

HARNESSING LANGUAGE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper conducts research into the linguistic techniques of the Nigerian environmental campaigns to promote climate and safe environment. The research study employed a qualitative research design, which involved the analysis of campaign materials in terms of posters, radio jingles, social media messages, and community outreach scripts in different regions in Nigeria. A content analysis was utilized to determine patterns of recurring language use. The study reveals that three major dimensions of language use are the application of emotional appeals, imperative statements and inclusion phrases to better appeal to the people; the use of storytelling, repetition of slogans and the use of scientific language to better understand the Nigerian diverse cultural and linguistic environment and the adaptability of the language style to the audience. Results highlight the necessity of culturally sensitive and audience-targeted communication to support environmental activism and mass action. The paper concludes that successful communications should be a balance between emotional appeal and technical comprehension, and should be adapted to the sociolinguistic realities of the audience targeted, to influence them to take a significant behavior change to more sustainable energy practice

Keywords: Language, Environmental Advocacy, Activism, Social media and Community outreach

Introduction

Language plays a critical role in shaping perceptions, influencing behavior, and mobilizing communities, especially in environmental advocacy. As challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution intensify, using language strategically becomes increasingly important. This analysis examines how language can effectively promote awareness and activism on environmental issues, drawing on relevant research and examples. The manner in which information is framed and viewed have a big effect on how the public will perceive and react. According to Entman (1993), framing is a process of choosing what to see in the perceived reality and focus on it in communication. Framing plays a key role in the concept of environmental advocacy where an issue is perceived as a crisis or a problem far away. Indicatively, the use of the concept of climate change as an existential threat has served to gain citizen interest (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Through the portrayal of urgency and seriousness, the advocates can create more support on the policies that will reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. According to Nisbet (2009), effective framing improves the involvement and backing of the people towards environmental programs. Language has an emotional resonance that is important. A language that causes intense feelings like fear or hope can inspire a course of action. Urgent and personal narratives can be made through vivid imagery and personal stories.

Moser and Dilling (2007) discovered that all narratives that humanize the effects of climate change such as the personal testimonies can be immensely helpful in increasing the engagement of the people. Metaphors are also constructive to the knowledge; when the Earth is described as a fragile planet, it can produce the desire to take care of it and behave in a sustainable way (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The social media has emerged as an effective medium of environmental campaign. Social media campaigns can be effective in mobilization and reaching large masses of people through language. Messages can be enhanced with the help of hashtags and viral content and community can be established. Greta Thunberg created the movement, which was called *Fridays For Future*, and was successful in using social media to organize youth activists and young children to take part in climate protests (Thunberg, 2019). According to Bruns and Burgess (2015), social media language may manipulate the discourse of the population and serve as a source of policy. Quick dissemination of information enables the advocates to refute misinformation and spread evidence-based stories.

It is difficult to ensure an inclusive and accessible language because jargon may cause supporters to feel excluded. Language inclusivity is critical towards having diversity and a stimulated movement. Language inequity may be used to discriminate against groups which prevents action by groups. In discourse on the environment, where western views are the dominant ones, Indigenous voices can be missing (Whyte, 2017). To achieve inclusivity, the advocates should employ

culturally appropriate language, recognize historical injustices, and communicate with the marginalized groups. Agyeman et al. (2016) refer to environmental justice, which deals with imbalanced effects of environmental degradation on vulnerable groups. Another important aspect in policy advocacy is good language. Explaining complicated scientific data can impact policymakers. The Intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC, 2021) has been participating in the communication of climate science to policy makers in easily accessible reports. Policies should be framed as economic gains and protecting the health of the population, as this will have more support (McCright & Dunlap, 2010). By matching the environmental objectives with the stakeholders values it is possible to establish a favorable environment to effect policy change. Environmental advocacy is a strong tool that resorts to language to change the perception, behavior, and policy outcomes. Advocates can create awareness about the environment and encourage activism through strategic framing, emotional appeal, engagement on social media, inclusivity, and effective communication. With more pressing environmental concerns, strategic language will be fundamental in rallying people and societies into a worthwhile course of action.

