

# Corpus Linguistics and Climate Communication

Niall Curry<sup>a</sup> and Lorenzo Zannini<sup>b,c</sup>, <sup>a</sup> Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; <sup>b</sup> University School for Advanced Studies IUSS, Pavia, Italy; and <sup>c</sup> University of Naples L'Orientale, Naples, Italy

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## Key Points

- This article introduces corpus linguistics as a mixed-methods approach for uncovering patterned meaning-making in corpora of climate communication.
- It shows how corpus-based climate discourse studies reveal cross-contextual and cross-cultural variation in how climate issues are framed, debated, constructed, and understood.
- It presents a multilingual case study of public-oriented research communication that demonstrates how academic climate knowledge is constructed in diverse, non-uniform ways across culture and language.
- It highlights the need for expanded multilingual, interdisciplinary research to better understand how, in the process of climate communication, climate knowledge moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries when shaping public engagement.

## Abstract

In this article, we examine corpus-based climate communication as a key area of contemporary discourse studies. First, through an exploration of corpus linguistics, we outline how its constituent techniques can play a role in investigating climate-related discourses and meaning-making. We then review the development of corpus-based climate discourse research and present a focused case study of public-oriented climate research communication. This case study shows how corpus and discourse approaches can be used flexibly to analyze the construction and framing of climate knowledge for non-specialist audiences. In closing, we argue for the need to enhance our understanding of the discursive construction of climate issues, and call for further multilingual and interdisciplinary research on climate communication, particularly in the domain of public-oriented research communication.

## Introduction

In this article, we examine corpus-based approaches to studying climate communication. First, we outline corpus linguistics as a field and method, identifying its key underlying principles and approaches. We then discuss corpus studies of climate-related discourse with a view to showing how corpus approaches have enabled systematic, large-scale analyses of climate change discourse across a variety of contexts. This discussion is followed by a case study that centers on public-oriented climate research communication. The case study is designed to demonstrate how corpus-assisted discourse analysis can be used flexibly to investigate how climate knowledge is constructed and disseminated by academics for non-specialist audiences in English, French, and Spanish. In concluding, we reflect on the contribution of corpus-based climate discourse studies to our understanding of the discursive construction of climate issues and we highlight the need for further multilingual and interdisciplinary research, particularly in the domain of public-oriented research communication.

## Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics is a branch of linguistic research concerned with the systematic study of language through principled collections of texts, known as corpora (singular, corpus). Emerging alongside advances in computational technologies in the late twentieth century, corpus linguistics developed in response to growing dissatisfaction with intuition-driven approaches to language study

and a broader turn toward empiricism in the social sciences. At its core, corpus linguistics seeks to uncover patterns in language use by examining naturally occurring language. In this way, corpus linguistics enables researchers to observe language patterns that are not readily accessible through introspection or small-scale analyses.

Corpus linguistics is often described as both a field and a method. As a field, it posits a particular view of language as being patterned and socially situated. As a method, it provides a suite of analytical tools for identifying, quantifying, and interpreting linguistic patterns in context. This dual status has allowed corpus linguistics to be productively integrated into a wide range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms, including discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, translation studies, and, increasingly, interdisciplinary research concerned with social issues (Brookes & McEnery, 2020). Owing to its wide-ranging applications (see Brookes et al., 2025 for more on applications of corpus linguistics), corpus approaches must respond to a plethora of epistemologies. However, certain facets of corpus research are unwaveringly central, regardless of area or context of application.

Of the stable facets of corpus linguistics, the first pertains to the view that frequency is meaningful and that patterns of repeated use are taken to be indicative of linguistic salience or social relevance. Second, corpus linguistics views language as highly patterned. In this way, meaning is understood to emerge from recurrent combinations of words. Collocation and grammatical patterns, for example, are central objects of analysis as, by identifying regular co-occurrence patterns, corpus methods make visible the habitual ways in which meanings are negotiated and naturalized in particular contexts of use. Third, corpus linguistics is fundamentally context-sensitive. Corpora are not neutral collections of language or texts. They are designed by researchers to represent contexts of language use (e.g., specific populations or communicative situations). Decisions about what to put in a corpus are necessarily subjective, as researchers will elect to include texts of a specific text type or by specific types of authors/producers, for example. This design process ultimately establishes the contexts represented by the corpus and defines the scope of interpretation. This facet of corpus building is known as determining representativeness, and, crucially, whatever a corpus represents will always be partial and shaped by a guiding research question or objective.

