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Big oil and climate change: An ecolinguistic perspective

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Abstract
In the context of the ever-worsening climate crisis, the global debate around fossil fuels is keener than ever. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Press Release of 20 March 2023 stated: "In 2018, IPCC highlighted the unprecedented scale of the challenge required to keep warming to 1.5°C. Five years later, that challenge has become even greater due to a continued increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The pace and scale of what has been done so far, and current plans, are insufficient to tackle climate change." Against this background, this paper investigates the discourse of oil giant TotalEnergies in its report "More Energy, Less Emissions: Sustainability & Climate 2024 Progress Report". The paper throws an ecolinguistic light on one of the main drivers of climate change, and explores the extent to which such a report may represent an instance of greenwashing. The aim of the study is to reveal linguistic strategies that enable such companies — who have played, and continue to play the most significant role in producing global warming — to present themselves as agents for environmental good. From the critical, discourse-historical perspective, the paper highlights the circulation in government, environmental, corporate and public contexts of both positive and destructive discourses. The findings appear to support the greenwashing hypothesis; the paper thus contributes to the growing tradition of ecolinguistic studies that expose the role of (corporate) language in perpetuating situations of environmental harm.
Key words: *corpus linguistic methods, critical discourse analysis, climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, greenwashing, ecolinguistics*

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Большая нефть и изменение климата: эколингвистический аспект

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Аннотация
В условиях постоянно обостряющегося климатического кризиса глобальные дебаты вокруг ископаемого топлива становятся как никогда острыми. В пресс-релизе Межправительственной группы экспертов по изменению климата (МГЭИК) от 20.03 2023 г. говорится: «В 2018 г. МГЭИК сформулировала беспрецедентную по масштабу задачу, которую необходимо решить, чтобы удержать потепление на уровне 1,5°C. Пять лет спустя эта задача стала еще более серьезной из-за продолжающегося роста выбросов парниковых газов. Темпы и масштабы того, что было сделано до сих пор, а также текущие планы недостаточны для решения проблемы изменения климата». В свете данной дискуссии в статье анализируется дискурс нефтяного гиганта TotalEnergies. Материалом исследования послужил отчет компании за 2024 г. «Больше энергии, меньше выбросов: работа в области устойчивого развития и изменения климата». С позиций эколингвистики рассматривается одна из главных причин изменения климата и исследуется, в какой степени данный отчет может представлять собой пример «зеленого пиара». Цель исследования — выявить лингвистические стратегии, позволяющие компаниям, играющим существенную роль в процессе глобального потепления, позиционировать себя в качестве представителей рациональной экологии. С точки зрения критического и дискурсивно-исторического подходов рассматриваются как позитивные, так и деструктивные дискурсы, циркулирующие в правительственных, экологических, корпоративных и общественных контекстах. Полученные результаты подтверждают гипотезу о «зеленом пиаре». Таким образом, работа вносит вклад в развитие эколингвистических исследований, раскрывающих роль корпоративного дискурса в сохранении пагубного влияния компаний на окружающую среду.
Ключевые слова: *корпусные лингвистические методы, критический дискурс-анализ, изменение климата, выбросы парниковых газов, зеленый пиар, эколингвистика*

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1. Introduction: The aims of the research

The attention paid in public discourse to the topic of global warming over the past couple of decades (Stern 2007), in the contexts of media, social media and scientific discourse justifies the attention paid to the phenomenon in Ecolinguistics. However, though many recent studies in Ecolinguistics have dealt with climate change (Norgaard 2011, 2019, Fløttum 2016, Gabrys 2020, Augé 2023), there remains a need for studies that present a thick, detailed picture of the scientific

background alongside those that focus mainly on rhetorical or discursive aspects. This paper uses critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to highlight the role of discourse in maintaining social practices connected to fossil fuel extraction that perpetuate an unsustainable trend in energy production. From a perspective mainly inspired by Ruth Wodak's (2001) Discourse Historical approach, the paper provides a rich picture of the contemporary scenario, detailing relevant information from political and commercial agents, environmentalists and civil society. It sheds light on the extent to which companies use, among other self-presentation strategies, that of greenwashing (Miller 2018) to suggest that they are fully on board with environmental goals, while in reality they remain at the heart of the problem. A complementary methodological approach uses corpus linguistics to uncover strategies by means of which commercial actors such as major energy production companies present themselves. The question is how far such positive self-presentation may be viewed as greenwashing or if, by contrast, it may represent a genuine shift in orientation by the companies involved.

The organization of the paper is as follows. Section 2 briefly presents the discourse-historical background and context of the paper, covering the role of fossil fuel in the climate emergency.

