• Article •

"The Making of a Climate Refugee": a Critical View on How Affects Construct and Deconstruct Hegemony in Discourses

Qingqu Yuan[1,*]

[1] School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangdong, China

[*] Corresponding Authors: Qingqu Yuan. Email: qingquy@foxmail.com

Received: 20 December 2023 Accepted: 19 February 2024 Published: 11 June 2024

Abstract: The discourse surrounding climate refugees is marked by ideological contestation and affective complexity. This study offers a novel perspective by integrating Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist discourse theory with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), while foregrounding the role of affect in hegemonic struggles. Through a detailed study of the first landmark case of Teitiota in Kiribati, it investigates how affect resources function in the construction and deconstruction of hegemony in discourses. Quantitative annotation, polarity scoring of affect resources in representations reveal two hegemonic discourses: "Apocalypse", which casts climate refugees as threats and helpless victims, and "Adaptation", which portrays them as resilient and politically active agents. The corpus-based affect annotation makes it possible to trace the how affects incur emotions which "articulate" different but similar elements into constructing hegemony and meanwhile compete with each other to deconstruct hegemony. The antagonism is highlighted in this entangled process, not only reflecting deep-seated geopolitical divides between the Global North and South, but also opens possibilities for discursive plurality. It contributes to theoretical debates by linking affective (emotional) charge to hegemonic contestation in climate governance while also offering practical implications for understanding how climate-induced displacement is framed and responded in the ever-lasting game in antagonsim, which precisely accounts for a way out — a pluralistic approach that recognizes diverse voices and affect with competing claims.

Keywords: Climate Refugee; Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis; Affect; Hegemony; CDA

1. Introduction

Climate change is both a discursive and material phenomenon (Farbotko et al., 2012). In a 2002 study, Oliver-Smith noted that disasters are both a real-life natural event and a complex social relationship in society that sometimes contradicts them. A series of representations have arisen through the avenues of international agencies, research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and investigative journalism, making extensive claims about climate refugees and their regions. (Bravo,

2009). Discourses on climate refugees are worldviews that are actively and continuously debated during their creation. Like all representations, those of climate refugees are neither static nor innocent. They are vehicles for power, defined by dynamic, continuous claims of inclusion and exclusion that are contingent on the interests of those who make them, according to Foucault (1972).

The academic literature surrounding legal, humanitarian, or environmental concerns has evolved significantly, primarily through content analysis. Much of the research has adopted qualitative methods to conduct broad thematic extractions and framing analysis of the climate debate. However, less attention has been paid to a more nuanced and scientifically rigorous linguistic perspective that connects discourse and content with the hegemonic power and ideologies underpinning them.

Since it remains elusive, discourse is neither static nor innocent, influencing the recognition of rights and migration policies.

The aim, therefore, is to take a step back from the debate itself, and dive deeply into the incisive process of how hegemonic discourses are constructed among various climate refugee discourses and propagated with significant experiential and affective effects, and meanwhile their potential to be deconstructed by its competing nature - antagonism, considering the dynamic heterogeneity in social practice.

This study both complements and extends previous analysis of representations of climate refugees through focusing on a specific case. This study presents a novel contribution by introducing the concept of affect to examine how climate refugee discourses have been interpreted, contested, deployed, and intermingled.

In light of our stance, the study makes no effort to support any hegemonic discourse. The purpose of this article was to critically discuss discourses by adopting a rigorous insight. The conflict between opposing hegemonic discourses and the process of hegemony construction and deconstruction inform us that: the eternal game demands a pluralistic future, which is essential to advancing the massive imperative of climate justice, even if it is only gradually (Adger et al., 2006). Maybe a conceptual platform might be made available so that scholars and others could participate more reflexively.

2. Literature and Theories: Affect, Discourse and Hegemony

In order to deal with the gaps in traditional discourse analysis, the theoretical framework of this study emphasizes the dynamic interplay of affect, discourse and hegemony by integrating affect resources, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and post-structuralist discourse theory. Drawing on CDA's rigor and post-structuralist insights, this approach examines how affect sustains or challenges hegemonic orders within both a language field and a broader sociopolitical contexts.