In terms of their composition, corpora are typically described as either balanced or specialized (Brookes & McEnery, 2020). Balanced corpora aim to sample a wide range of text types in proportions intended to approximate broader language varieties or contexts of use, whereas specialized corpora tend to focus on a particular domain, genre, or discourse community and, as a consequence, are typically heavily patterned (O’Keeffe, 2018). In practice, specialized corpora are especially common in discourse-oriented research, owing to a general preoccupation with the close analysis of patterned meaning-making in socially situated contexts. In such cases, careful documentation of corpus design choices is essential for transparency and interpretive validity.

In terms of analysis, corpus linguistics research makes use of a range of analytical techniques that operationalize these three principles. At the most basic level, frequency lists provide insight into the most common items in a corpus. Collocation analysis examines statistically significant co-occurrence patterns, revealing associations between words that contribute to meaning beyond the level of individual items. Keyword analysis compares a target corpus against a reference corpus in order to identify features that are unusually frequent or salient in a given dataset when compared to another, thereby potentially highlighting distinctive discursive practices; however, it should be noted that the utility of keywords is entirely dependent on the quality of the comparison. These techniques are often complemented by analyses of distribution and dispersion, which indicate how evenly linguistic features are distributed across and within texts. These approaches all draw on quantitative corpus analysis techniques to study language and, as a consequence, corpus linguistics is often erroneously labeled a quantitative approach. However, this is not the case. Indeed, despite its quantitative focus, qualitative interpretation is also a central facet of corpus work, and concordance analysis represents the primary means through which corpus findings are contextualized and interrogated. Concordance lines, typically presented in a keyword-in-context (KWIC) format, allow researchers to examine how linguistic items function in relation to their immediate co-text and across wider discourse patterns. Through close reading of concordance lines, researchers can identify semantic prosodies, pragmatic functions, evaluative tendencies, as well as the kinds of ideological stances that are of interest to discourse analysts and that cannot be inferred from frequency data alone.

In this sense, corpus linguistics operates as a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative pattern detection with reflexive and interpretive qualitative analysis. Yet despite this reality, corpus approaches are often critiqued in discourse studies for their limited engagement with context. Typically, these critiques address the exclusion of multimodal dimensions of communication, such as gesture, layout, or visual imagery in a corpus, and are concerned with corpus studies’ penchant for abstraction — a process that can distance the corpus analyst from the communicative events being studied. Nevertheless, this tension between corpus approaches and discourse studies has proven fruitful, as it has facilitated the development of corpus-assisted discourse studies. In research in this context, the qualitative discourse analysis approach, which prioritizes interpretive depth and contextual sensitivity, is merged with the corpus methods that contribute the likes of scalability, systematicity, repeatability and replicability. Consequently, a key facet of corpus-assisted discourse studies is the interpretation of corpus findings in dialog with other analytical approaches and wider contextual information.

Overall, corpus linguistics provides a robust empirical framework for analyzing language as a social practice. Its emphasis on frequency, patterning, and context, combined with qualitative interpretation, offers a distinctive means of accessing discursive phenomena at scale while remaining attentive to situated meaning-making. These affordances have made corpus linguistics a central methodological resource for contemporary discourse studies and one particular area in which it has become more prominent is climate communication. In what follows, we discuss some of the growing collection of corpus-based discourse studies of climate communication with a view to illustrating the operationalization of corpus techniques therein.

## Corpus-Based Discourse Studies of Climate Communication

Corpus-based discourse studies of climate communication have emerged as a central strand of inquiry within applied linguistics, responding to the growing prominence of climate change as a contested and politicized issue. While early discourse analytic work on climate change relied predominantly on qualitative methods, the increasing availability of large digital corpora and the advances in corpus analysis software have enabled researchers to investigate climate discourses at greater scale and within a wider range of discursive domains. As a result, corpus-based approaches have significantly expanded the empirical scope of climate discourse studies.

