



Green by Words : Linguistic Framing of Sustainability Claims in Indian Advertising

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Abstract

Advertising ecosystem in India appears to have reached in an era of consciously going green, as brands across different categories adopting 'green rhetoric' as a strategic tool for advertising. This paper sets out to illustrate that how linguistic framing operates within Indian eco-friendly advertising terrain. The researchers in this paper argues that prudently chosen words construct environmental realities that often diverge substantially from verifiable ecological outcomes. Based on the concepts of linguistic framing theory, semantics, and pragmatics, the study analyses patterns of vague modification, absolute claims, comparative constructions, and emotionally charged language across more than fifty Indian advertising slogans. The analysis reveals that terms such as eco-friendly, natural, and sustainable function as persuasive devices lacking definitional anchoring in Indian regulatory frameworks. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) 2024 guidelines identify vague environmental terminology as a challenge, with internal assessments suggesting that nearly seventy-nine percent of green claims in Indian advertisements carry misleading elements. The researchers propose a four-category linguistic taxonomy of green advertising tactics and argues for culturally situated reading of such claims, noting that Indian rhetorical traditions and collective environmental values amplify the persuasive reach of certain linguistic patterns. The study contributes the India-specific theoretical framework for critically analysing linguistic framing in green advertising, offering implications for regulatory bodies, communication scholars, and consumer awareness initiatives.

Keywords: linguistic framing, greenwashing, Indian advertising, environmental communication, vague modifiers, ASCI guidelines.

Introduction

The intersection of environmental concern and commercial persuasion has given rise to a distinct linguistic register in contemporary advertising. Across the globe, corporates use vocabulary that position their products as agents of ecological benefit, a practice scholar have termed 'Greenwashing' when such claims lack substantive grounding (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

In India, this practice is particularly relevant as the country seeks to balance rapid urbanisation and economic development with growing environmental challenges. At the same time, Indian society continues to draw upon Vedic values, reflected in the verse: "*Yat te bhūme vikhanāmi kṣipraṃ tad api rohatu. Mā te marma vimṛgvari mā te hṛdayam arpipam,*" which emphasizes the responsible use of natural resources without harming the nature earth.

Indian advertisers occupy a uniquely productive rhetorical space. On one side, they address consumers increasingly conscious of environmental issues and on the other, they deal with regulatory frameworks governing environmental claims remain underdeveloped relative to the scale and sophistication of the

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advertising industry. The ASCI, India's primary self-regulatory body for advertising industry, released updated guidelines in 2024 specifically targeting misleading environmental claims, acknowledging that the problem had reached systemic proportions (Advertising Standards Council of India [ASCI], 2024).

Despite growing scholarly attention to greenwashing globally, India-specific linguistic analyses remain noticeably, absent from academic literature. Most existing studies examine Western advertising contexts, drawing on North American or European corporates and regulatory frameworks (Parguel et al., 2011; Chen & Chang, 2013). This gap matters because language functions within cultural systems, and the persuasive mechanics of Indian English advertising blending British colonial linguistic inheritance, Sanskrit-rooted vocabulary, and vernacular emotional advertisements differ meaningfully from Western counterparts.

This paper addresses a gap by proposing a theoretical framework for understanding linguistic framing in the context of Indian green advertising. The main argument of the paper is that specific linguistic tactics such as vague modification, absolute assertion, comparative minimisation, and emotional invocation in particular works systematically to construct an impression of environmental responsibility that frequently outpaces ecological reality. By analysing these tactics through linguistic framing theory (Entman, 1993), semantic analysis (Cruse, 2004), and pragmatic interpretation (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983), the paper builds a taxonomy applicable to the Indian advertising landscape.

Literature Review

2.1 Greenwashing and Linguistic Deception

The scholarly Address of greenwashing has evolved considerably since Westervelt first coined the term in the 1980s, moving from descriptive documentation of corporate behaviour toward nuanced analysis of communication mechanisms (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Linguistic approaches to greenwashing examine how particular word choices, rhetorical structures, and discourse patterns enable advertisers to suggest environmental alignment without committing to verifiable claims (Guy & Shiva, 2017). Vague language plays a prime role in this process: terms that carry positive environmental connotations without corresponding to any legally or scientifically defined standard create what Laufer (2003) calls the halo of ambiguity, a space in which favourable inferences can be drawn without any corresponding factual foundation.

The Federal Trade Commission in the United States and equivalent bodies in Europe have invested significantly in defining what constitutes a misleading environmental claim (FTC, 2012; European Commission, 2023). Indian regulatory attention has historically lagged, though recent ASCI guidelines represent a substantive corrective step. The 2024 ASCI framework specifically identifies terms including eco-friendly, green, sustainable, and natural as requiring substantiation, noting that these terms in isolation communicate nothing specific about a product's actual environmental impact (ASCI, 2024).

2.2 Linguistic Framing Theory

Entman's (1993) framing theory, originally developed for media studies, holds that communication frames operate by selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text. Applied to advertising language, framing analysis asks which environmental attributes are foregrounded, which are obscured, and what inferential pathways are opened or closed by particular word choices. When an Indian paint brand describes its product as inspired by nature, the frame activated involves harmony between product and natural world; the toxicity of volatile organic compounds in the paint's composition is simultaneously pushed outside the frame's boundaries.

