

Linguistics And Sustainability: A View

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Abstract

Sustainable, according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, is, i.e. ‘able to continue without causing damage to the environment’. I believe Knowledge is sustainable, regardless of its form. The tradition of knowledge, beginning with Mahadeva (Lord Shiva), was carried forward by Sage Ved Vyas. Sustainability is generally understood through environmental science, economics, and policy, yet linguistics, i.e. ‘a scientific and systematic study of language’, is humanity’s primary medium of communication. It plays an equally foundational role in shaping sustainable societies. This paper explores the thematic connections between linguistics and sustainability, focusing on how linguistic practices impact environmental awareness, preserve ecological knowledge, shape public discourse, and support inclusive sustainability policies. By examining indigenous knowledge systems, environmental communication, digital media, and global governance, the paper argues that language is not merely a weapon for describing sustainability but a driving force that determines how societies conceptualise, negotiate, and act upon environmental challenges.

Keywords: Linguistics, Language, Sustainability, environment, media

Introduction

Sustainability has become a defining global priority as nations confront climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality. While scientific innovation and policy frameworks are essential, the role of language is often overlooked. Language shapes how people understand environmental issues, how communities mobilize, and how knowledge is transmitted across generations. It influences public perception, political will, and cultural attitudes toward nature.

This thematic research paper examines the relationship between language and sustainability through multiple lenses: environmental communication, linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge, policy, and digital discourse. It argues that language is central to sustainable development because it frames environmental realities, preserves ecological wisdom, and enables inclusive participation in global sustainability efforts.

Language promotes sustainability by shaping perceptions, e.g. enabling knowledge transfer, especially through indigenous wisdom (1), fostering empathy through storytelling, driving behaviour change, ensuring inclusivity for diverse voices facilitating global collaboration on complex issues, thereby supporting education, policy and community action for environmental and social goals. Language builds bridge and facilitates

communication across cultures and disciplines, translating complex science and uniting global efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015, created 17 Worlds Sustainable Development Goals. The aim of these goals is peace and prosperity for the people and the planet. Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 is Quality Education.

Language and Environmental Awareness

Language is nature’s gift to us, humans, and we use it to talk about the world, and we talk about not just the physical world, but what it means to us as well. Thus, at the same time, we live in twin worlds: the world of the senses and the world of meanings. As we talk about us, we talk about the self and the other, about the way we relate to the world and to one another, the way we negotiate with the world and with each other. Furthermore, we use language, among other things, to reflect on our use of language; as a result, we have theories of language use: theories of communication and miscommunication, of information and making sense of information, of saying things pleasantly and offensively and of manipulating language to influence opinion.

Environmental Issues

The language used to define environmental problems outlines how societies receive them. Concepts such as climate change, global warming, climate emergency, and climate crisis evoke different levels of urgency. The environmental issues influence: Public concern at a large level, noticeable policy support, Media narratives and undoubtedly behavioural change.

For example, calling plastic pollution a “global threat” rather than a “waste management issue” shifts responsibility from individuals to systems, prompting broader policy discussions.

Environmental Communication

Environmental communication turns scientific knowledge into accessible language. Effective communication streamlines intricate concepts, uses descriptions and chronicles to make issues significant, boosts pro-environmental behaviour, mobilises communities during crises.

Concise language can influence large populations via campaigns like “Reduce, Reuse, recycle” or “Save Water, Save Life”, in a way energy is saved.

Language and Environmental Education

To communicate ecological concepts, promote sustainable values and to encourage critical thinking, environmental education counts heavily on language. In rural and indigenous regions especially, using native languages in environmental education increases understanding and acceptability as well as community engagement.

Linguistic Diversity and Ecological Knowledge

Native Languages as Ecological Repositories

Native languages encode centuries of ecological knowledge that includes names of plants, animals, and ecosystems; Traditional farming (small scale farming or subsistence farming) and fishing techniques; Seasonal indicators and climate patterns; Sustainable

resource management practices. This knowledge is often absent from scientific literature but indispensable for biodiversity conservation.

Language Loss and Environmental Decline

Linguistic diversity and biodiversity often overlap geographically. When a language becomes endangered, i.e. there is no speaker left, the ecological knowledge embedded within it is lost. This contributes to the waning of traditional ecological practices, loss of sustainable land-use systems and weakening of cultural identity. Thus, language preservation is an environmental priority.

Oral Traditions and Sustainability

To transmit ecological wisdom many native communities, depend on oral traditions such as heresies, stories, songs, and proverbs, etc. These narratives teach us respect for nature, i.e. how to save nature, Intergenerational responsibility and harmony between humans and the environment. Oral traditions function as cultural tools for sustainability. They serve as dynamic reservoir for place-based ecological understanding. They encode information about local ecosystems, including weather patterns, plant and animal behaviours, resource management techniques, and disaster preparedness.

Language Policy and Sustainability

Multilingualism and Inclusive Sustainability

Sustainability initiatives, when communicated only in dominant languages they are bound to collapse. Multilingual policies guarantee wider participation of people, better and improved understanding of environmental programs, inclusion of marginalized communities as well as cultural sensitivity. For example, disaster warnings, any other social issues issued in multiple languages save lives by reaching diverse populations.

