary mode. Rather than isolated linguistic instances attention is given to recurring patterns of meaning.

5.1 Ecological Frames in the Narrative

Through this analysis three dominant ecological frames emerge from the narration: crisis, interdependence, and finite resources. These frames organise how environmental problems are named, explained, and evaluated throughout the documentary.

Table 1. Dominant Ecological Frames in *the Documentary*

Frame	Linguistic Characteristics	Illustrative Examples (Subtitle Data)	Discursive Function
Crisis	Lexical items signaling urgency, irresponsibility, loss	“one-way doors,” “the natural world is fading,” “irreversible change”	Constructs environmental degradation as immediate and severe
Interdependence	Systemic metaphors, collective nouns, causal chains	“life-support machine,” “all that evolution undone”	Emphasizes ecological interconnectedness
Finite Resources	Temporal/metaphorical contrasts, evaluative language of loss	“Garden of Eden,” “a habitat that is dead in comparison”	Highlights ecological limits and unsustainability

In this analysis, the crisis frame is the most pervasive, foregrounding environmental decline as both rapid and human induced. The use of expressions such as “one-way doors” frames ecological damage as irreversible, discouraging complacency while reinforcing ethical responsibility.

The interdependence frame presents ecosystems as integrated systems rather than isolated entities. Describing Earth as a “finely tuned life-support machine” positions humans as embedded within ecological processes rather than external controllers, aligning with ecolinguistic calls to challenge anthropocentric discourse Stibbe, (2015).

The finite resources frame opposes past abundance with the present reduction. Narration uses the metaphors of loss and decay to emphasize the effects of over-exploitation and disorient the stories of boundless growth.

5.2 Ecological Meaning Constructed Metaphorically

Metaphors are important cognitive and evaluative instruments with the help of which abstract ecological processes turn into intelligible. Instead of ornamental language, the metaphors organize the environmental argument in the documentary in a systematic manner.

Table 2. Metaphorical Patterns and Ecological Meanings

Metaphor Type	Example Expressions	Conceptual Mapping	Ecological Implication
Mechanical/System	“life-support machine”	Earth as a regulated system	Fragility and dependence
Life/Death	“the ocean starts to die”	Ecosystems as living entities	Moral urgency and loss
Temporal Loss	“all that evolution undone”	Time as irreversible	Long-term consequences
Edenic Past	“Garden of Eden”	Nature as lost paradise	Contrast between past and present

These comparisons make it possible to reduce the complex scientific processes into clear conceptual forms through narration. Notably, crisis frame implementation is supported by metaphors of death and irreversibility, whereas interdependence frame is supported by metaphors of system. They both lead interpretation in ethical accountability as opposed to neutral observation.

5.3 Expository Mode, Documentary and Linguistic Authority

Existing documentary is a good example of such expository documentary mode (Nichols, 2010, 2017) since

Table 3: Expository Documentary Tools in the Film

Expository Tool (Nichols)	Description	Example from the Documentary	Function in Narrative
Voice-of-God Narration	Authoritative commentary addressing the audience	“We rely entirely on this finely tuned life-support machine.”	Establishes scientific and moral authority; guides interpretation
Historical Sequencing	Linear presentation of events across time	Decade-by-decade progression from 1937 to projected futures beyond 2100	Demonstrates cumulative environmental decline and cause-effect relationships
Evidentiary Editing	Integration of visuals and scientific data to support claims	Statistics on population, carbon levels, wilderness loss; archival footage of species and habitats	Provides empirical credibility; reinforces argument with observable evidence
Cause-and-Effect Logic	Clear explanation of human-induced environmental change	Deforestation → species loss; overfishing → ocean collapse	Frames environmental crisis as preventable and human-induced

it applies authoritative narration, logical sequencing, evidence-based imagery, and cause and effect argument to inform and convince the audience about the loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation. The continuous narration of the documentary enables the audience to trace complicated ecological engagements as they comprehend the ethical and scientific repercussions of action among humans.

Explanation

The documentary makes use of voice of God narration, in the form of the calm, authoritative commentary by Attenborough, which guides the viewers in the interpretation, and creates the credibility, both ethical and scientific, of the documentary. The urgency and responsibility of the human being in the relationship with the nature of the world is supported by the narration as the factual information is presented and the moral commentary is made. This position of authority also makes the viewers understand the gravity of environmental degradation without any doubt.