2.1 Review of Climate Refugee Discourse Analysis

Studies about the representations of climate refugees in discourses have mushroomed (Dun & Gemenne, 2008). Among these studies, discourse analysis concerning the concept of "affect" is a strong analytical tool to study the representations of climate refugees (e.g. Gabrielatos & Baker, 2007). Through a reconstruction and repositioning of the social order within these discourses, Lea and Lynn

(2003) discovered that letters from readers about the UK's asylum debate, selected for publication based on particular values, constructed asylum seekers in a largely negative way, positioning them as being outside of society. Many studies (e.g. Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018) criticize depictions of climate refugees from the global south facing floods in a post-climate change apocalypse.

Since much have suggested the mostly negative representations, studies have recognized that these representations failed to take into account existing resilience of those under-represented voices (Randall, 2013; Kelman, 2010). Alternative depictions of refugees as individuals in need of assistance have been proposed by numerous research (Parker, 2015). Despite the prevalent negative portrayal of refugees at the national level, Cooper et al. (2017) discovered that regional newspapers were more likely to highlight the personal narratives of migrants. In a comparative discourse analysis of media coverage, Parker et al. (2018) discovered that this tragedy had briefly resulted in a sympathetic construction of migrants.

Although the meaning of climate change is dependent on location and history, it cannot be imposed from above. Thus, it becomes crucial to comprehend how the climate refugee rhetoric unfolds. Social settings influence how discourses develop in an iterative manner, and climate refugee discourse shapes social change among island inhabitants (Barnett & Adger, 2003). It is important to comprehend these dynamics in addition to how they interact with the tangible consequences of climate change. According to Krzyżanowski (2020), representations can be seen as ideological constructs that are used to achieve certain political goals in order to perpetuate and maintain power relations. Studies show that refugee discourse intensifies during political moments like elections, often portraying refugees as threats to national security, as seen in Turkish media (Çetin & Gürelli, 2024), and in Twitter-based public sentiment analysis in Turkey (Yılmaz et al., 2023). Concerning the latest conflict happening nowadays, Ukrainian refugees are found more humanely represented with strategies of individualization employed in international media including UK, contrasting with typical representations of non-European refugees (Abdulaal & El Deen, 2024).

However, in contemporary times with the flux of political discourses such as nationalism and populism, the globalization propelled by information revolution is profoundly restructuring both discourses and its receivers. The ideologies underpinning certain hegemonic discourses have become increasingly obscured, suggesting a deterministic reality to which all are seemingly subjected, stirring up our affect without even realizing it.

Indeed, scrutinizing the hegemonic discourses through the category of “affect” elaborated by the post-structuralists - Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, can help people understand that the present discourses is the result of hegemonic moves in the relations between capitalist corporations and the nation-states. And, this hegemony can be challenged (Laclau & Mouffe, 2000).

2.2 From CDA to Post-structuralist Discourse Theory

The evolution of discourse analysis methods has been closely tied to theoretical advancements at each stage. Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) first emerged in Europe in the 1990s when Norman

Fairclough, a key figure in critical discourse analysis (CDA), asserting that discourse not only reflects but also reinforces or challenges power relations (Fairclough, 1992). Building on this, Fairclough proposed the three-dimensional framework of CDA, which views discourse practices as a triadic unity of textual analysis, discourse practice, and social practice.

Nevertheless, CDA has faced critiques for its limited attention to non-linguistic aspects of power relations. For example, institutions and social structures that help reproduce inequalities can be as important as language (Wodak, R., & Meyer, M, 2009). Additionally, Allan and Peter (1998) noted that much of the existing research overly concentrates on the structural analysis of texts while neglecting the production and reception processes, making it difficult to encompass the more diverse and dynamic representations and ideological struggles within society. Furthermore, certain key concepts such as hegemony, ideology, and power, are often ambiguously defined, necessitating further refinement.