Secondly, India is a multilingual country. Different contexts of Indian plurality are noticed in the context of speech communication. Speech behaviour in a society is modulated according to the roles and attitudes of participants, the settings and channels of communication, situational expediency and the communication tasks performed. In unilingual ‘standardised’ societies variation due to stratification may be limited to narrow spectrum of speech behaviour. This spectrum becomes much wider when the society is either multilingual with its members controlling several distinct languages, or is made up of fluid speech groups, with its members claiming different speech identities in response to changing contexts. The magnitude of functional heterogeneity in communication in the subcontinent testifies the strength of linguistic plurality built over the ages. Multilingual societies have a wider access to intra-group, inter-group, and inter-cultural communication without fully committing themselves to learn the “traditional bound” standardised nuances of another language or culture such as the use of Lingua Franca Hindustani in South Asia. South Asia abounds with many plural speech communities which though functioning through diverse speech varieties show a remarkable degree of homogeneity in their overall communication values. In multilingual and multidialectal societies many speech groups have virtual native control over more than one language or dialect.

Literature and Sustainability

Literature works through a special force of language. Poetry (a form of literature) is read at births, weddings and funerals. It is used to commemorate wars and celebrate nations. Poetry gives the most intense and memorable expression of the feelings that we cannot otherwise express. Reading, conversation and accumulated knowledge are the essence of literary life. Literature is normally serious. It is often concerned with the same questions as Philosophy. What makes a good life, how do we live well, what matters most? Life is journey. Literature is our means of making senses of the journey, i.e. a sustainable one.

Language in Global Governance

International sustainability frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), depend on Specific and Clear terminology, Accurate translation and Cross-cultural communication. Global sustainability efforts risk is becoming top-down and ineffective without linguistic inclusivity.

Legal and Policy Language

Environmental laws rely on accurate language. Ambiguous wording can lead to Weak implementation in terms of Misinterpretation and Loopholes. For strong environmental governance, linguistic clarity, consistency and economy are indispensable.

Media, Discourse, and Environmental Narratives

Media Representation of Sustainability

In determining public understanding of sustainability, the media plays a vital role. The language used in news, documentaries, and social media influence’s public opinion, political pressure and consumer behaviour at a large scale. Narratives that emphasise urgency, justice, and collective responsibility tend to mobilise stronger action.

Discursive Construction of Nature

Different cultures conceptualise nature differently through language. Some view nature as a resource, others as a living entity. A piece of conversation is an instance of discourse, using the term “discourse” for both spoken material and written text. These discourses influence environmental ethics, policy priorities, as well as conservation strategies.

Understanding these discourses helps create culturally grounded sustainability solutions.

Greenwashing and Manipulative Language

To appear environmentally responsible, corporations sometimes use misleading language. Terms like “eco-friendly,” “natural,” or “green” may be used without evidence. This undermines consumer trust, genuine sustainability efforts and environmental accountability. Critical language awareness is essential to counter greenwashing.

Digital Communication and Sustainability

Social Media as a Platform for Environmental Activism

By connecting global audiences, social media strongly raises environmental awareness, simplifying complex issues with visuals, mobilising movements and fostering community action through shared content. Digital platforms advance sustainability messages through, Hashtag movements (#FridaysForFuture), Online petitions, Climate

education content at all levels of education and Youth activism. According to Patrick Svennson, a Digital Humanities scholar, “It is an integral part of life in large parts of the world, an increasing amount of material is digital, and digital media offer expressive potential.” That is digital humanities too supports sustainability. Language spreads quickly online, shaping global environmental consciousness.

Misinformation and Climate Denial

Digital spaces also spread misinformation. Misleading language can challenge scientific consensus, create public confusion and ultimately lead to delayed policy action. Therefore, digital literacy is a crucial component of sustainability.

The Role of Translation in Global Digital Campaigns

Environmental campaigns must be translated into multiple languages to reach global audiences. Poor translation can misrepresent meaning, while an accurate and exact translation strengthens universal harmony.

Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

1. Revitalising endangered languages
2. Integrating local languages into environmental education
3. Developing clear, inclusive sustainability terminology
4. Strengthening digital environmental literacy
5. Using storytelling to promote sustainable values

Challenges

1. Language barriers in sustainability communication
2. Loss of indigenous languages and ecological knowledge
3. Technical jargon that excludes non-experts
4. Greenwashing through manipulative language
5. Digital misinformation

Conclusion

Language is a controlling force shaping how societies understand, communicate, and act upon sustainability challenges. It impacts environmental awareness, preserves ecological knowledge, and determines the inclusiveness of sustainability initiatives. Recognising language as a central pillar of sustainability allows policymakers, educators, and communities to design more effective, culturally grounded, and equitable environmental strategies.

Sustainability is not only a scientific or political challenge—it is a linguistic one. By valuing linguistic diversity, improving environmental communication, and integrating local languages into sustainability efforts, humanity can build a more resilient and sustainable future. The preservation of linguistic diversity is intrinsically linked to the preservation of cultural and ecological knowledge. Effective and just sustainability policies require the inclusion of all linguistic groups, especially minority and indigenous populations, in policy making and implementation. Multilingual education, especially in Mother Tongues (MT) (2), is an indispensable tool for improving access to quality education.

Notes

- a) Revival of Nalanda University at Rajgir, Bihar.
- b) Mother Tongue is also known as First Language.

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