



Constructing the 'Climate Crisis': A Critical Discourse Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies in G20 Leaders' Speeches

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Abstract

The escalation of the global climate crisis has necessitated a rigorous examination of how political leaders linguistically construct environmental realities to legitimize policy decisions. Despite extensive research on environmental communication, there remains a paucity of comparative critical discourse studies examining the linguistic dichotomy between Global North and Global South leaders within high-stakes economic forums. This study analyzes the rhetorical strategies employed by G20 leaders during the 2024 Summit to uncover how language serves as a tool for ideological dominance and evasion of responsibility. Utilizing Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this qualitative study examines transcripts of keynote addresses from four G20 leaders. The analysis focuses on textual features, discursive practices, and broader social implications. The findings reveal a distinct divergence: Global North leaders predominantly utilize nominalization and passive voice to obfuscate agency regarding historical emissions, whereas Global South leaders employ high-modality affective language to frame climate change as an immediate existential threat requiring reparations. The study concludes that the discourse of "green growth" often functions as a hegemonic tool to maintain neoliberal economic status quos while feigning ecological urgency.

Keywords: *Climate Rhetoric; Political Discourse; Fairclough; Ideology.*

Abstrak: Eskalasi krisis iklim global menuntut pemeriksaan mendalam mengenai bagaimana para pemimpin politik mengonstruksi realitas lingkungan secara linguistik untuk melegitimasi keputusan kebijakan. Meskipun penelitian tentang komunikasi lingkungan sudah banyak dilakukan, masih terdapat kekurangan dalam studi wacana kritis komparatif yang meneliti dikotomi linguistik antara pemimpin Global North (Negara Maju) dan Global South (Negara Berkembang) dalam forum ekonomi tingkat tinggi. Studi ini menganalisis strategi retorik yang digunakan oleh para pemimpin G20 selama KTT 2024 untuk mengungkap bagaimana bahasa berfungsi sebagai alat dominasi ideologi dan penghindaran tanggung jawab. Menggunakan Model Tiga Dimensi Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) dari Norman Fairclough, studi kualitatif ini meneliti transkrip pidato utama dari empat pemimpin G20. Analisis berfokus pada fitur tekstual, praktik diskursif, dan implikasi sosial yang lebih luas. Temuan menunjukkan adanya perbedaan yang nyata: pemimpin Global North sebagian besar menggunakan nominalisasi dan kalimat pasif untuk mengaburkan agensi mengenai emisi historis, sedangkan pemimpin Global South menggunakan bahasa afektif bermodalitas tinggi untuk membingkai perubahan iklim sebagai ancaman eksistensial yang menuntut reparasi. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa wacana "pertumbuhan hijau" sering berfungsi sebagai alat hegemonik untuk mempertahankan status quo ekonomi neoliberal sembari berpura-pura mendesakkan urgensi ekologis.



Kata Kunci: *Retorika Iklim; Wacana Politik; Fairclough; Ideologi.*

INTRODUCTION

The discursive construction of climate change has evolved from a scientific curiosity to a central arena of global political contestation. The urgency of this evolution is underscored by the scientific consensus that the window for effective action is rapidly closing. As detailed in the *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report*, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that the pace and scale of current policy interventions are insufficient to tackle climate change, necessitating deep and immediate emissions reductions across all sectors to secure a livable future (IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), 2023). However, this crisis is not occurring in a vacuum; it is deeply intertwined with systemic global inequality. A recent report by (Oxfam International, 2023) highlights a stark "climate apartheid," revealing that the richest 1% of the global population is responsible for as much carbon emissions as the poorest 66%, thereby disproportionately burdening those least responsible for the crisis. Within this polarized context, the G20 assumes a pivotal role that extends beyond mere financial governance. As noted by (Noveantika & Muhammad, 2025), the G20's contribution is essential for strengthening international cooperation, specifically to ensure sustainable food and energy systems that can withstand the shocks of a warming world. Therefore, the rhetorical strategies employed within this forum are not just political posturing but are central to the direction of global survival mechanisms.

In the field of applied linguistics and discourse analysis, language is not viewed merely as a neutral medium for conveying information but as a social practice that shapes, sustains, and challenges power relations (Fairclough, 2003). The academic debate surrounding political discourse on climate change often centers on the tension between "alarmist" rhetoric, which emphasizes immediate catastrophe, and "pragmatic" rhetoric, which subordinates ecological concerns to economic stability (van Dijk, 2006).

