



ECOLOGICAL WORLDVIEWS IN INDONESIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE ON RUBBER AND OIL PALM PLANTATIONS: A CRITICAL ECOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Plantation commodities occupy a central place in Indonesia's development narrative, yet the language used to describe them is rarely neutral. This study examines how Indonesian online media construct competing ecological worldviews in their coverage of oil palm and rubber plantations, drawing on ecolinguistics and critical discourse analysis. Thirty articles published between 2019 and 2024 across national, local, and environmentally focused outlets were analyzed using a coding framework built around Stibbe's distinction between instrumental and intrinsic ecological values. The analysis shows a marked asymmetry: oil palm coverage is dominated by a vocabulary of productivity, efficiency, and investment that positions land and ecosystems chiefly as economic assets, while rubber coverage more often draws on language of balance, continuity, and local knowledge that treats nature as a living system with its own worth. This polarization suggests that different commodities are anchored in distinct ideological frames, with oil palm discourse aligning closely with instrumental, growth-oriented narratives and rubber discourse offering a comparatively marginal but ecologically richer alternative. The findings extend critical ecolinguistic scholarship on development discourse in the Global South and point to the need for media practitioners and policymakers to frame plantation development in terms that hold economic and ecological considerations together, rather than treating them as competing priorities.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics; Media Discourse; Ecological Worldview; Oil Palm; Rubber Plantation; Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

As ecological pressures mount across the developing world, few sectors illustrate the tension between economic ambition and environmental limits as clearly as plantation agriculture. In Indonesia, oil palm and rubber have long anchored national development narratives, generating employment, export earnings, and rural income at a scale few other commodities can match. Yet plantations are never simply economic facts; they are also talked about, and the way they are talked about matters. Media coverage does not just report on oil palm and rubber — it builds a picture of what these commodities are, what nature is for, and what counts as legitimate development.

This picture is far from neutral. Media discourse actively frames reality and, in doing so, lends legitimacy to particular ideological positions over others. Coverage of oil palm in

Indonesia tends to foreground productivity, efficiency, investment, and national economic contribution. Rubber, by contrast, is more often folded into narratives of sustainability, ecological balance, traditional farming, and local livelihoods. That two commodities occupying similar ecological terrain should attract such different vocabularies is itself revealing: it suggests that distinct ecological values are being written into the discourse, quietly shaping how readers come to understand nature and its relationship to human development.

Environmental communication research has grown considerably in recent years, but comparative ecolinguistic work across plantation commodities remains scarce. Much of the existing literature examines a single commodity in isolation or stays at a descriptive level, stopping short of interrogating what particular linguistic choices imply ideologically. This leaves a gap: we know relatively little about how ecological worldviews are constructed and contested when two commodities compete for the same discursive space.

This study addresses that gap by examining Indonesian online media coverage of oil palm and rubber plantations through an ecolinguistic lens. It asks how instrumental and intrinsic ecological values are linguistically encoded in this coverage, and what ideological work these representations perform within broader development discourse. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the role language plays in shaping ecological consciousness and development ideology.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecolinguistics supplies the theoretical backbone of this study. The field examines how language mediates the relationship between people and the natural environment, and it is particularly interested in linguistic patterns that either sustain ecological wellbeing or contribute to its erosion. Stibbe (2015) frames this in terms of the "stories we live by" — the narratives, often invisible because so familiar, through which we make sense of nature, progress, and development.

Central to this framework is the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic ecological value. Instrumental value treats nature chiefly as a resource: its worth is measured in terms of productivity, efficiency, and utility to human ends, and this logic tends to underwrite development discourses oriented toward short-term economic gain. Intrinsic value, by contrast, holds that nature has worth independent of its usefulness to people; discourse organized around this value tends to foreground sustainability, interdependence, and long-term ecological continuity.