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory extends framing analysis by showing that abstract concepts, such as environmental responsibility, are understood through concrete metaphorical structures. Indian green advertising frequently draws on cultural metaphors rooted in ancient ecological philosophy of India, invoking the sacred status of rivers, forests, and soil to borrow affective associations for commercially produced goods. Phrases evoking Dharti Maa (mother earth) or positioning a product as a guardian of prakriti (nature) activate deeply embedded cultural schemata that carry persuasive power precisely because they tap into values consumers hold independent of any specific product evaluation.

2.3 Semantics and Pragmatics of Green Claims

Semantic analysis distinguishes between the denotative meaning of a word and its connotative extensions (Cruse, 2004). The term natural denotes conformity with nature, yet its connotative freight includes

purity, safety, health, and environmental goodness. Advertisers exploit this connotative excess: a product labelled natural need only contain some naturally occurring ingredient to satisfy minimal denotative standards while activating the full connotative complex in consumer interpretation.

Gricean pragmatics introduces the principle of relevance which means listeners assume that communicators provide information that is relevant to the context and cooperate toward shared understanding (Grice, 1975). When we applied this principle to advertising, it could be understood as, consumers interpret vague environmental claims charitably for instance if a brand says its packaging is better for the environment, cooperative processing leads consumers to infer that the product represents a meaningful ecological improvement rather than a marginal one. Advertisers benefit from this pragmatic charity without being held accountable for the inferences they trigger (Levinson, 1983).

Methodology

A qualitative discourse analysis is used as its primary methodological approach for this study, supplemented by systematic categorisation of linguistic features. The corpus consists of fifty-three advertising slogans and taglines drawn from Indian brands across five sectors: personal care, food and beverages, home care, textiles, and consumer electronics. Slogans were selected on the basis of containing at least one environmentally oriented claim and originating from brands operating primarily or substantially in the Indian market. Data was collected from publicly available advertising materials, brand websites, and documented campaign archives between 2019 and 2024.

Analysis proceeded through three stages. In the first stage, each slogan was examined for the presence of semantic features associated with environmental claims: vague modifiers, absolute quantifiers, comparative constructions, and emotional or aspirational invocations. In the second stage, linguistic framing analysis was applied to identify which environmental realities each slogan foregrounded and which were suppressed or obscured. In the third stage, pragmatic analysis examined the inferential gaps between stated content and likely consumer interpretation, drawing on Gricean cooperative principles and relevance theory.

The ASCI (2024) guidelines were used as a normative reference point against which claims were evaluated, alongside relevant scientific literature on the environmental performance of the product categories in question. This multi-layered approach allows the analysis to move beyond cataloguing linguistic features toward understanding the mechanisms through which language constructs environmental meaning in the Indian advertising context.

Theoretical Framework: A Taxonomy of Linguistic Framing Tactics

4.1 Vague Modification

The most pervasive linguistic tactic in the corpus is the deployment of vague modifiers are adjectives and adjectival phrases that signal environmental orientation without specifying what that orientation consists of or how it is achieved. Terms such as eco-friendly, green, environmentally conscious, sustainable, and natural appeared in forty one of the fifty-three slogans analysed, frequently as the sole environmental claim. The semantic vagueness of these terms is not incidental; it is constitutive of their persuasive function.

Consider the phrase eco-friendly packaging deployed by a major Indian brand. The term eco-friendly has no statutory definition under Indian law, and the ASCI (2024) guidelines explicitly flag it as requiring qualification. What environmental attribute is being claimed? Reduced weight? Use of recycled materials? Biodegradability? Each of these would constitute a distinct ecological claim with distinct implications, yet eco-friendly collapses them into a single, positively valenced modifier that invites the consumer to supply whichever interpretation they find most favourable. This is framing as omission: by not specifying, the advertisement says everything positive about the environment and nothing verifiable.

Cultural amplification intensifies this mechanism in the Indian context. Terms like *prakriti* (nature), *shudh* (pure), and *swachh* (clean) carry connotations rooted in religious and philosophical traditions that extend well beyond their literal meanings. When an Indian personal care brand describes its product as made with *prakriti*'s bounty, the modifier activates associations with blessed purity, ancestral wisdom, and cosmic harmony that no synthetic ingredient list could plausibly support. From this it can be concluded that the vagueness is culturally enriched and its source emerged from the ancient culture (Tanaka, 1994).

4.2 Absolute Claims

A second tactic involves the use of absolute quantifiers like 100%, zero, completely, fully that assert total environmental compliance or the complete elimination of negative impacts of the product. Such claims appear in seventeen slogans in the corpus, including assertions of zero carbon emissions, 100% natural ingredients, and fully biodegradable formulations.