The early development of corpus-informed climate discourse research was closely tied to news media analysis. One of the most influential studies in this regard is [Boykoff and Boykoff's \(2007\)](#) examination of journalistic norms in US news reporting. In their study, they used quantitative analysis to demonstrate how practices such as balanced reporting amplified contrarian views and obscured scientific consensus. Although not framed explicitly within corpus linguistics, this work illustrated the value of systematic, large-scale textual analysis for identifying discursive mechanisms in climate communication that would be difficult to observe through close reading alone. It also foregrounded a recurring concern in climate discourse studies; that is, the role of discourse in mediating, or distorting scientific knowledge for public consumption. Building on such insights, later corpus-based studies began to integrate discourse analysis more explicitly with quantitative methods through corpus-assisted discourse studies. [Grundmann and Krishnamurthy \(2010\)](#) provided one of the earliest large-scale corpus-assisted analyses of climate change discourse across national contexts, comparing news media coverage in the UK, the US, France, and Germany. Their study demonstrated how corpus techniques could be used to trace cross-cultural variation in the framing of climate change, showing that national media systems prioritize different aspects of this shared, global issue. For example, they found that among the media, attention was variably paid to issues of scientific uncertainty, the economic consequences of climate change, or political responsibility thereof. Since then, comparative and contrastive perspectives have become increasingly prominent. Such corpus-based studies have examined how climate-related concepts are represented across languages, cultures, and political contexts, revealing both convergence in global discursive trends and divergence rooted in local histories, values, and epistemologies (e.g. [Curry, 2024](#); [Dayrell, 2019](#)).

Examining *The New York Times* from 2000 to 2019, [Liu and Huang \(2022\)](#) show that although climate change and global warming are often treated as interchangeable, they are associated with distinct topics, framing practices, and perspectivization strategies. Their study highlights the analytical value of corpus approaches for capturing nuanced usage patterns. Extending their work with an international perspective, [Liu and Huang \(2024\)](#) compare climate responsibility framing in *China Daily* and *The New York Times*, finding that while both newspapers prioritize treatment over causal responsibility, they diverge in attribution, with the former emphasising developed countries' historical obligations and the latter foregrounding developing countries' current causal roles and shared responsibility for climate action. Similarly, [Reghunath and Zafar \(2023\)](#) show that Indian English-language newspapers frame climate change primarily as an urgent and geopolitical issue, characterised by limited scepticism, sensitivity to the economics of mitigation, and a strong emphasis on India's active participation in global climate governance, inter alia. Elsewhere, [Kennedy and Wright \(2025\)](#) analyse how British newspapers depict police responses to climate-related protests amid a broader polycrisis involving climate change and declining public confidence in policing. Notably, they find that coverage typically frames the police as constrained by existing laws and therefore unable to manage protests effectively, which in turn legitimizes calls for more restrictive protest legislation and shapes public understandings of the tensions between climate action, democratic rights, and policing.

Beyond news media, corpus-based climate discourse studies have expanded into a diverse range of domains. Political discourse has attracted sustained attention, particularly in relation to climate denialism and populist rhetoric ([Wang & Huan, 2024](#)). For example, [Wang and Huan \(2024\)](#) report that analyses of speeches, policy documents, and public statements by political actors have shown how climate change is framed as an economic threat or as an ideological imposition, often through the strategic use of language of uncertainty, notions of nationalism, or appeals to common sense. According to the authors, corpus techniques enabled researchers to track these framings across time and political cycles, which brought to light important shifts in emphasis and rhetorical strategy in political framings of climate issues. This trend is also evidenced in [Willis \(2017\)](#), who examines how UK politicians talk about climate change. In their study, they analysed a parliamentary debate on the 2008 Climate Change Bill, showing that politicians largely frame climate change as an economic and technical problem and that they selectively draw on scientific evidence, while giving little attention to the human or social dimensions of the climate crisis. In Willis' view, this framing activity tames the issue, making it more politically manageable while limiting space for acknowledging its full implications or for considering more radical responses.