2. Discourse-historical background and context

2.1. Scientific background

The science is clear: greenhouse gas emissions, such as carbon dioxide (C02) and methane (CH4) from human activities, are wrapping the Earth in a blanket of pollution that has warmed the planet and led to severe impacts such as more intense storms and hurricanes, droughts and famines, floods and wildfires. Today, there is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than there ever has been in at least the past 2 million years. During the 20th and 21st century, the level of carbon dioxide rose by 40%. Moreover, as the study by Cook et al. (2019) made clear:

> Scientists working for the fossil fuel industry knew about the potential warming effects of C02 emissions as early as the 1950s. Exxon's internal documents show that their own scientists were explicitly aware of the potential dangers of human-caused climate change caused by their products, but instead of taking action or warning the public, they spent millions of dollars on disinformation campaigns designed to obscure the scientific reality.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a U.S. government agency that provides weather, climate, ocean, and coastal science and services, the most important number of the climate crisis is 426.7 atmospheric CO_2 in parts per million, on 7 June 2024. The baseline NOAA employs is 280ppm — the preindustrial average. A safe level and a stabilisation scenario set out by the IPCC entails limiting the world's temperature to below 2 degrees C. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022),

meanwhile, states that the results of climate change will pose great risks for human and natural systems, on all continents, across all oceans.

Until the mid-19th century, traditional biomass — the burning of solid fuels such as wood, crop waste, or charcoal — was the dominant energy source used worldwide. But with the Industrial Revolution came the rise of coal; followed by oil, gas; and hydropower by the turn of the 20th century. It was not until the 1960s that nuclear energy was added to the mix. What is often referred to as 'modern renewables' — solar and wind — were only added much later, in the 1980s.Renewables, including solar, wind, hydropower, biofuels and others, are at the centre of the transition to less carbon-intensive and more sustainable energy systems. According to Dowson (2022): 'Overall, in 2020 wind and solar accounted for just 10 per cent of global electricity generated, and only 1.6 per cent of total primary energy supply.' The accompanying problem Dowson pinpoints at the same time is that:

> the increasing share of renewables in the energy mix has been outstripped by soaring usage of all forms of energy, including oil, gas and coal. Increasing sales of larger SUVs (Sports Utility Vehicles) are creating more pollution than electric vehicles are saving. Greenhouse gas emissions are at record highs and continuing to rise.

2.2. The role of Big Oil

Big Oil is a name sometimes used to describe the world's six or seven largest publicly traded and investor-owned oil and gas companies, also known as supermajors. The term, particularly in the United States, emphasizes their economic power and influence on politics. Big Oil is often associated with the fossil fuels lobby and also used to refer to the industry as a whole in a pejorative or derogatory manner. Given their size, the numbers of barrels of oil they annually produce, the financial power they wield, in terms of revenue, profit (net income) or market capitalization, especially the Big Five (Exxon Mobil Corp., Shell PLC, TotalEnergies SE, Chevron Corp. and BP PLC) control and dictate the movements of the world oil market. Globally, net income of the oil and gas industry reached a record US$4 trillion in 2022. After the COVID-19 pandemic, energy company profits increased with higher fuel prices resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, falling debt levels, tax write-downs of projects shut down in Russia, and backing off from earlier plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Independent journalist Nick Dowson asks the reader to:

> Imagine for a moment what life could be like if we were free of our dependence on oil and gas. Stepping out into a neighbourhood without the noise of the combustion engine, you breathe deeply, fresh air filling your lungs. It could be a world with fewer resource conflicts, one with good quality green jobs, where everyone has access to the renewable energy they need. Climate change's worst effects could be avoided. Standing up to dictators would be easier. (Dowson 2022)

For Dowson the oil and gas industry is blocking that future. He cites Tessa Khan, the director of Uplift, which campaigns to end North Sea fossil fuels: 'We need to clearly identify the organizations that are not only driving, but also profiting from, the climate crisis: namely the fossil fuel industry.'

Research and advocacy group Oil Change International claim that major oil companies are lagging behind their climate targets. They examined climate plans from the eight largest US and European-based international oil and gas producers. They assessed the eight largest U.S. and European-based international oil and gas producers — BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Eni, Equinor, ExxonMobil, Shell, and TotalEnergies — on their climate and sustainability pledges and plans. The ten assessment criteria are based on ambition, integrity, and people-centered transitions. Six out of eight companies — ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Eni, Chevron, TotalEnergies, and Equinor — have explicit goals to *increase* oil and gas production within the next three years or beyond. To meet climate targets, companies are planning to rely heavily on the "net" in "net-zero," particularly by investing in carbon capture and carbon offsets, which may prolong the life of fossil fuels.