This study also draws on critical discourse analysis, which treats media texts not as neutral windows onto events but as sites where institutional interests and power relations leave their mark (Fairclough, 1995, 2010; van Dijk, 2008). Through the steady accumulation of lexical choices and framing strategies, media discourse normalizes some worldviews while pushing others to the margins. Machin and Mayr (2012) and Hansen (2018) similarly show how repeated linguistic patterns in media coverage of environmental issues shape public understanding well beyond the facts being reported. In plantation discourse specifically, this often means that media framing tracks national development agendas, reinforcing instrumental ecological values almost by default.

Taken together, these two strands situate the present study within critical ecolinguistics: an approach that treats discourse as an ideological arena in which ecological values are negotiated, rather than simply reflected. Media language, on this view, is not incidental to development and environmental debates — it is one of the mechanisms through which particular development trajectories come to seem natural, inevitable, or beneficial.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design built around ecolinguistic discourse analysis. A qualitative approach suits the aim here, which is not to quantify linguistic features but to interpret how ecological values are constructed through language, word by word and frame by frame.

The corpus comprises thirty Indonesian online media articles published between 2019 and 2024, drawn from national, local, and environmentally focused outlets to capture a reasonably wide discursive range. Articles were selected on three criteria: an explicit focus on oil palm or rubber plantations, clear relevance to development or sustainability debates, and public accessibility online. The five-year window was chosen to keep the corpus anchored in contemporary development discourse and recent environmental debate in Indonesia.

Analysis proceeded through an ecolinguistic coding framework designed to surface dominant lexical items, discursive framing, and the ecological values these imply. Coding focused on identifying language that positions nature instrumentally or intrinsically. The process moved through several stages: a close reading of each article to isolate ecologically relevant lexical items, classification of these items according to the value they encode, comparative analysis between oil palm and rubber coverage, and finally interpretation of the resulting patterns against the theoretical framework outlined above.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study applied theoretical triangulation, reading the data through both ecolinguistics and critical discourse analysis rather than a single lens. Coding procedures were kept transparent throughout, and the researcher's interpretive role was treated reflexively as part of the analytical process rather than bracketed out of it.

Table 1. Media Corpus Overview

No	Media Source	Year	Commodity	Topic Focus	Dominant Lexical Items	Ecological Value
1	National Online News A	2019	Oil Palm	Economic growth	productivity, export value	Instrumental
2	National Online News B	2019	Oil Palm	Land expansion	land optimization, efficiency	Instrumental
3	National Online News C	2020	Oil Palm	Investment	competitiveness, yield	Instrumental
4	National Online News D	2020	Oil Palm	National revenue	economic contribution	Instrumental
5	Environmental Media E	2020	Rubber	Sustainability	ecological balance	Intrinsic
6	Local News F	2020	Rubber	Smallholder farming	traditional system	Intrinsic
7	National Online News G	2021	Oil Palm	Productivity	yield increase	Instrumental
8	Environmental Media H	2021	Oil Palm	Green narrative	sustainable palm oil	Instrumental
9	Local News I	2021	Rubber	Agroforestry	mixed farming	Intrinsic
10	National Online News J	2021	Oil Palm	Infrastructure	efficiency	Instrumental

No	Media Source	Year	Commodity	Topic Focus	Dominant Lexical Items	Ecological Value
11	National Online News K	2022	Oil Palm	Export market	global demand	Instrumental
12	Environmental Media L	2022	Rubber	Climate resilience	resilience	Intrinsic
13	Local News M	2022	Rubber	Farmer livelihood	long-term sustainability	Intrinsic
14	National Online News N	2022	Oil Palm	Investment growth	profitability	Instrumental
15	National Online News O	2022	Oil Palm	Plantation scale	land productivity	Instrumental
16	Environmental Media P	2023	Rubber	Biodiversity	ecosystem balance	Intrinsic
17	Local News Q	2023	Rubber	Cultural value	local wisdom	Intrinsic
18	National Online News R	2023	Oil Palm	Industrial output	efficiency	Instrumental
19	National Online News S	2023	Oil Palm	Bioenergy	energy resource	Instrumental
20	Environmental Media T	2023	Rubber	Sustainability	ecological harmony	Intrinsic
21	National Online News U	2024	Oil Palm	Production target	output optimization	Instrumental
22	National Online News V	2024	Oil Palm	Export strategy	competitiveness	Instrumental
23	Local News W	2024	Rubber	Farmer resilience	sustainability	Intrinsic
24	Environmental Media X	2024	Rubber	Climate adaptation	adaptive farming	Intrinsic
25	National Online News Y	2024	Oil Palm	Industrial efficiency	yield maximization	Instrumental
26	Local News Z	2019	Rubber	Rural economy	balanced livelihood	Intrinsic
27	Environmental Media AA	2021	Rubber	Environmental ethics	intrinsic value	Intrinsic
28	National Online News AB	2020	Oil Palm	Market demand	economic value	Instrumental
29	Local News AC	2022	Rubber	Sustainable land use	land stewardship	Intrinsic
30	National Online News AD	2023	Oil Palm	Growth strategy	productivity	Instrumental