Language and environmental advocacy convergence are an interdisciplinary and complex area of study which depends on the communication theory, social movement theory and social environmental sociology. The framework will focus on the role of language in creating awareness of people about environmental issues and the effectiveness and effectiveness of advocacy efforts. The three theories we will dwell on here are three interrelated theoretical points of view, which are the framing theory, narrative theory, and discourse analysis which offers a different range of insights into the communicative elements of the environmental mobilization. Entman (1993) in his conceptualization of the framing theory opines that presentation of information in a particular manner is highly influential of the way the audience will interpret it and respond to it. In the context of environmental activism, framing will determine the areas of focus and those of concealment concerning a problem. According to an example, crisis such as climate change will give rise to an urgency and alarm response, but climate change as a challenge will give rise to a more solution-oriented and practical response (Nisbet, 2009). The empirical research proves the notion that the frames emphasizing the moral responsibility and immediacy may raise the rate of engagement and policy support among the people (Gifford, 2011). Also, framing is dependent on social identity, and it influences the way different demographic categories respond to advocacy messages.

Kahan et al. (2012) state that in the case of conservative viewers, the economic benefits over the moral imperative framing are more likely to be accepted, which is why it is essential to take into consideration the significance of the message shaping to target a specific ideological direction. Discourse analysis has a broader and more critical view of the study of language as way of constituting social realities and mediating power relations. Since discursive analysis is premised on the contributions of the theorists such as Foucault (1972), Fairclough (1995), and Gee (2014), the primary emphasis is laid on how the dominant discourse is legitimized, and the voices of the alternative are in the background. In the context of the environmental movement, this approach is applied to demonstrate how scientific and technical terminology has long been substituting the discourse on climate, often making non-experts appear to be out of this world. Hulme (2009) argues that the less exclusive and more accessible language has now been shifting towards democratizing environmental communication. The other domain of discourse analysis is to find out the ideological undertext which is hidden in the message about the environment. As Dryzek (2013) argues, in most instances, campaigns tend to be a reflection of more general values of the society, such as individualism or collectivism, which predestines the content of advocacy and reception.

Objective of the Study

1. To investigate language tricks of environmental campaigns in Nigeria and the way they affect people and their actions.
2. To explore the influence of storytelling, repetition and use of technical terms on understanding the environment in different cultures and languages practiced in Nigeria.
3. To determine the extent to which advocacy messages employ the use of language to motivate people to action and adjust in response to grassroots, institutional, and policy environments.

Methodology

The present study presents a qualitative research design where a case study analysis will be done to investigate the communicative strategies of environmental advocacy. It is centered on some of the environmental movements, advocacy campaigns and communication efforts that have received significant attention by the masses. The qualitative design is adopted because it effectively expresses the richness and depth of language use in real-life settings, especially in meaning-making, persuasion, and identity construction. The research data will be based on a purposive sample of 20 artifacts, including social media posts, published works, and public speeches from environmental organizations and individual

activists. These are chosen for their relevance, visibility, and ability to explain strategic communication practices in environmental advocacy.

The theoretical approach was based on discourse analysis and thematic coding principles. Discourse analysis will be used to understand how language shapes environmental realities, reflects ideologies, and reveals power relations. Thematic coding will examine patterns, rhetorical strategies, and messaging in the selected texts. This two-pronged approach provides interpretive richness and a rigorous analytical system. By combining discourse analysis and thematic coding, the research aims to reveal how environmental narratives are constructed, negotiated, and distributed across different contexts. This approach will clarify the role of language in guiding public involvement, building support, and promoting the environmental agenda. It also highlights communicative trends and innovations that define modern environmental advocacy.