Oil Change International argue that governments should end new licensing and permitting of fossil fuel extraction or infrastructure. They say governments and investors need to go far beyond the scope of current policies and engagement strategies towards the industry. The study found that the companies' climate pledges and plans are "Grossly Insufficient" on most of the criteria analysed. Governments thus need to eliminate subsidies and domestic and international public finance for fossil fuel extraction or infrastructure, including technologies like CCS (carbon capture) that perpetuate the industry's pollution. Meanwhile, a Greenpeace (2023) report, *The Dirty Dozen: The Climate Greenwashing of 12 European Oil Companies*, written by oil market expert Dr Steffen Bukold, reveals that fossil fuel companies are deceiving the public about their willingness to transition to renewable energy and to curb their climate-damaging impact. The profits, revenues and investments of 12 fossil fuel companies were analysed for this report. It claims that the oil and gas industry is lacking in almost every aspect of the actions it would need to take to become a protagonist, or even a neutral bystander, in global energy transition and climate protection. Firstly, fossil fuel profits have risen sharply, lining the pockets of shareholders and executives, but their investments in sustainable solutions remain minimal. Secondly, fossil fuel companies' renewable energy production is still minuscule. No company's share of renewable energy produced exceeded 1.35% of their total 2022 energy production, according to the report. Thirdly, fossil fuel companies have no genuine strategy to achieve net zero. Instead, they deceive with false solutions:

> Transitional technologies that actually should play a role in decarbonisation such as advanced e-fuels or green hydrogen are often mentioned, but the provision is largely left to other industries. Most talk about sales targets, but rarely about production targets or concrete investment volumes. Plus: All options are ultimately designed to extend their own fossil fuel business model. A far-reaching reduction of emissions is not possible on this path.

Fourthly, contrary to greenwashing claims, fossil fuel production is set to continue growing until at least 2030. Greenpeace demands that the oil and gas industry should be rapidly, economically and politically downsized, their profits should be properly and heavily taxed, plans should be made to reduce the risk of stranded assets and, above all, oil and gas demand should be rapidly reduced by government planning.

3. Literary review

By now a fully established trend within linguistic research, Ecolinguistics addresses linguistic dimensions of the relationship between humans and ecosystems (Fill & Penz 2017). Studies focus on topics such as place metaphors and frames (Döring & Ratter 2018), media representation (Döring 2017, Chua et al 2022, Ponton 2023), embodiment (Steffensen & Cowley 2022), econarrative (Stibbe 2023, Ponton 2024).

Some recent studies in Ecolinguistics focus on the discourse of fossil fuel companies, repeated by mainstream media, that influences public perception of the climate crisis. One element identified is the strategy of greenwashing, particularly through the use of items like 'renewable', 'transition', 'green', 'clean', 'sustainable', 'carbon neutral', etc., which mask the companies' harmful practices under an eco-friendly cloak (Stibbe 2021). Ecolinguists show how such manipulative language obfuscates responsibilities and delays public realisation of the urgency of the crisis. Hansen and Machin (2020), for example, explore how by framing the crisis as a manageable problem, the oil industry traces an optimistic prognosis and thereby wards off regulatory pressure. Fill (2023) explores the role of social media in enabling corporate greenwashing and at the same time grassroots ecological resistance, shedding light on the contested nature of environmental discourse. Greenwashing, also known as 'semantic engineering', is also critiqued in Penz and Fill's critical overview of the development of Ecolinguistics (2022).

Alongside work in Ecolinguistics are texts produced in the field of more strictly ecological studies. As the scientific consensus on climate change emerged and strengthened, the fossil fuel industry and its political allies have attacked the growing consensus on climate change, and attempted to exaggerate the uncertainties. This is the theme addressed by Cook et al. (2019), who write that:

> Over the past few decades, the fossil fuel industry has subjected the American public to a well-funded, well-orchestrated disinformation campaign about the reality and severity of human-caused climate change.

Their work shows that climate denial lacks consistency, and may be viewed as an attempt to continue business as usual in the face of climate disruption. The authors conclude that disinformation about climate change has a clear purpose, which is simply to block action on the question. In America, they say, this has been largely successful.

Sylvia Jaworska (2018) employed corpus-linguistics methods to investigate the discourses of climate change in corporate social responsibility and environmental reports produced by major oil companies from 2000 to 2013. One conclusion to this study claims that 'responsibilities are clandestinely shifted to other stakeholders or the future'. The author suggests that this discourse

> obscures the industry's contribution to the environmental degradation and reinforces the neoliberal credo that the market and technology are the only solutions to ecological problems.

Westervelt (2021) summarizes the work of academic researchers who say the fossil fuel industry has a new tool to delay efforts to curb emissions — a social justice strategy. As she writes: "A casual social media user might get the impression the fossil fuel industry views itself as a social justice warrior, fighting on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, and women — at least based on its marketing material in recent years." Westervelt (2021) further writes: 'These campaigns fall into what a handful of sociologists and economists call 'discourses of delay', and continues: 'now the industry's messaging is far more subtle and, in many ways, more effective than outright climate science denial.' (see also Lamb et al 2020, Noor 2024). Timmons Roberts, a co-author of the "discourses of delay" paper, catalogued how fossil fuel interest groups and utility companies in particular used discourses of delay to try to defeat clean energy legislation (Ciplet & Roberts 2017).