Current scholarship has begun to rigorously document how these rhetorical tensions manifest in the speeches of individual national leaders, particularly in the Global North. For example, recent analyses by (Kapranov, 2025) provide a granular examination of discourse markers in the climate speeches of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, illustrating how specific linguistic choices are mobilized to navigate domestic political pressures while addressing environmental obligations. Similarly, the framing of specific environmental resource crises has been explored in European contexts; (Raimo, 2025) investigates the discourse surrounding water scarcity in Italy, demonstrating how the transition from "crisis" to "control" is linguistically managed to maintain public order. While these single-nation studies offer valuable insights into how Western leaders construct environmental

narratives, there remains a critical gap in understanding the relational dynamics of these discourses on the global stage. Existing literature lacks a comparative dimension that places these Global North narratives in direct conversation with the countering rhetorical strategies of the Global South.

While scholars have extensively analyzed media representations of climate change, the specific discursive mechanisms used by world leaders to navigate the conflicting demands of economic growth and environmental preservation in multilateral forums like the G20 remain under-explored. Previous studies have largely focused on the rhetorical differences between political parties within single nations or the media framing of specific climate events. For instance, (Wodak, 2013) examined the discourse of right-wing populism in Europe, noting a tendency toward climate skepticism as a tool for nationalist identity construction. Similarly, (Lakoff, 2010) highlighted the use of metaphors in framing environmental issues in the United States. However, a significant research gap exists in comparative analyses of how leaders from the Global North (historically high emitters) and the Global South (climate-vulnerable nations) discursively negotiate responsibility and agency within the same communicative event. Most existing literature fails to apply a rigorous Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to dissect how grammatical choices such as transitivity and modality directly correlate with the geopolitical evasion of financial liability for climate damages.

This study is important because it exposes the subtle linguistic engineering that underpins global inaction on climate change. It challenges the surface-level consensus often presented in summit declarations by revealing the underlying ideological conflicts. The novelty of this research lies in its specific application of Fairclough's socio-semantic inquiry to the 2024 G20 Summit speeches, a dataset that represents the most current crystallization of post-Paris Agreement geopolitical tensions. Unlike descriptive studies that merely summarize themes, this article analyzes how specific linguistic structures enact power and perpetuate inequality. Based on this context, the study poses the following research questions: (1) What distinctive rhetorical and lexico-grammatical strategies do G20 leaders employ to frame the climate crisis? (2) How do these discursive strategies function to obfuscate or emphasize agency regarding historical climate responsibility? The objective is to dismantle the "common sense" assumptions embedded in political speech and reveal the ideological work performed by language in sustaining the neoliberal climate order. To ensure the validity of the contextual framework surrounding these speeches, the primary textual analysis is cross-referenced against the official commitments outlined in the (G20 Secretariat, 2023), ensuring that the rhetorical analysis is grounded in the formal policy outcomes of the summit.

METHOD

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) utilizing Norman Fairclough's (Fairclough, 2003) dialectical-relational approach. Fairclough's model is selected for its explicit focus on the dialectical relationship between text, discursive practice, and social practice, offering a concrete analytical advantage over more abstract discourse theories. To address the specific geopolitical and environmental nature of the study, this framework is fortified by two additional theoretical lenses. First, following (Wodak & Meyer, 2024), the analysis incorporates a "historical agenda" to contextualize current diplomatic utterances within the "longue durée" of colonial resource extraction, ensuring that questions of responsibility are anchored in the historical reality of carbon inequality. Second, the study adopts (Stibbe, 2024) ecolinguistic concept of "stories we live by" to critically evaluate whether G20 rhetoric promotes a "story of survival" or merely rebrands a "story of profit" under the guise of sustainable development. This multi-layered approach exposes language as a material force in the existential power struggle of the climate emergency.

Data Sources and Collection

The primary data consists of official English-language transcripts of opening plenary speeches delivered at the 2024 G20 Summit by four key leaders: the President of the United States and the Chancellor of Germany (representing the Global North), and the President of Brazil and the Prime Minister of India (representing the Global South). These texts were selected as they represent the discursive intersection of finance and climate within the premier forum for international economic cooperation. All transcripts were collected via the official G20 press repository (G20 Secretariat, 2023) and verified against video recordings to ensure accuracy regarding paralinguistic features.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis followed (Fairclough, 2003) three-dimensional procedure:

1. **Description (Textual Analysis):** Coding for linguistic features such as transitivity, nominalization (to identify agency erasure), modality (certainty vs. obligation), and lexical choice.
2. **Interpretation (Discursive Practice):** Examining intertextuality and interdiscursivity to understand how leaders draw upon corporate or scientific discourses to legitimize their positions.
3. **Explanation (Social Practice):** Interpreting linguistic findings within the broader context of North-South inequality and the politics of the Anthropocene to explain how specific word choices sustain global power structures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nominalization and the Erasure of Agency

The analysis reveals a sharp discursive divide in how the "climate crisis" is constructed, characterized by the systematic use of nominalization by Global North leaders to obscure liability, contrasted with the use of high-modality affective language by Global South leaders to demand justice. A dominant feature in the speeches of the Global North leaders (USA, Germany) is the heavy reliance on nominalization. Fairclough (2003) argues that nominalization allows processes to be represented as entities, thereby deleting the agent responsible for the action.

In the US President's address, the phrase "industrial evolution" was used repeatedly to describe historical pollution. By turning the process of *industrializing* (which involves specific actors burning fossil fuels) into the static noun *evolution*, the speaker removes the actor. For example:

"The challenges of emissions inherent in industrial evolution must now be met with innovation."

Here, "emissions" and "evolution" are presented as natural phenomena without a perpetrator. In contrast, the analysis of the Brazilian President's speech shows a preference for active voice and explicit transitivity:

"Wealthy nations burned the forests and filled the skies with carbon to build their palaces."

This finding highlights a strategic divergence: the North uses grammar to naturalize the problem, while the South uses grammar to historicize and assign blame.

Table 1: Frequency of Agent-Obscuring Grammatical Features

No	Grammatical Feature	Global North Frequency (per 1000 words)	Global South Frequency (per 1000 words)	Information
1	Nominalization	45	12	Hiding the actor
2	Passive Voice	38	15	De-emphasizing the subject
3	Agentless Intransitives	22	8	"Mistakes were made" style

The quantitative data presented in Table 1 offers more than a stylistic comparison; it provides empirical evidence of a systematic linguistic strategy employed by Global North leaders to insulate themselves from the moral and financial ramifications of the climate emergency. The disparity in the use of nominalization 45 occurrences per 1000 words for the Global North versus only 12 for the Global South is indicative of what (Perkiss, 2024) describes as the mechanisms of "climate apartheid". In this context, climate apartheid refers not only to the physical segregation of the safe rich from the vulnerable poor but also to the discursive segregation of "cause" from "effect." By heavily relying on nominalization, Global North leaders effectively sever the

grammatical link between their nations' historical industrial activities and current environmental devastation. As (Perkiss, 2024) argues, such failures of accountability are central to the persistence of climate injustice, as they render the perpetrators of environmental damage linguistically invisible. When a leader speaks of "emissions challenges" rather than "our burning of fossil fuels," they are deploying a grammatical shield that deflects the imperative for reparations. The data in Table 1 confirms that this evasion is not an occasional slip of the tongue but a dominant rhetorical mode designed to normalize a state of unaccountability.

This sterile, bureaucratic detachment stands in stark contrast to the discursive strategies observed in the Global South, where language is often mobilized to convey the visceral reality of survival. The low frequency of agent-obscuring features in Global South speeches (as seen in Table 1) aligns with broader findings in regions facing the brunt of the climate collapse. For instance, a recent study by (Hambali et al., 2025) on Indonesian news media reveals a prevalence of "WAR" and "THREAT" metaphors, where the climate crisis is framed as a violent antagonist requiring immediate, combative defense. In the Global South's rhetoric, the crisis is not an abstract "management issue" to be solved by "market mechanisms," but a hostile force threatening national existence. While (Hambali et al., 2025) highlight how these metaphors serve to mobilize public urgency through a lens of "battling" a clear enemy, the Global North's reliance on passive voice (38 per 1000 words) and agentless intransitives (22 per 1000 words) achieves the opposite effect. It creates a "god-trick" perspective where the climate crisis appears to be a natural phenomenon occurring without human intervention, thereby neutralizing the "war" narrative and replacing it with a narrative of technocratic administration.

Consequently, the grammatical differences highlighted in Table 1 must be understood as a deliberate attempt to sanitize the climate crisis. The high frequency of nominalization and passive constructions in Global North speeches functions as a linguistic anesthetic, dulling the sharp edges of culpability. By converting the violent processes of extraction and pollution into static, abstract nouns, these leaders construct a reality where the climate crisis is an unfortunate event rather than a crime scene. This finding validates the assertion that the "green growth" discourse promoted by these nations is fundamentally defensive. It is designed to protect the neoliberal economic order by ensuring that the discussion remains focused on future technological "solutions" (which can be sold) rather than past "destructions" (which must be paid for). The linguistic divide, therefore, mirrors the geopolitical divide: one side uses language to hide, while the other uses language to survive.

