

Climate policy and environmental protection in the electoral programmes of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD): a discourse-semantic analysis (2013–2025)

This paper deals with the linguistic treatment of climate policy and environmental protection in the electoral programmes of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany). It analyses how this party has articulated its positions on climate policy and environmental issues in election manifestos since it was founded in 2013, how these issues are strategically instrumentalised to serve the party's political objectives and which linguistic features are employed within the populist narrative it has developed.

The paper is based on a corpus comprising the AfD's manifestos for federal elections in 2013, 2017, 2021 and 2025 as well as state elections in the eastern German federal states of Thuringia (2014, 2019, 2024) and Saxony (2019, 2024), where the party has since emerged as the strongest political force, and in Baden-Württemberg (2016, 2021), where it became the third strongest party in 2026. For purposes of comparison and contextualisation, the federal election programmes presented since 2017 by the Christian conservative political alliance (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* / *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern*, CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) were examined as well (see sources). Adopting a *politolinguistic* approach, rooted in the German tradition of applied linguistic research, the study seeks to contribute to and further advance existing scholarship investigating how the AfD communicates with the public.

Firstly, a quantitative analysis of the presence of environmental issues in the election programmes of the party reveals its increasing engagement with environmental topics over time. Climate change and environmental protection are not treated as closely interconnected policy domains, however: while climate-related issues are discussed primarily in relation to energy policy and technological developments, environmental protection is predominantly framed in terms of nature conservation, land use and agricultural policy. It is particularly revealing that no link whatsoever is made in these programmes between environmental issues and the party's central topic of migration.

This section is followed by a discourse-semantic analysis considering lexical, syntactic and textual levels as well as contextual dimensions of background knowledge. The focus is placed on various discourse-semantic strategies adopted by the AfD in order to construct a political line of argumentation that is fundamentally based on denying anthropogenic climate change and relativising, if not completely negating, its negative consequences for humanity. The argumentative strategy of the party also includes semantic erosion or the redefinition of key terms used by political opponents, i.e. well-established rhetorical devices that are employed by other political actors as well. For example, the usual compound noun *Klimawandel* ('climate change') is frequently replaced by *Wandel des Klimas* ('change in the climate'), possibly with the objective of suppressing the semantic features +WARMING and +ANTHROPOGENIC that are central in the public debate. Moreover, the term *Umwelt* ('environment') is often linked to programmatically salient

concepts such as *Landschaft* ('landscape'), *Natur* ('nature') and *Heimat* ('homeland') and is thus embedded within an ideologically compatible semantic frame.

The only way for the AfD to present itself as an "Alternative for Germany" is through demarcating itself clearly and consistently from the governing parties. 'Stigma words' are used to delegitimise the values, actions and arguments of political opponents – portrayed as irrational, threatening and socially harmful – and to cast other parties, their representatives, objectives and values in a negative light (e.g. *Altparteien* 'old parties', *linksgrüne Ideologen* 'left-green ideologues'). In addition, the party employs derogatory or overtly offensive expressions such as *Multi-Kulti-Ideologie* ('multiculti ideology'), *Fridays-for-Future-Hysterie* ('Fridays for Future hysteria') and *unwissenschaftliche Klima-Hysterie* ('unscientific climate hysteria') as well as distancing devices such as quotation marks ("scare quotes" or "sneer quotes") and epistemic modal adjectives or adverbs (e.g. *sogenannt* 'so-called', *angeblich* 'allegedly') in order to relativise or call into question both the factual validity and the argumentative relevance of climate policy measures.

Another discursive strategy aimed at delegitimising political opponents consists in staging environmental and climate issues as a site of political-ideological conflict. In this framing, a confrontation is constructed between allegedly interest-driven "mainstream parties" and the AfD as the purported guardian of the common good. Threat scenarios invoked for the *Normalbürger im ländlichen Raum* ('ordinary citizens living in rural areas/the countryside') include, in particular, an alleged loss of prosperity resulting from deindustrialisation – presented as a consequence of promoting renewable energy – as well as the endangerment of individual freedom and democratic order through an *ideologisch geleitete Verbotspolitik* ('ideologically driven policy of prohibition'). This rhetoric contributes to the construction of a dualistic societal model in which *das Volk* ('the people') is opposed to a morally delegitimised *Elite*, accused of pursuing selfish interests and deliberately deceiving *kleine Leute* ('ordinary people').

Beyond this, the AfD seeks to establish a (purported) ideological coherence by discursively linking environmental issues with highly loaded concepts such as *Heimat*, *Natur* and *Tradition*. The analysis of the party's programmes reveals that environmental protection is framed simultaneously as serving to preserve the homeland and maintain tradition. In this semantic context, *Heimat* is frequently associated with dichotomous distinctions between past and present or between what is construed as one's own and what is perceived as foreign.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the AfD makes strategic, often sophisticated use of environmental issues to reinforce its populist narrative and propagate ethnonationalist concepts of *Heimat*, *Natur* and *Volkszugehörigkeit* ('national belonging' or 'ethnicity') in its election programmes. The study also reveals argumentative weaknesses and internal inconsistencies, such as selective references to scientific knowledge, with environmental policy and environmental protection being foregrounded or marginalised depending on political expediency rather than being evaluated according to consistent criteria.

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