Ajit Niranjan (2024b) looks at the Norwegian case. He summarises his analysis: "As it rapidly adopts clean technologies while drilling furiously for oil and gas, the Nordic nation is a paradox." He argues: "Europe's northernmost country is the closest the world has to what could be called a green petrostate." "It is a paradox that has led some to paint Norway as a climate hero and others to decry it as a carbon villain." As Niranjan puts it: "The Norwegian defence is that its fossil fuels are produced more cleanly and with higher ethical standards than those of the autocracies and flawed democracies that dominate petroleum production." Their politicians justify what they are doing, with some politicians like Elisabeth Sæther, state secretary of Norway's petroleum ministry, arguing that the country was working to reduce its "already low" production emissions, but that 'the world will still need oil and gas'."

According to Nina Lakhani (2024) some of the world's most profitable — and most polluting corporations — have invested in carbon offset projects that have fundamental failings and are "probably junk". This suggests that industry claims about greenhouse gas reductions were likely overblown, according to new analysis. Major corporations, like Delta, Gucci, Volkswagen, ExxonMobil, Disney, easyJet, and Nestlé have purchased millions of carbon credits from climate friendly projects that are "likely junk" or worthless when it comes to offsetting their greenhouse gas emissions, according to a classification system developed by Corporate Accountability, a non-profit, transnational corporate watchdog. Their study suggests at least some claims about carbon neutrality and emission reductions have been exaggerated according to the analysis. The fundamental failings leading to a

"likely junk" ranking include whether emissions cuts would have happened anyway, as is often the case with large hydroelectric dams, or if the emissions were just shifted elsewhere, a common issue in forestry offset projects. They show that the voluntary carbon market (VCM) industry works by carbon credits being tradable "allowances" or certificates that allow the purchaser to offset one ton of carbon dioxide or the equivalent in greenhouse gasses by investing in environmental projects anywhere in the world that claim to reduce carbon emissions.

4. Materials and methods

We analyse the "Sustainability and Climate Change Progress report", a significant recent document produced in 2024 by one of the super-majors, TotalEnergies. It purports to support a range of clean energy programmes, to be a roadmap for energy transition away from fossil fuels, to highlight achievements in this sector and in sum to present the company as a force for environmental good. As such it may be viewed as a branding exercise or, if the document's basic premise is felt to be insincere, as a climate greenwash. The foregoing details of the climate science, the social background and the role of Big Oil are provided to support our enquiry in this area. The Discourse-Historical approach pioneered by Ruth Wodak (Wodak 2001, Weiss & Wodak 2007) offers a principled model for the in-depth study of contemporary discourse, and it is precisely via triangulation of discursive effects with details and perspectives from other disciplines (in this case, contemporary climate ecology) that the richest results from Wodak's methodology are obtained. Wodak argues for the inclusion of data and perspectives from a range of contexts, including, 'more or less systematically', the 'historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimension' (Weiss & Wodak 2007: 21–22). Wodak (2001: 64) envisages the D/H method as a 'problem-oriented science', aligning it with the overall socially constructive mindset and methodological outlook of other CDA paradigms.

In our study the aim of the foregoing sections has been to provide part of a thick socio-historical picture of the role of Big Oil in the current energy crisis, on the basis of which possibly hidden meanings in the discourse fragments that are analysed will emerge. From an Ecolinguistic perspective, this approach is particularly useful since it allows to appreciate both the role of alternative, environmentally damaging 'stories we live by' (Stibbe 2015) in the oil companies' discourse, and the extent to which the greenwashing rhetorical strategy is present.

As well as critical discourse analysis the study uses corpus linguistic methods to scrutinize material from the website of an energy company (Alexander 2017, Poole 2022). The analyses undertaken will be facilitated by the use of computer-generated concordances, [1] used to reveal how specific linguistic features are

[1] The program was compiled by Laurence Anthony and is available at his web site. www.laurenceanthony.net (accessed: 23 September 2024).

associated with or serve to uphold larger-scale discourse processes, such as evaluation, argumentative strategies and discourse tactics. We thus receive additional evidence to supplement the descriptive background and sustain our qualitative analysis of argumentation structures.

One of the most basic techniques of language data-processing is the production of alphabetical frequency lists which provide details of key lexical items, and can aid us to explore collocational co-texts which a cursory reading may well have overlooked. Focuses of semantic interest are reflected in lexical patterns including repetition.

Wodak's approach engages three levels: from the broadest to the finest these are topics, discursive strategies and linguistic means (Wodak 2001: 72). In terms of topics, we are dealing with background knowledge that concerns the activities of oil companies in the area of environmental sustainability, with climate activists and their discourse, as well as with that of politicians. Relevant discursive strategies are the deployment of representation patterns such as greenwashing, vagueness or mendacity on the part of the companies, including the use of vacant slogans or positive sounding 'purrwords'.