Attentional sequencing of history makes the personal life experiences of Attenborough consistent with the world environmental measurements, including population explosion, carbon emission, and disappearance of wildness. The chronological presentation of the story from the early 20th century to the future projections beyond 2100 helps the film to show the accretive and accelerating impacts of human activity so that the viewers could see the change of ecology not as a one-time event but as the logical result of the system of human activity.

With evidentiary editing, the documentary splices in archive footage, nature visuals and spreadsheets to back up its assertions. The conjunction of visual and numerical proof serves rhetorically to justify the story, as it closes off subjective experience against objective measurement. In addition to concrete examples, such as species decline and habitat loss, strengthens the persuasive impact of the expository mode that provides tangible proof of ecological consequences.

In conclusion, the logic of cause and effect is meticulously used to link human actions with environmental consequences. It directly connects actions like deforestation, overfishing and fossil fuel use to a collapse of the natural world, the documentary presents ecological degradation as both predictable and avoidable. This argumentative code serves to educate and to stimulate an ethical form of reflection due to its audience.

These elements all work together to build a unified and effective expository argument. By combining authoritative voice, chronological plot, empirical evidence, and causal argumentation the documentary manages to teach its audience complex ecological processes in a way that is understandable but also ethic oriented. The data analysis highlights the importance of Nichols' expository mode as a model for how documentaries articulate scientific and moral arguments with clarity and rhetorical force.

5.4 Integration of Frames, Metaphors, and Documentary Mode

This analysis of film demonstrates that linguistic frames and metaphors do not operate independently of genre. Rather than they are embedded within the expository structure, where authoritative narratives organize meaning and ethical interpretation. By this data analysis frames establish thematic focus on the other hand metaphors shape conceptual understanding, and finally documentary mode ensure coherence and argumentative clarity.

6. Findings

According to the findings of this research, the documentary has a systematic and integrated discourse strategy of communicating ecological issues. Instead of applying individual rhetorical tools, the documentary builds meaning by creating a clash between framing, metaphor, and expository narration.

To begin with, environmental degradation is consistently presented in the documentary as a pressing, structural, and manmade phenomenon. The crisis frame dominance predicts irreversibility whereas

interdependence recast human beings as a part of ecological systems as opposed to isolated observers. This is in line with the ecolinguistic attempts to break anthropocentric and exploitative histories Stibbe (2015).

Second, metaphors are in the middle of constructing ecological knowledge. The narration makes abstract scientific data morally charged discourse by imagining earth as life-support system, and ecosystem as entities that are alive. These metaphors not only help to make the complex simple but also help in moral judgment to enforce the sense of responsibility and accountability.

Thirdly, the expository mode in documentary amplifies the persuasive impact of these linguistic strategies. Authoritative voice-of-God narration, historical sequencing, evidentiary editing, and cause-and-effect logic work together to legitimize ecological claims, and it directly links to human action and consequences. Through coherent explanatory framework, the expository mode ensures that metaphors and frames are interpreted as factual, evidence-based, and morally compelling rather than purely subjective commentary

Finally, the integration of linguistic strategies with documentary genre enhances ecological communication by linking knowledge, ethics, and agency. The findings suggest that environmental documentaries can function as powerful sites of ecological meaning-making when language and genre are strategically aligned. This reinforces the value of combining ecolinguistic analysis with documentary studies to better understand how environmental discourses shape public ecological awareness. The following discussion will consider the implications of this integrated discourse strategy for public engagement with environmental issues and the potential limitations of the expository mode in fostering critical ecological agency.

7. Conclusion

In summing up, this paper has shown that the documentary effectively uses linguistic framing and metaphor strategies in conjunction with the exposition type of documentary to convey ecological and environmental problems. Frames such as crisis, interdependence and finite resource are supported with metaphors such as a series of one-way doors and all that evolution undone, to emphasize the urgency and ethical importance of ecological degradation. Moreover, the expository mode with its authoritative telling and evidentiary sequencing, organizes the discourse in a manner that leads to interpretation, puts in place both historical and current information, and reinforces the persuasive and educational effectiveness of the documentary. Last but not least, the findings are used to support the importance of using linguistic tools, along with genre-related conventions, to help imbue environmental realities with complexity. By demonstrating the importance of strategic narration and framing in improving understanding and ethical reflection, this study will now add to ecolinguistics and documentary research. Further studies may build on the study by using several documentaries to study the regularity and variability of the strategies of framing and narration in environmental communication.

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