Imperative and Directive Language

Several campaigns use strong, action-oriented commands to prompt immediate behavioral change. For example:

“Say No to Plastic Pollution – Join the Clean Lagos Initiative” (LAWMA)

“Keep Nigeria Clean – Dispose Responsibly” (NESREA)

“Don’t Burn – Compost!” (Federal Ministry of Agriculture)

“Save the Forests – Stop Illegal Logging” (FAN)

These messages rely on imperative phrasing such as “Say No,” “Dispose,” and “Stop,” which are direct and easy to follow. This strategy is effective in public health and sanitation campaigns where clear instructions are needed. The use of patriotic and civic language, especially in NESREA’s message, also appeals to national pride and responsibility.

Metaphors and Symbolic Framing

Metaphorical language is used to simplify complex environmental ideas and make them more relatable:

“Green is the New Gold” (Eco-Nigeria Magazine) equates sustainability with wealth and prosperity.

“Plant a Tree Today, Save Tomorrow” (NCF) uses a future-oriented metaphor to link present action with long-term benefits.

“Our Water, Our Life – Protect the Rivers” (River Basin Authorities) uses a life metaphor to emphasize the essential nature of water.

These metaphors help bridge the gap between scientific concepts and everyday understanding, making the messages more emotionally resonant and memorable.

Emotional and Inclusive Appeals

Emotive language and inclusive pronouns are used to foster a sense of urgency and shared responsibility:

“Our Water, Our Life” and “Green Energy for All” use possessive and inclusive phrasing to build community ownership.

“Climate Change is Real – Act Now” (Federal Ministry of Environment) combines a factual statement with an urgent call to action.

These strategies are particularly effective in mobilizing collective action and reinforcing the idea that environmental protection is a shared duty.

Educational and Institutional Tone

Some campaigns adopt a formal, visionary, or educational tone to target schools, policymakers, and institutions:

“Eco-Schools for a Greener Future” (Ministry of Education&UNICEF Nigeria) uses aspirational language to engage youth and educators.

“Don’t Burn – Compost!” and “Climate Change is Real – Act Now” also reflect an educational tone, aiming to inform and guide behavior.

This tone is appropriate for structured programs and policy-driven initiatives, where credibility and long-term planning are emphasized.

Messages like “Plant a Tree Today, Save Tomorrow” and “Keep Nigeria Clean – Dispose Responsibly” use short, clear phrases that are easy to remember and repeat. This simplicity ensures that the message is accessible to a wide audience, including those with limited literacy or exposure to environmental terminology. Many of the messages are tailored to Nigeria’s social and environmental context. For instance:

“Don’t Burn – Compost!” targets rural communities where open burning is common.

“Green Energy for All” addresses energy equity, a pressing issue in Nigeria’s development agenda. By aligning language with local realities, these campaigns increase their relevance and effectiveness. The analysis reveals that Nigerian environmental advocacy campaigns strategically use a mix of emotional appeals, metaphors, imperatives, and inclusive language to engage diverse audiences. Whether targeting grassroots communities or institutional stakeholders, the language is adapted to fit the message’s purpose and audience. These rhetorical choices not only enhance message clarity and impact but also foster a sense of collective responsibility and urgency in addressing environmental challenges.

Results

Message/Advertisement	Organization	Theme	Language Features
“Say No to Plastic Pollution – Join the Clean Lagos Initiative”	Lagos State Management (LAWMA)	Waste Authority Waste Management	Imperative phrasing, collective appeal, emotive tone
“Plant a Tree Today, Save Tomorrow”	Nigerian Foundation (NCF)	Conservation Reforestation&Climate Action	Metaphor, future-oriented framing, simplicity
“Keep Nigeria Clean – Dispose Responsibly”	NESREA	Sanitation&Public Health	Directive language, patriotic framing, civic responsibility
“Green is the New Gold”	Eco-Nigeria Magazine	Sustainable Development	Metaphorical comparison, aspirational tone, branding
“Don’t Burn – Compost!”	Federal Ministry of Agriculture	of Sustainable Agriculture	Contrastive phrasing, educational tone, rural targeting
“Our Water, Our Life – Protect the Rivers”	River Basin Development Authorities	Water Conservation	Possessive pronouns, life metaphor, emotional appeal
“Climate Change is Real – Act Now”	Federal Ministry of Environment	of Climate Awareness	Declarative statement, urgency, factual tone
“Eco-Schools for a Greener Future”	Ministry of Education&UNICEF Nigeria	of Environmental Education	Visionary language, institutional tone, youth focus
“Save the Forests – Stop Illegal Logging”	Forestry Association Nigeria (FAN)	of Biodiversity Protection	Commanding tone, conservation framing, legal emphasis

