

Significance of semantics: The importance of language in research, governance and communication of global environmental change

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During the Critical Decade for Climate Action Conference, hosted by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia (UEA), climate experts gathered to showcase evidence-based ideas and critically evaluate opportunities for climate action. This briefing note serves as a summary of Session 11a on Wednesday 10 September 2025.

Keywords, jargon, buzzwords, and slogans all resound in climate and biodiversity conservation discourse. Terms such as resilience, recovery, and restoration are just some current examples. The widespread and front-stage circulation of such buzzwords inform conceptions of what they mean and represent. At their best, topical buzzwords can provide a space for debate, engender recognition, mobilise support, and lead to just and ethical knowledge-generation. However, their over-simplification and over-use can risk concealing the nuance of local realities that they may aim or profess to represent. For example, what recovery entails, or restoration would represent, may be understood differently by Indigenous peoples and local communities compared with mainstreamed interpretations. Further, when pursuit or measurement of recovery or restoration is determined by external ideas and interpretations, injustices and missed opportunities can pervade. Examples include framing hazards as ‘natural’, misrepresenting the social-driven roots of vulnerability, and the use of alarmist language in the context of fires (e.g. mega-fires), which risks conflating the diversity of fire types that exist, resulting in actions that can condemn all fire, including bioculturally important fires. We explore the significance of semantics in environmental governance, offering examples of where damages have occurred, how they can be avoided, and where better semantics are essential to support and empower intervention, research, and communication in ethical, just, and decolonial ways.

Introduction

This conference session aimed to explore the importance of language norms in the context of research, governance, and communication of global environmental change. Drawing on research from five panel speakers, the session deconstructed the dominant semantic features that are used in environmental discourses, critiqued the commonly used terminologies such as resilience, recovery, and restoration, and suggested more plural, diverse, just, and nuanced ways of working with words, and methods for doing so in our research, partnerships, and practice.

Rhetoric vs reality in biodiversity frameworks

James Reed (CIFOR-ICRAF) offered a candid critique of the language used in high-level multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and the reality in their implementation, arguing that there is a disconnect between the two. He argued that the environmental and development discourse often relies on vague language, simplified soundbites, slogans or headline goals such as ‘make poverty history’, ‘leave no one behind’, ‘keep 1.5 alive’, ‘halt and reverse biodiversity’, among others. These phrases, while ostensibly well-intended and certainly memorable, risk oversimplifying complex issues, masking the lack of real progress or specific

strategies, and sometimes obfuscating the need for bundles of approaches, targets and more holistic approaches.

Reed argues that there is insufficient consideration of inclusivity and specificity within the current country submissions towards the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Many national submissions neglect key issues like gender equality, finance, and Indigenous peoples and local communities. Reed critiques how global biodiversity policies often emphasise ambitious language over tangible, inclusive, and accountable action. He suggests that social justice concerns should be at the core of integrated implementation efforts towards the GBF, with a greater emphasis on the dominant drivers of biodiversity decline. Doing so requires a move away from vague language that, for example, calls to 'recognise the rights' of Indigenous people and rather ensure that they are central actors in the design of conservation efforts.

Rethinking resilience

In their presentation, *Rethinking resilience: Local perspectives and language on climate resilient development*, Angela Mae Minas and George Borrinaga noted that current climate resilience frameworks are often dominated by 'northern'/Eurocentric, technocratic, and top-down conceptions of what constitutes resilience. These models don't always resonate with local communities' experiences or aspirations of what being resilient means, and the way it connects to their visions of a 'good life'.

They note that colonisation caused linguistic and cultural disjunctions, weakening local disaster preparedness and resilience knowledge. Nevertheless, colonial and revolutionary histories shaped interpretations of crises and fuelled nativist, spiritual, and communal movements. Moreover, resilience remains deep rooted in indigenous and local traditions such as rituals, cultural values and mutual aid practices.

They argued that communities, particularly in the Philippines, view resilience not just as recovery but as a collective responsibility and self-encouragement, and has oftentimes been a response to government inaction. Resilience is framed through lived experiences of disaster (e.g., typhoons, floods) and rooted in social, cultural, and spiritual traditions. They therefore call for a rethink of climate resilience, arguing that this should also value local notions of transformation, equity and fairness.

Contested meanings of recovery

In his presentation, *Telling tall tales? Media representations of recovery following disaster events*, Mark Tebbboth examined how the media portrays recovery after disasters, with case studies from Kerala and Tamil Nadu (India). He

argues that recovery narratives are not neutral but shaped by power, agendas, and selective storytelling. How disasters are talked about matters, as certain narratives are privileged, influencing how events are perceived and understood. He notes that the 'silence' or absence of certain voices, places, or issues in reporting is as significant as what gets highlighted.

He highlights three dominant themes: (1) 'I can count the progress' – where his study found that recovery is measured in economic/physical terms (funding, infrastructure, houses built, years of development compressed); (2) 'You have recovered, you have a house' – which equates housing with complete recovery, ignoring broader social, cultural, and psychological dimensions; and (3) 'You are resilient/vulnerable' – where survivors are depicted either as resilient heroes or helpless victims, simplifying complex lived realities.

Tebboth notes that the current framing obscures deeper inequalities and lived experiences of survivors. He argued for the need for more just, plural and equitable representations of recovery that centre disaster-affected people in dignified ways. He opined that alternative discourses should amplify local voices, experiences, and collective priorities rather than externally imposed narratives.

Ecolinguistics and participatory approaches

Prof. Angela Crack presented a method developed drawing on participation and ecolinguistics and resulting in a community-sourced Chichewa-English translation glossary for international development. The example demonstrated how the method was able to navigate semantic complexity, bridge language barriers and unearth colonial terms and cases where direct translation were not appropriate or erroneous. The project emphasises participatory methods and ecolinguistics to strengthen inclusivity, solidarity, and dialogue across languages.

She argues that international development has historically been Anglocentric, imposing dominant worldviews. Ecolinguistics highlights the need to embrace linguistic diversity but must also address practical tools for bridging languages. The glossary is proposed as an innovative research tool to facilitate solidarity and activism as it includes many words absent from commercial dictionaries. Crack notes that the glossary has the potential to contextualise ecological discourse by incorporating local terms and nuances, bridge language barriers between communities and cultures, and encourage critical dialogue on power dynamics and hegemonic discourses in language.

In short, Crack argues that participatory translation glossaries can democratize knowledge production,

empower local communities, and enrich ecolinguistics by embedding cultural and ecological nuance into development discourse.

The concept of participatory methods resounded during plenary. The audience raised various questions, including on how the proposed alternative approaches or projects can be embraced or scaled up in practice. The speakers noted that meaningful engagement and participatory workshops with decision-makers, local and Indigenous communities, and media practitioners, could be opportunities to explore in the future.