Studying a variety of text types, [Bevitori and Russo \(2025\)](#) use frequency, collocation and concordance analysis to unpack the framing of polycrises in post-pandemic press releases, speeches, and statements from the EU Commission. In focusing on intersecting issues of health and climate, they highlight legitimization strategies employed by EU leadership that serve to reinforce European identity. Climate issues have also been widely studied in terms of their representation on social media, with most studies centering on Twitter (now X; [Pearce et al., 2019](#)). This is evident in [Gotkova and Chepurnykh \(2022\)](#) who examine how specialised environmental vocabulary is used in everyday online discourse on Twitter and Reddit. Critically, they note that in the analysis of the term *carbon*, five semantic patterns emerge, demonstrating how technical environmental terminology is adapted and reinterpreted in diverse ways by non-specialists in online contexts. Studies of climate reception have also been undertaken on social media, given the affordances of sites like Reddit to shed light on how the public negotiate and understand unfolding climate crises (e.g., [Litherland & Wood, 2025](#)). Another major area of growth in climate discourse studies concerns institutional and corporate discourse. Corporate social responsibility reports and sustainability disclosures have been analysed to examine how organizations frame their

environmental responsibilities and negotiate tensions between economic growth and environmental protection. Studies such as [Fuoli and Beelitz \(2024\)](#) demonstrate how corpus-assisted analyses can reveal recurring patterns of mitigation and moral positioning in texts produced by high-emitting industries, particularly following the mainstreaming of sustainability through initiatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Overall, corpus-based discourse studies have made a substantial contribution to understanding how climate change is discursively constructed in a variety of contexts. Arguably, by enabling the systematic analysis of language data while remaining sensitive to context and interpretation, corpus approaches have strengthened the empirical foundations of climate discourse research. They have also highlighted at scale the extent to which climate change is a discursive issue, shaped by competing interests, values, and epistemologies, *inter alia*. As climate communication continues to evolve in response to intensifying global challenges, corpus-based discourse approaches are likely to remain a crucial resource for analysing how climate issues are negotiated through language and other semiotic resources.

### Case Study: Corpus Approaches to Studying Climate Communication

This case study brings together a set of studies that examine climate communication in public-oriented research communication, with a particular focus on academic news blog posts published by *The Conversation*. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that this emergent register engages in complex and highly variable discursive practices when communicating climate knowledge to non-specialist audiences. While each study addresses a different thematic concern in different languages, ranging from register variation, death, and climate adaptation in English, to rhetorical engagement and the climate and health polycrisis in English, French, and Spanish, they are unified by a shared data source and a common methodological orientation that combines corpus linguistics with discourse analysis (i.e., corpus-assisted discourse analysis). This coherence allows the studies to be read collectively as an illustration of both the analytical affordances and the flexibility of corpus-assisted approaches for the study of climate communication.

The English-language studies form a useful starting point, as they establish how public-oriented climate research communication constructs knowledge in what is arguably the global lingua franca of knowledge dissemination. In [Curry and Pérez-Paredes \(2025\)](#), we undertake multidimensional and cluster analyses of academic news blog posts in *The Conversation* and overall, our study shows that although texts in *The Conversation* are often treated as a single communicative register, there is much internal variation in the climate-themed texts studied. Specifically, we identified four recurrent text types that reflect this variation. These are rhetorical narratives, reasoned abstractions, empirical storytelling, and quantitative reflections, and this kind of variation demonstrates that public-oriented research communication is not functionally homogeneous, especially when disciplinary areas are concerned. Thus, the key contribution of this study lies in its ability to operationalize register analytically through corpus methods, moving beyond intuition-based descriptions to empirically grounded typologies. In this way, the corpus approaches allow us to unpack the discursive functions of these texts and shed some light on what the authors and editors are doing when they engage the public in climate knowledge construction.

In [Zannini and Curry \(2025\)](#), we take a different approach. In this study, we focus on the discursive construction of climate adaptation in Australian public-oriented research communication. The narrower focus here illustrates the flexibility of corpus methods as, in analyzing the same corpus, we could downsample to a specific focus (i.e., adaptation) and context (i.e., Australia) to undertake a detailed analysis of an ideologically charged concept. Through keyword analysis, followed by Hallidayan transitivity analysis, the study shows that adaptation is overwhelmingly constructed through material action processes, with verbs clustering around themes of mitigation, farming, and leadership. The findings demonstrate that public-oriented climate research communication is not value-neutral. Rather, this form of communication appears to encode culturally situated epistemologies, shaped by local environmental, economic, and political concerns. Methodologically, this study exemplifies how corpus techniques can guide analysts toward salient discursive patterns, while discourse-analytic frameworks and wider contextual engagement enable the interpretation of those patterns in relation to power and responsibility. Falling somewhere in between these two studies in terms of granularity, [Curry \(2026\)](#) examines how death is discursively constructed in public-oriented climate research communication. In this case, the chapter centers on mortality-themed collocations of death and the wider focus on the entire corpus of more than 6 million words allows for a broader perspective on global discourses at the intersections of climate and death. Overall, this study reveals a number of complexities surrounding death in the climate crisis, including how death is categorized and rendered abstract in climate discourses. The analysis shows that death is framed not only as a human outcome but also as a planetary and non-human phenomenon, reflecting the multidimensional nature of the impacts of climate change. Here, the corpus approaches to studying collocation enable systematic access to language patterns that would be difficult to detect through close reading alone. In addition the qualitative analysis, facilitated through the study of concordance lines, situates these patterns within broader discourses of commoditization, naturalization, and dehumanization, among others.