The rhetorical appeal of absolute claims derives from their apparent precision. Unlike vague modifiers, an absolute claim seems to commit the advertiser to something measurable. Yet the commitment is illusory as biological systems do not function in absolute categories, and the lifecycle analysis of virtually any manufactured product reveals environmental impacts across extraction, processing, distribution, use, and disposal that preclude genuine absolute claims. When a textile brand asserts 100% natural fibres, it may accurately describe the fibre composition while concealing the chemical-intensive processes of dyeing, finishing, and transportation that constitute the majority of the product's carbon footprint. The absolute claim frames a partial truth as a total one (Parguel et al., 2011).

4.3 Comparative Minimisation

Comparative constructions present a product as better than, lower than, or more sustainable than an implicit baseline, without specifying what that baseline is. Examples from the corpus include lower carbon footprint, reduced plastic usage, and cleaner than conventional alternatives. This tactic is particularly sophisticated from a linguistic standpoint because comparative claims are technically relative rather than absolute, apparently providing the qualifier that absolute claims lack.

The problem, as Entman's (1993) framing theory predicts, lies in what is not said. Lower emissions than what? Better than which competitor? Reduced plastic by what percentage relative to which benchmark year? Without answers to these questions, comparative claims produce an impression of progress without substantiating its magnitude or significance. A product that reduced its plastic packaging by two percent relative to a 2019 baseline can truthfully claim reduced plastic while contributing to ongoing environmental harm at nearly identical rates. The frame foregrounded is improvement; the context excluded is scale (Chen & Chang, 2013).

4.4 Emotional and Aspirational Invocation

The fourth tactic departs from factual claim-making entirely, substituting emotional appeal and collective aspiration for environmental information. Slogans such as 'Together, let us save our earth', 'Join the journey to a greener tomorrow', and 'Door to the future' deserve operate through affective rather than propositional logic. They do not assert that the product has any specific environmental attribute; they position the act of purchase within a moral narrative of environmental stewardship.

This tactic is particularly effective in the Indian cultural context, where collective identity and intergenerational responsibility carry significant normative weight. Appeals to future generations, invocations of national environmental heritage, and framings of consumption as participation in a larger ecological mission all draw on cultural values that Indian consumers bring to the advertising encounter. The Gricean principle of relevance (Grice, 1975) ensures that consumers interpret these emotional appeals as implying some genuine environmental connection to the product otherwise, why would the advertiser mention environmental themes at all? The implicature of relevance does the persuasive work that explicit claims cannot.

Discussion

The taxonomy developed above reveals a coherent system of linguistic choices that collectively construct environmental credibility for products and brands whose ecological performance ranges from marginally improved to actively misleading. Several implications emerge from this analysis.

First, the cultural situatedness of these tactics demands India-specific regulatory and analytical frameworks. Although international research on greenwashing provides useful theoretical insights, it does not fully reflect the Indian context. Indian advertisers often use cultural and linguistic elements, such as Sanskrit terms related to nature and traditional environmental values. They also draw on stories and beliefs rooted in Indian culture to create an emotional connection with consumers. Because these ideas are familiar, Indian consumers may be more willing to trust or positively interpret such environmental claims made by brands. A framework developed from Western advertising contexts will systematically underestimate the persuasive reach of culturally inflected Indian green claims.

Second, the ASCI (2024) guidelines are an important step towards regulating environmental claims in advertising. However, their success depends on strong enforcement and public awareness, which are still limited. The guidelines state that terms like “eco-friendly” are too vague unless supported by clear evidence. However, this does not stop brands from using such terms. Instead, the guidelines provide a standard to assess whether these claims are true or misleading. Building consumer literacy around linguistic framing tactics may prove as important as regulatory action in reducing the impact of misleading green claims.

Third, the linguistic framing analysis reveals that greenwashing in Indian advertising is not primarily a phenomenon of outright false statements. Most of the slogans analysed are not technically false but they are strategically incomplete, exploiting the gap between what is said and what is pragmatically implied. Regulatory frameworks focused on truth-testing of explicit claims will consistently fail to capture this mechanism; frameworks attentive to the inferential environment created by advertising language are required (Laufer, 2003).

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a theoretically grounded framework for understanding how linguistic framing operates in Indian green advertising. Through vague modification, absolute claims, comparative minimisation, and emotional invocation, advertisers construct environmental realities that regularly outpace the ecological performance of their products. The analysis demonstrates that these tactics are not random or incidental but constitute a coherent linguistic system that exploits semantic vagueness, pragmatic charity, and cultural resonance.

The novelty of this contribution lies in its cultural and geographical specificity. India’s advertising landscape presents unique linguistic resources and unique consumer interpretive contexts that require dedicated analytical frameworks rather than the translation of Western models. Future research should extend this corpus-based analysis to vernacular-language Indian advertising, where the cultural-linguistic dynamics of green framing are likely to be even more pronounced. Empirical consumer studies examining how Indian audiences interpret and are influenced by the linguistic tactics identified here would substantially advance the field. Additionally, longitudinal analysis tracking changes in green advertising language following the ASCI 2024 guidelines would provide valuable data on the responsiveness of advertising practice to regulatory intervention.

Ultimately, the question of how words construct environmental meaning is not merely an academic one. As India confronts some of the world’s most pressing ecological challenges, the language through which those challenges are addressed or obscured in public communication carries real stakes for consumer behaviour, corporate accountability, and environmental outcomes.

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