Objective 1: Exploring Language Techniques in Environmental Campaigns

Analysis showed that Nigerian environmental campaigns use emotional language, commands, and inclusive terms to drive public engagement and influence behavior.

Objective 2: Understanding Through Storytelling, Repetition, and Technical Language

The study found that storytelling, repeated slogans, and scientific terms improve understanding of environmental issues across Nigeria’s diverse linguistic and cultural groups.

Objective 3: Adapting Language for Different Audiences

Findings indicated that advocacy messages are tailored to audience type, with informal language used for communities and formal tone adopted in institutional and policy contexts.

Discussion of the Findings

In the critical examination of the language use in environmental advocacy in Nigeria, it has been demonstrated that there is a considerable use of linguistic aspects that are strategically employed in creating a sense of knowledge and encouraging emotional investiture as well as behavioural change. Language as a community organizing tool, affecting policy, and encouraging sustainability is a potent force in a country where environmental issues such as deforestation, flooding, and waste management are a significant problem and threat to the environment. One of the main characteristics of Nigerian

environmental campaigns is the use of emotion-related language. The language of phrases like Our planet is dying, Save our children future and even Protect our rivers is to create a feeling of empathy, being urgent and having a moral obligation. This is congruent with the framing theory that points to the effectiveness of emotionally appealing frames in increasing the engagement of the population (Gifford, 2011). Such emotional appeals work well with the people in Nigeria where livelihoods are directly related to environmental degradation. Recent research findings indicate that emotional framing enhances the reception of a message and action especially in rural communities exposed to climate change (Audu, 2024).

Metaphors make difficult to understand concepts in the environment easier and more accessible. Carbon footprint, green revolution and Mother Earth are some of the words that rephrase scientific terminologies into familiar imagery. The Green is the New Gold slogan makes sustainability economically aspirational. This is in line with the narrative theory of focusing on the symbolic storytelling (Polletta&Lee, 2006). Metaphor has become a common factor in Nigerian campaigns to connect the environmental values with economic and cultural hopes and strengthens the social concern about sustainability (Sunny-Adikwu and Egwim, 2025). The speech forms include directive language, like, act now, join the movement and say no to plastic to encourage an immediate change in behavior. In movement such as Clean Lagos Initiative, the imperatives persuade people to take part in waste management and sanitation. It is an indication of the performative role of language in the mobilization of collective action (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Research indicates that urban campaigns that focus on youth and market communities can be effectively used to reach their objectives through clear, action-oriented messages (Audu, 2024).

Inclusive pronouns like we, our, and us make people feel that they are together and they have a mutual responsibility. One example is that Our Water, Our Life instills the feeling of belonging to the community in the ownership of natural resources. The discourse analysis highlights the contribution of the usage of the pronouns to the formation of the collective identities (Gee, 2014). The campaigns in Nigeria are using a more inclusive language so as to instill trust and encourage community-based environmental stewardship (Udoh, 2025). This focus on inclusive pronouns leads to another characteristic of environmental communication, that is, the use of technical and scientific language. Such technical terms as biodiversity, climate mitigation, and sustainable development are used in policy documents and educational materials. Such terms make environmental discourse accurate and believable. Such organizations like NESREA and the Federal Ministry of Environment use this language in order to be connected to the systems on the international level. The utilization of technical language in the institutional environment is justified in current research, but it has to be made comprehensible to broader audiences (Sunny-Adikwu and Egwim, 2025).