In terms of multilingual perspectives, [Curry \(2024\)](#) presents a corpus-based contrastive analysis of direct questions in public-oriented climate research communication in English, French, and Spanish. Focusing on questions as a resource for reader engagement and meaning-making, the analysis demonstrates that direct questions are a core rhetorical feature across all three languages, but that they vary significantly in frequency. French texts employ questions more frequently than English to a significant degree. In addition, through the combination of quantitative measures (i.e., frequency, dispersion, statistical significance) with metadiscourse and discourse analysis, the study shows that questions function to manage textual progression, construct arguments, and frame hypothetical futures. Thematically, the domains in which questions are asked also differ across languages. Questions occur in

science and technology in English, science in French, and politics and society in Spanish, revealing how distinct knowledge-making cultures question different aspects of the climate crisis. Methodologically, this study illustrates a key affordance of corpus-assisted discourse analysis as the method supports cross-linguistic pattern recognition, while also accounting for culturally specific rhetorical practices within an emergent register. The second study, Curry and Brookes (2025), extends this contrastive perspective by examining the discursive framing of the climate and health polycrisis in public-oriented climate research communication in English, French, and Spanish. Using a keyword-driven analytical focus on the cultural keywords *health*, *santé*, and *salud*, the analysis reveals systematic cross-linguistic differences in how the climate and health polycrisis is conceptualized. While all three languages construct the climate-health relationship as a pressing global concern, they diverge in epistemological orientation. English texts tend to frame the polycrisis through transdisciplinary and solution-oriented perspectives, foregrounding institutional responsibility and pragmatic adaptation. French texts emphasize the interconnectedness of human, non-human, and planetary health, reflecting phenomenological and ecological epistemologies and Spanish texts, by contrast, frequently situate issues of climate and health within a broader transdisciplinary polycrisis, with particular attention to the relationships between mental health, social vulnerability, and the climate crisis. The corpus approach was critical in the substantiation of the points of comparison, the selection of analytical procedures, and the qualitative interpretation of the designated keywords, lending, among other things, a high degree of systematicity to the analysis.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined corpus linguistics as a field and method and has illustrated how corpus linguistics and discourse analysis together provide a robust framework for examining climate communication. This article has also shown how corpus-assisted discourse analysis approaches have expanded the empirical reach and analytical breadth of work on climate communication. Through the case study of public-oriented research communication, the examination of a shared dataset through multiple analytical lenses has shown that this form of communication is neither uniform nor neutral. Rather, it is shaped by register variation, differentiated discursive framings, and culturally situated epistemologies that influence the foregrounding of specific climate issues. The contrastive and multilingual dimensions of this work further demonstrate that even within a single platform and register, climate knowledge is articulated differently across languages and contexts, revealing both areas of convergence and meaningful divergence in global knowledge-making practices.

These insights point to an evident need for further research on climate discourse, particularly from multilingual perspectives and in the domain of public-oriented research communication. As academics increasingly act as intermediaries between scientific research and public debate, having a clear understanding of how their discourse shapes perceptions of climate issues is becoming ever more important. Expanding corpus-based and multilingual discourse studies in this area will be crucial for developing a more inclusive and culturally attuned understanding of how climate knowledge travels across linguistic, cultural, and epistemic boundaries. Such work has the potential to inform more reflexive and socially responsible climate communication in the face of shared global challenges.

**See Also:** [Corpus Linguistics and Media Discourse](#); [Corpus Linguistics and Fake News](#); [Corpus Linguistics and News Discourse](#); [Corpus Linguistics and Journalism](#).

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