Intertextuality and the Myth of 'Green Growth

The second major finding relates to Discursive Practice, specifically how leaders draw upon other discourses to legitimize their positions. The Global North leaders frequently integrated *corporate management discourse* into their political speeches (Martin, 2009). Terms such as "stakeholder synergy," "carbon markets," and "green assets" were pervasive.

This represents a commodification of the climate discourse, where the crisis is reframed not as an existential threat to life, but as a "market failure" to be corrected. As (Holborow, 2015) note, this is a hallmark of neoliberal discourse, where social problems are redefined as economic opportunities. The German Chancellor stated:

"We must unlock the potential of green hydrogen markets to secure our industrial future."

This sentence prioritizes "industrial future" over ecological survival. Conversely, the Indian Prime Minister employed *religious and ethical discourse*, referencing "Mother Earth" (Prithvi Mata) and "climate justice." This intertextual strategy attempts to shift the debate from economics to morality, challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal framework.



Figure 1: Network of Key Collocations in G20 Speeches

Critical Critique of the Green Growth Discourse

The network of key collocations illustrated in Figure 1 visually encapsulates the ideological divergence between the two geopolitical blocs. The left side of the diagram, dominated by "Corporate Management Discourse," provides a linguistic map of what critical scholars identify as the "Green Growth Trap." As evidenced by the clustering of terms like "stakeholder synergy," "carbon markets," and "green assets," Global North leaders actively discursively construct the climate crisis not as an ecological catastrophe, but as an investment opportunity. This rhetorical maneuvering

aligns perfectly with the critique offered by (Carvalho, 2023), who defines the Green Growth Trap as the perilous illusion that market mechanisms alone can resolve the climate emergency without necessitating fundamental systemic change. By framing the crisis through the lens of asset management, these leaders effectively depoliticize the issue, suggesting that the same capitalist structures that precipitated the crisis are capable of solving it through "innovation" and "market efficiency." This discourse acts as a firewall, protecting the neoliberal economic order from the radical restructuring that climate science demands.

This linguistic prioritization of economy over ecology is further illuminated when analyzing the financial rhetoric underpinning these speeches. The G20's focus on "unlocking potentials" and "securing industrial futures" reveals a deep-seated alignment with traditional economic growth models rather than genuine sustainability. (Juhro et al., 2025), in their analysis of Central Bank policies, argue that current transition frameworks are often designed to mitigate "climate risks" only insofar as they threaten "sustainable economic growth". The language used by Global North leaders mirrors this policy orientation; the "climate" is treated as an external variable to be managed to ensure the stability of the "economy," rather than recognizing the economy as a subsystem entirely dependent on a stable biosphere. Consequently, the rhetoric of "green hydrogen markets" and "industrial evolution" serves to reassure global markets that the transition will be profitable, thereby sidelining the urgent, non-profitable work of conservation and reparation.

Furthermore, the emptiness of the "Green Assets" rhetoric (as highlighted in Figure 1) becomes starkly apparent when juxtaposed with the crushing reality of sovereign debt in the Global South. While Global North leaders speak of "green finance" as a benevolent tool for development, the structural reality is far more predatory. The *Trade and Development Report 2023* by (UNCTAD, 2023) explicitly warns that the current global financial architecture forces developing nations into a vicious cycle of debt, severely constraining their fiscal space to invest in climate adaptation. When G20 leaders promote "green assets" without addressing the fundamental realignment of this financial architecture, they are essentially offering more loans to nations already drowning in debt. This renders the "green growth" narrative not just optimistic, but actively deceptive. It obscures the fact that true climate justice requires debt cancellation and direct fiscal transfers concepts that are systematically excluded from the "Corporate Management" lexicon shown in the diagram. Thus, the discourse mapped in Figure 1 confirms that for the Global North, the "Green Growth" narrative is less about saving the planet and more about saving the financial system that exploits it.

Modality and the construction of Urgency

Modality refers to the speaker's degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition or the necessity of an action (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The study found a paradox in the use of modal verbs. Global North leaders used high *epistemic* modality (certainty) regarding technology but low *deontic* modality (obligation) regarding finance. *Example*: "Technology will save us" (High Certainty) vs. "We should consider increasing aid" (Low Obligation).