At the level of linguistic means, analysis focuses on frequency data and the contribution of frequent lexical items to the processes of framing and argumentation developed in the discourse.

Thus, our research questions are as follows: what are the main linguistic and lexical patterns by means of which the company in question represents its activities, and how do these meanings match up with the ideational details we have described in the sections on the discourse-historical background? 2.i, 2.ii.).

5. Results. TotalEnergies' Report and Corpus Analysis

5.1. Case study: TotalEnergies, Iustainability and Climate Change Progress report

We begin with a look at TotalEnergies' 2024 "Sustainability & Climate Progress report", a title which already *presupposes* (Levinson 1983) a favourable climate action profile for the company, i.e., that a) they have made progress towards climate sustainability, and b) that climate goals are among their core aims. The website version runs to 112 pages, and section titles continue the company's green rhetoric. Early pages contain a message from Patrick Pouyanné, Chairman and CEO, and one from Jacques Aschenbroich, Lead Independent Director. Among the messages are headings and sub-titles with environmentally-friendly content:

(1) Anchored on two pillars, the Company is building a strong position to support the energy transition of its customers (p.3)

(2) TotalEnergies stays the course of its balanced multi-energy strategy..(p.3)

(3) Responsibly producing low-cost, low-emission hydrocarbons (p.3)

Both texts exemplify what was claimed in the study by Westervelt (2021) outlined above, i.e. that the company is at pains to associate itself with green ideologies via purr-words (p. 4–9 include: *balanced, integrated, renewable, clean, transition, equitable, decarbonised, solar, wind, low-carbon, sustainable, sustainable development, net zero, integrated power, environmental risks*, etc.), and are full of impressive claims such as:

(4) The Company is building a world class cost-competitive portfolio combining renewable (solar, onshore wind, offshore wind) and flexible assets (flexible gas power plants, storage) to deliver clean firm power to its customers (p. 4)

Purr-words (as non-linguists call them) are positive-sounding or euphemistic words. They are transparent and recognizable indicators of self-representation. When one analyzes how purr-words are employed in corporation discourse, a number of common features emerge. The use of such words and phrases, and, particularly, their tendency to cluster, or their cumulative effect when used often with each other, reflects a self-assured, unquestioning perspective. They confer a confident and categorical note on the discourse, hence transmit an authoritative message to the readership.[2]

Twenty pages entitled 'Our Ambition and Progress' give further proof of green credentials, and page 27 introduces 'Energy and Climate: Our orderly energy transition'. At an inferential level, these section headings contain nested propositions whose pragmatic function is to undercut the document's ostensible message. For example in this case, the notion of an 'orderly transition' associates the company with the socially-valued quality of 'responsibility' in dealing with the climate crisis. It insinuates that it would also be possible for energy multinationals to effectuate a *disorderly* energy transition, i.e. abandon fossil fuel extraction and switch to renewables in a panicky way, compromising the world's energy supplies. Moreover, for a 'transition' to be 'orderly' it must be slow, since it entails all kinds of research, decision-making processes and the like.

The final section, 'Performance Indicators', from page 96 to the end consists of tables with figures, supposedly backing the company's green rhetoric. To a degree, for a non-specialist readership, this mass of complex mathematical detail obfuscates rather than illuminates the actual impact of whatever TotalEnergies has done in this sector.

The document is a mixed multimedia report, with occasional photographs that support the overall pro-green messages of the text. For example, on p.83 there is a glossy image of two beaming black workers in a tropical agricultural setting, illustrative of a section entitled, in large blue letters: 'Having a Positive Impact for

[2] Orwell (2013) noted in the well-known essay Politics and the English Language that such words, which were called 'glittering generalities' in 1938 by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, allow their users to equivocate, since they are too imprecise to admit of a single recognised meaning. The hearer is bound to conclude that the speaker means what they themselves imagine them to mean, which may not be the case.

Stakeholders'. It is not hard to unpack the message in such an 'image-text' (Mitchell, in Wiesenthal et al. 2000): TotalEnergies' environmental policies are impacting just the kind of areas where people are usually felt to be most at risk from climate change.

5.2. Concordancing study of TotalEnergies' Sustainability & Climate Progress Report

The report has 27,774 tokens — the total number of words (i.e. of running words), and 4,472 types — the number of different words (word-forms or 'lemmata'). This gives a type-token-ratio (Baker 2010) of 0,1610. Maximum diversity, i.e. every other word being different, equals unity (1). The more repetitive the text, the closer to zero (0) the ratio will be; hence, the element of repetition is reflected in this ratio, a datum which may well reflect focuses of semantic interest. If function words are ignored, and only content words counted, frequency data is obtained on which, predictably, the most frequent item is 'TotalEnergies'.