Storytelling is a powerful rhetoric that is employed by Nigerian advocacy. Farmers are talking about drought, and communities are talking about flood destruction, both of which emphasize the human aspect of the environmental problem. These are widespread stories in the radio, the newspaper and the social media. Narrative theory is concerned with the fact that narrative can motivate to act (Moser, 2010). In Nigeria, especially, local narratives are an effective method of receiving the support of the grassroots and creating awareness of climate risks (Audu, 2024). Repeating helps to drive home important messages and make them more memorable. Such slogans as Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Think globally, act locally are localized and repeated over platforms. This helps in the salience of messages in the focus of framing theory (Entman, 1993). The Nigerian campaigns tend to rephrase the global slogans in order to enhance the culture of relevance and retention (Udoh, 2025).

The multilingual nature of Nigeria demands the inclusion of language. The translation of campaigns into Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo is done to reach a variety of people. This makes environmental awareness not only limited to the English speaking elites. The resonance of the messages is increased when the messages are framed culturally as there is a correlation between the environmental values and the traditional beliefs. According to the recent research, the role of native languages in climate change communication and sustainable development cannot be underestimated (Udoh, 2025; Audu, 2024). In their public service announcements, policy briefs and materials on schools (such as Eco-Schools for a Greener Future) the language of the government agencies and non-governmental organizations is formal and educational. This tone focuses on long term planning and credibility. It has been established that the institutional tone is effective to address educators, policymakers, and development partners (Sunny-Adikwu and Egwim, 2025). The language practices applied to the environmental advocacy in Nigeria are varied and context specific. Engagement is created through the use of emotional appeals and metaphors and mobilization through imperatives and the use of the collective pronoun. Technical language creates credibility and narrative humanization of abstract issues. Repeated use is a retaining technique and multilingual

inclusivity will guarantee a wide coverage. These results confirm that the language is not a tool to deliver information but a strategic asset to influence the perception, create a strong connection, and foster environmental transformation. The table below illustrates how these linguistic features manifest across selected Nigerian campaigns:

Recommendations

The following strategies could be used to improve environmental communication strategies in Nigeria:

1. Speak in a language that is non-judgmental and also emotionally connecting in order to create a connection and understanding between different communities.
2. Use storytelling and strategic repetition in order to enforce the important messages and enhance clarity.
3. Be technical and at the same time, make complex information easier to understand by simplifying it so that more people can understand it.
4. Customize communication to the needs, tastes, and cultural backgrounds of the various groups of people.
5. Value equity and cultural sensitivity to make all voices heard and valued in the environmental discourse.

Conclusion

The research highlights the central place of the strategic use of language in supporting environmental advocacy in the complex sociolinguistic environment of Nigeria. The results indicate that emotionally active language, use of inclusive text, and use of culturally based narratives are not a stylistic choice they are necessary instruments to mobilize masses and create a change of behavior to adopt renewable energy use. An environmental campaign should involve effective communication which should be audience centric in the view that different groups of people have different needs, values and linguistic preferences. Conversational, familiar language is more effective in community outreach whereas official, policy-driven messages are more effective with institutional and governmental stakeholders. In addition, the introduction of scientific terms, combined with the availability of explanations, make scientific literature more credible and comprehensible to a variety of audiences. All the advocacy should focus on equity and cultural sensitivity. The campaigns must use the real-world experiences of the marginalized groups and engage them actively in the message development and delivery. Through alignment of communication strategies to audience features and cultural contexts, the stakeholders can considerably increase the reach of the clean energy programs, their relevance, and effectiveness. Also, these lessons provide a workable guideline to create inclusive and meaningful messages that can facilitate the shift of Nigeria to sustainable energy systems that would not make any community to be left behind on the way towards a green future.

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