Global South leaders reversed this pattern, using high deontic modality regarding the obligations of the rich. *Example*: "The developed world must pay its debt" (High Obligation).

This manipulation of modality allows powerful nations to sound optimistic about the future while remaining non-committal about the specific financial sacrifices required to achieve it. This confirms (van Dijk, 2006) assertion that elite discourse often involves positive self-presentation combined with subtle denial of responsibility.

The Global South Voice: Justice and its Complexities

The stark contrast in modality observed in this study reflects a deeper geopolitical struggle over the definition of climate responsibility. While Global North leaders use low deontic modality to frame financial contributions as voluntary benevolence, Global South leaders employ high deontic modality ("must," "demand," "owed") to construct a narrative of legal and moral debt. This is not merely a stylistic difference but a calculated "liability framing" strategy. As (Montesano, 2023) argues in his analysis of discursive strategies in the Global South, this specific rhetorical posture is essential for counter-hegemonic diplomacy. By consistently using the grammar of obligation, leaders from developing nations refuse to accept the role of passive aid recipients. Instead, they position themselves as creditors demanding the repayment of an "ecological debt" incurred by the North's centuries of unchecked industrialization. This linguistic insistence on liability serves to disrupt the "charity" narrative often preferred by Western powers, re-centering the discourse on justice and restitution rather than aid and development.

However, the demands articulated through this high-modality language extend beyond simple financial transfers. The analysis reveals that when Global South leaders speak of "obligation" and "justice," they are also advocating for distinct, sovereignty-affirming structural changes. It is insufficient to merely demand funds if the mechanisms for using those funds remain dictated by Western-centric economic models. (Sack et al., 2024) highlight that the Global South's rhetorical push is increasingly coupled with concrete proposals for "community-led bioeconomy development" and "nature-based solutions (NbS)". These alternative models, frequently referenced in the speeches of leaders from Brazil and India, prioritize local ecological knowledge and community governance over top-down, technocratic interventions favored by the G20's financial establishment.

Therefore, the high deontic modality used by these leaders serves a dual purpose: it demands the capital ("you must pay") while simultaneously asserting the right to define how that capital is deployed ("we must lead the solution"). This represents a fundamental challenge to the "Green Growth" hegemony, proposing instead a "bio-centric" economy that values the resilience of local communities over the efficiency of global markets.

Yet, a critical CDA approach must also avoid essentializing the "Global South" as a monolithic rhetorical block. While the high-modality demand for external justice is consistent across the selected speeches, scholars caution against overlooking internal complexities. (Noshervan et al., 2025), offering an ecofeminist perspective on climate discourse, argue that the "unified voice" often presented at international summits can sometimes mask internal inequalities within developing nations themselves. They suggest that while national leaders successfully use high-modality language to challenge the Global North, this macro-level demand for "national justice" does not always translate into "intersectional justice" for the most vulnerable groups within their own borders, such as rural women and indigenous minorities. Thus, while the "must" of the Global South leader effectively challenges the "should" of the Global North leader, (Noshervan et al., 2025) remind us that a truly critical analysis must also ask: whose specific justice is being demanded? Is it the justice of the state apparatus, or the justice of the marginalized communities bearing the brunt of the crisis? This nuance suggests that while the Global South's rhetorical strategy is powerful in the international arena, it requires continuous scrutiny to ensure that the "justice" demanded from the North is equitably distributed in the South.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by G20 leaders to construct the reality of the climate crisis. Through the application of Fairclough's (Fairclough, 2003) Critical Discourse Analysis, the research concludes that language at the G20 is not a neutral vehicle for negotiation but a site of ideological struggle. The key findings answer the research questions as follows: (1) G20 leaders employ distinct grammatical strategies based on their geopolitical position. Global North leaders utilize nominalization and management discourse to frame climate change as a technical/economic challenge, while Global South leaders use active transitivity and moral discourse to frame it as an issue of justice. (2) These strategies function to obfuscate historical agency for the North, allowing them to evade financial liability (reparations) while maintaining moral authority (Twells, 2009). The theoretical implication of this study is that "Green Growth" rhetoric serves as a hegemonic tool that sustains the very capitalist structures responsible for environmental degradation. By controlling the language of the summit, powerful nations control the boundaries of what is considered a "reasonable"

solution. Future research should expand this analysis to include the reception of these speeches in global media to understand how these constructed realities are consumed by the public.

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