Studying frequency allows us to unearth specific areas that TotalEnergies presents as its major interests and sets out to emphasise for the general reader. The three most frequent content terms are 'TotalEnergies', 'energy' and 'emissions' (table one, below):

Table 1. **Frequency list**

Word	Hits	Frequency
TotalEnergies	234	12
Energy	205	15
Emissions	161	19
Company	106	28
Transition	82	32
Carbon	81	33
Year	79	36
Gas	78	37
Electricity	77	38
Production	75	40
Development	70	45
Renewable	69	46
Projects	66	48

Alongside expected items for a fossil fuel multinational such as 'energy, production, company, projects, gas' are found items with an environmental orientation like 'emissions, transition, renewable'.

Many passages in the report document and demonstrate the environmental credentials of TotalEnergies, such as this extract, which aims to show how humanely the company treats people in the Global South:

> Access to clean energy, particularly for cooking, is a prerequisite for economic and social development in emerging countries. Today, 2.3 billion people in the world do not have access to it.
> By substituting Liquefied Petroleum Gas (a fossil fuel) in the form of bottled gas for wood and charcoal, 'clean cooking' has a positive effect on people's health, the environment and the economy. LPG is more efficient for cooking and emits less CO2 than charcoal. It improves air quality, reducing the risk of respiratory complications and cardiovascular disease. It also reduces some of the negative impacts of traditional biomass use, notably on women (time saved facilitating access to education, employment or entrepreneurship, and financial independence) and on the environment (deforestation)

The text rehearses some of the standard arguments proposed in favour of liquefied petroleum gas as a transition fossil fuel towards cleaner energy sources . However, though it has some advantages it is still a fossil fuel, hence unsustainable in the long-term, and its use represents a sideways step in terms of meaningful transformation of the energy market. It has been claimed that, though cleaner than petrol in the context of cars, it performs worse than diesel (Synák et al. 2019). In any case, as a by-product of the petrol extraction and refining process (Raslavičius et al. 2014), it is plain that its adoption on a wide scale would simply mean business as usual for TotalEnergies. There is some merit in the claim that there are environmental benefits associated with its use in ex-colonial contexts (fewer trees cut down, health benefits, etc.). However, the presupposition that third-world women will be able to access 'education, employment and entreneurship' because they are freed up by the use of LPG is unsubstantiated. Hence, it assumes as real and actual benefits which in reality are at best contingent, or currently *irrealis*. The text is accompanied by a radiant image of a 'Kenyan woman using bottled LPG to cook, replacing charcoal'; again, an instance of visual persuasion (Messaris 1996). Like a magazine advert, the image is carefully constructed, with the woman's bright orange dress a perfect match for the gas bottle in the foreground, the company name in prominent position.

Analysis now focuses on some of the key lexical items in table one, as well as others of interest identified by the software. We begin with *ambition*, not one of the most frequent items, but relevant for what it reveals about the company's intentions and self-presentation strategies. Somewhat curiously, for an ostensibly future-oriented document that promises significant changes, the term only occurs 35 times. Some examples are shown in table two, below:

Table 2. **'Ambition'**

wind developers in 2023, and we have the	**ambition**	to be among the world's top 5 by 2030
production (15 TWh in 2023). As part of its	**ambition**	to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050
or the 4th consecutive year, the company's	**ambition**	in terms of sustainable development and energy
er with Society TotalEnergies reaffirms its	**ambition**	to be a major player in the energy transition
integrating new skills. Our	**ambition**	to rank among the top 5 producers of wind and

The co-text contains numerous instances of eco-friendly lexis (here *wind developers, carbon neutrality, sustainable development, energy transition, new skills*). 'Ambition' thus operates like a corporate purr-word; moreover, the irrealis element here — these desirable outcomes are all as yet only future possibilities — allow the company to bank positive capital now on the basis of future scenarios which may not be realised.

Secondly, *company* (106 hits). As expected, a picture of the company emerges that paints a highly positive picture, especially in terms of its green credentials:

Table 3. **'Company'**

strategy from production to customer, the	**Company**	implementing its transition strategy supporting
urns of the traditional Utilities model. The	**Company**	is building a world class cost-competitive portf
et Zero in 2050, together with society, the	**Company**	has placed sustainable development at the hear
ing them to deepen their knowledge of the	**company's**	specific features, its sustainability challenges
2024 confirmed the progress made by the	**Company**	in the field of energy transition and sustainable
from processes and water discharges. The	**company**	often goes beyond compliance with applicable

By contrast with the last item, the general orientation here is to the present tense, the area of present measures, construed predominantly in Material processes (*to implement, to build, to place, to make + progress, to go*, etc.). To expand some of these snippets is to make manifest the extent to which the texts play up the company's environmental credentials. It self-represents as going the extra mile:

> (5) The company often *goes beyond compliance* with applicable regulations to limit the quantities discharged into the various environments.

It uses purr words:

> (6) the company has placed *sustainable development* at the heart of its strategy, projects and operations.

It poses as deeply committed to renewable energy:

> (7) The company is building a world class cost-competitive portfolio combining renewable (*solar, onshore wind, offshore wind*) and flexible assets (flexible gas power plants, storage) to deliver clean firm power to its customers 24/7."