FINDINGS

The analysis surfaces a clear split between how oil palm and rubber plantations are talked about. Coverage of oil palm draws heavily on a vocabulary of productivity, efficiency, investment, and economic contribution. Land, trees, and ecosystems are consistently framed as economic assets, and the emphasis falls on large-scale industrial performance. Where

environmental impacts do appear, they tend to be backgrounded or presented as problems technology and management can solve.

Rubber coverage tells a different story. It draws more often on language tied to sustainability, ecological balance, traditional farming, and local wisdom, with a recurring emphasis on long-term coexistence between people and nature rather than rapid expansion. Resilience and continuity, not growth, are the organizing themes — and nature appears in these texts less as a resource to be extracted than as a living system to be maintained.

Across the corpus, then, instrumental ecological values dominate oil palm discourse, while intrinsic ecological values are comparatively more prominent — though still not dominant overall — in rubber plantation discourse. This asymmetry suggests that the two commodities sit within distinct ideological frameworks, each shaping in its own way how readers come to understand nature and development.

DISCUSSION

The prevalence of instrumental values in oil palm discourse reflects a development ideology built around growth, efficiency, and global competitiveness. Repeated across many articles, this vocabulary does more than describe the industry — it normalizes monoculture expansion, framing it as an inevitable and beneficial path for national development. In the process, ecological costs such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and social displacement tend to recede from view.

Rubber discourse offers a counter-narrative grounded in intrinsic value. Its association with sustainability, local knowledge, and ecological balance points toward development pathways that sit more comfortably with environmental limits. Yet this narrative remains a minority position relative to oil palm discourse, which enjoys the backing of stronger institutional and economic interests — a reminder that discursive prominence tracks power as much as it tracks ecological merit.

These patterns support the broader ecolinguistic claim that language actively shapes ecological consciousness rather than simply describing it. Media discourse does not just relay policy; it participates in legitimizing particular ecological worldviews. By consistently privileging instrumental framing, media language helps reproduce a development ideology that may, over time, work against the sustainability it claims to serve.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, the study extends critical ecolinguistics by showing how ecological ideologies become embedded in media discourse around development in the Global South. Methodologically, its comparative approach across two plantation commodities offers a framework other researchers can adapt to different commodity pairs or national contexts. Practically, the asymmetry documented here suggests that media practitioners and policymakers have room to frame plantation development in language that holds sustainability and economic considerations together, rather than allowing one to quietly crowd out the other.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian media discourse on plantation commodities turns out to be ideologically polarized in a fairly consistent way. Oil palm coverage leans heavily on instrumental ecological values centered on productivity and efficiency, while rubber coverage more often reflects intrinsic ecological perspectives centered on sustainability and balance. This contrast is a useful

reminder of how much work media language does in shaping both ecological worldviews and development priorities — often without readers noticing the frame at all.

The study is limited to online media texts, and its conclusions should be read with that scope in mind. Even so, the findings open several directions for further research, including how these ecolinguistic patterns play out in policy discourse, in the everyday practices of media production, and in environmental communication strategies more broadly.

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