It paints a picture of its role in an ongoing process of transition to a decarbonised economy:

> (8) the company is implementing its *transition strategy* supporting its customers and stakeholders in their *decarbonization.*

Many of these claims are vague. For example, no details are given in (c) of the proportions involved. A possible inference is that the company's portfolio is split 50–50 between renewables and fossil fuel, but all that is indicated is that there is a 'combination'. In (a) too the adverb 'often' is non-specific regarding the form this action takes, how often it is carried out, what it consists in, etc.

Next, *energy*, after TotalEnergies the second most frequent lexical item, with 205 hits:

Table 4. **'Energy'**

ctives of tripling the amount of renewable	**energy**	and doubling energy efficiency by 2030, as well
tments are needed, not only in renewable	**energy**	but also in electricity networks and systems
gress thanks to sales growth of renewable	**energy**	by notching a 13% reduction in the lifecycle carb
ers numerous opportunities for renewable	**energy**	and flexible production. TotalEnergies has built
enewables: activities related to renewable	**energy**	(wind, solar, bio- energy and hydropower), as wel
accelerating our investments in renewable	**energy**	Relentlessly Reducing Our Scope 1+2 Emissions,
accelerating our investments in renewable	**energy**	Scope 1+2 Emissions Reduction by 2030
weather conditions contrary to renewable	**energy**	and to face demand fluctuations. In addition,
gned agreements to acquire the renewable	**energy**	aggregator Quadra Energy, which has a 9 GW
of water using electricity from renewable	**energy**	sources. Synthetic fuels, e-fuels CO2 can be co e-

The left collocation of the keyword with the adjective 'renewable' is the outstanding finding here. Moreover, in the corpus results, 'transition' occurs 33 times as a direct right collocate. 'Efficiency' occurs 13 times as a direct right collocate to 'energy', while the adjective 'transitional' occurs twice as a left collocate. From table four it is plain at a glance that TotalEnergies is concerned to present itself as almost exclusively concerned with the left collocate, or 'renewable' energy. Yet, as indicated above, TotalEnergies is one of the 'supermajors', a group of the world's largest publicly traded oil companies that includes ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, and Shell. In 2019, its oil output was 1.845 million barrels per day (Toledano et al. 2022: 50). The significant presence of the term 'energy' in the corpus, with this collocation pattern exemplify the company's rhetorical goals throughout the document, i.e. to shift attention from its role as among the planet's heftiest polluters and contributers to global warming (Toledano et al, ibid.) and to re-shape the image of its global brand as an environmentally-friendly concern.

The next item is the third most frequent, *emissions*, of which there are 161 instances. The semantic prosody (Hunston 2007) of company discourses about 'emissions' can be observed simply by listing all the processes that figure left of the term, either directly or in company with other words:

> we have reduced / aiming for zero / reduce / slashing / reducing / aiming for zero /reduction / find solutions to reduce /slashing / reducing / elimination / drastically lowering / reduce / reducing / Reducing / curbing / Our objective of cutting / Reduce / help our clients reduce / lower / reduce / Relentlessly reducing / substantially reduce / a priority to / reduce / reduced / minimizing / the reduction in / to avoid and reduce / Our actions aiming to reduce / to reduce/ reducing / aims to gradually reduce / efforts to reduce / We are also working to reduce/ reducing / reduce / has already reduced / beyond the 75% reduction / near-zero Upstream / reduce / reduce / Reduce / reduce / reduce / reduce / reduce / reduce / reduce / reducing / reduce / reduce / reduce / lowering / reduce / Reduce / definitely contribute to lower / Reduction / reductions / reducing / reduction / reducing / reduce / help to reduce / achieve net zero / reducing / aiming for zero / reducing / target of 75% reduction / reduced.

This list makes clear how substantial this semantic area is within TotalEnergies' discourse in the report. The central terms employed are 'reduce' or 'reduction' and a wide range of related synonyms. In parallel with this point, we can note that the most frequent adjective in the report is 'low', which occurs 46 times; in more than half the instances (27) as a left collocate of 'carbon'. Right collocates are: 'break even' (3 instances), 'emission' (5 instances), 'cost' (7), 'greenhouse gas emissions' (2) 'production costs' (once) 'low permeability deposits' (once). Not only, then, does the company ostensibly position itself as actively engaged in the reduction of carbon emissions, but it paints a picture of energetic activity in this direction via high intensity lexical terms (Martin and White, 2005) such as: *slashing /aiming for zero / elimination / drastically reducing / relentlessly reducing.*

6. Discussion

At this point we can draw together the above linguistic analysis with the details provided of the context in which this discourse appears. The repeated use of green lexical items such as 'carbon neutral' and 'reducing emissions', as well as discursive practices such as the striking insistence on 'renewable energy' identified above, support the company's strategy of self-presenting as environmentally on point. TotalEnergies, as pointed out above, was selected for study as a representive of 'Big Oil', the group of super-majors whose core business activities contribute greatly to global warming and hence to the ongoing climate crisis (Gutstein 2018). These companies are regularly accused of greenwashing (Vasta 2005, Bowen & Aragon-Correa 2014, Seele & Gatti 2017, etc.). The last of these studies describes Shell's 2007 campaign, 'Don't throw anything away. There is no away', which featured 'a colourful picture of an industrial landscape with several refineries and four chimneys emitting colorful flowers into a bright blue sky' (Seele & Gatti 2017). The Guardian criticized this misleading advertisement, and the environmental organisation Friends of the Earth complained to the UK's Advertising Standards Authority, accusing Shell of 'inconsistency between its communication and its actual environmental performance', successfully compelling the company to withdraw the advertisements. Greenwashing allows these corporations to project a false image of leadership in the fight against climate change when it is a scientifically accepted fact that fossil fuels are the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, driving global warming and forcing the climate to the brink of collapse. Moreover, as pointed out by Lamb (2020) and Westervelt (2021) in works cited above, these rhetorical methods play a role in the delaying strategies of Big Oil, whose true interests coincide with the 'drill, baby, drill!' slogan recently announced by Donald Trump as official Republican policy on the fossil fuel issue.[3]

[3] ABC News, online: https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/drill-baby-drill-donald-trump-oil-gas-rnc/story?id=112108980 (retrieved 9/10/2024).

The linguistic and semiotic patterns identified in the above analysis confirm that the Report is another attempt by a protagonist of climate change to re-brand itself as a force for environmental good. That this is largely a rhetorical performance is manifest in the profusion of green purr-words that have been identified, as well as in the glossy, climate-friendly images described above. However, to highlight such linguistic and semiotic elements without an in-depth account of the surrounding context is to offer a superficial, partial picture of the company's behaviour. The discourse-historical approach entails the situation of the discourse analysed in its appropriate context, where disparities between rhetoric and reality may emerge in a natural fashion.

Actions speak louder than words, and the reality of TotalEnergies' daily commercial activities shows them deeply engaged as one of the most significant players in fossil fuel extraction, while their renewable sector is trivial by comparison. The rhetorical smoke-screen thrown up by documents like the Report obfuscates the true state of affairs, while allowing supporters of Big Oil to represent them as responsible, cooperative organisations. All this delays the process of a real transition towards renewable sources of energy, and maintains intact the structures of dependence on fossil fuels.

We need to ask whether there are steps that can be taken to expedite energy transition on a world scale. Perhaps surprisingly the latest UN climate summit, COP28, was the first COP to officially acknowledge that fossil fuels are the root cause of climate change. Most countries wanted a strong statement on phasing out or at the very least phase down (reducing) of fossil fuels. Instead, countries agreed a statement saying we must

> transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science.

The rhetoric may sound like it was a breakthrough. However, one notices here the same kind of vague, destabilising, irrealis patterns as those found in the TotalEnergies report itself. The can is kicked away down the road — to 2050, by which time it will be the problem (and responsibility) of a new generation of politicians. The need for dramatic, rapid, instant action (now!) is pushed away by emphasising the need for a 'just, orderly and equitable' process.

But Big Oil has already had decades to do the right thing — it can't, and it won't. Therefore, enabling a just transition must mean, first of all, bringing private oil and gas companies into public ownership. To really achieve downsizing of energy companies much more is needed; for example, requiring transnational companies and financial institutions to monitor, assess, and transparently disclose risks and impacts on the climate through their operations, portfolios, supply and value chains. This may sound like an appeal to act voluntarily. But a realist would say that it is going to take a long time, to initiate legal requirements enforced by international law and administered by national governments.

7. Conclusion

The study aimed to highlight the main linguistic and lexical patterns by means of which the company in question represents its activities to conform with a desirable social profile which, we have argued, is out of synch with their real nature. It shows how the language used by an oil company like TotalEnergies to represent itself as environmentally conscious, fully committed to respecting the goals of international climate frameworks such as COP 28, raises questions about how far such discourse may be seen as a case of greenwashing (Grasso 2022).

As the impacts of climate change become more apparent, the need for a true shift to renewable energy becomes more critical. Thus, it is essential to hold companies like TotalEnergies to account, to require them to substantiate their rhetorical claims, to do more than propose eye-catching but ultimately superficial investments in renewables. What the report presents is, in the final analysis, a marketing exercise rather than what it purports to be, a sort of manifesto for change.

The paper thus contributes to the growing tradition of ecolinguistic studies that expose the role of (corporate) language in perpetuating situations of environmental harm.

Hopefully, this study will encourage researchers to provide more indications of the steps being taken to counter climate change, and of the enormous effects on ecological degradation in the world by the fossil fuels industry, as well as who or what is contributing to this deterioration, and what can be done about it.

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