Post-structuralist discourse analysis emerged as an alternative path, particularly influenced by the discourse theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This approach redefines "discourse" as encompassing all social phenomena, including both linguistic and non-linguistic social practices. It draws attention to the role of meaning-giving practices in both the construction and deconstruction of hegemony, and is revelatory of the contingency of such practices (Torfing, 2004).

Ding (2021) suggested that researchers should fully recognize the revolutionary and creative dimensions of language, moving beyond static and conservative linguistic philosophies. Laclau's post-structuralist discourse theory, with its advocacy of a "plural and radical" democracy, views discourse as a key instrument for achieving democratic and political transformation, providing researchers with tools to deeply analyze the mechanisms of discourse production, the political attributes of discourse, and the competition for meaning.

In this study, CDA's three-dimensional framework serves as the foundational analytical structure, while post-structuralist discourse theory complements it by addressing the gaps between textual language and social practices, which enables an in-depth exploration of how structured representations coalesce into hegemonic discourses and how these discourses exhibit antagonism and tendencies towards deconstruction.

2.3 Affective Parameter in Post-structuralist Discourse Theory

Existing discourse analyses concerning climate refugees have predominantly focused on lexical semantics (e.g., Parker et al., 2021) or grammatical structures (Bailey et al., 2014). Why, then, does this study adopt affect resources?

Affect is a major part of the appraisal system (Liu, 2009). Affect refers to the expression of human's emotion and feelings, categorized as dis/inclination, un/happiness, in/security and dis/satisfaction, realizing the interpersonal function of language (Halliday, 2008, p.29-30).

Martin argues that the study of discourse concerning politics can be developed in conjunction with appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005). Meanwhile, representations, or discourses are conceived primarily as filters of sense-making (Cooper et al., 2015) where affect resources plays an central role.

As Laclau (2000, p.148) explained, affective resonance constitutes the essence of investment, and its contingency accounts for the "radical" component of the formula. Indeed, every hegemonic signifier carries an affective charge beyond its linguistic operations.

As indicated before, the concept of affect as an umbrella term can instigate emotions with specific affect categories (as seen in appraisal system). Anger, for example, involves the negative expressions like disinclination, unhappiness, insecurity and dissatisfaction toward its object (Cherry & Flanagan, 2018). Thus, in addition to quantitatively analyzing the distribution of affect resources within texts, this study examines the force of collective affect as an intrinsic component of hegemony construction and deconstruction.

Therefore, the following questions are posed to guide this research:

(1) How do representations appeal to affect resources as affective signifiers?

(2) How do affective signifiers articulate representations into hegemonic discourses?

(3) How does affective conflict between competing discourses contribute to the antagonism and deconstruction of hegemonies?

(4) How can plural discourses and dynamic hegemonies be balanced in society?

The purpose of these inquiries is to shed light on the processes of hegemonic discourses in relation to climate refugees. This analysis specifically aims to show that none of these discourses are neutral or self-evident. Rather than sharing with the intended recipients (e.g., the Global South), they rely on the leverage of affect resources under various pressures.

3. Methods and Data: A Landmark Case for Study

One of the most prominent cases is that of Ioane Teitiota from Kiribati, who sought recognition as a "climate refugee" and protection status in New Zealand courts. After the New Zealand Supreme Court dismissed his appeal to stay in 2015, Teitiota appealed to the UN Human Rights Committee, which in 2020 upheld New Zealand's decision.

Multiple representations can be seen in the records of different groups, including individuals, journalists, policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and scholars, as numerous studies have noted (Dewulf, 2013). The publicly accessible texts pertaining to the individuals directly involved in the case comprise the research corpus in this study:

(a) Article "The Making of a Climate Refugee" from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting with the word count of 6,293, referred to as "Article A" in the following;

(b) Statement by the president Anote Tong (President of Kiribati) in 69th UNGA with the word count of 2,882, referred to as "Statement B" in the following;

(c) Document "Views adopted by the Committee under article 5 of the Optional Protocol, concerning communication" from Human Rights Committee with the word count of 10,339, referred to as "Document C" in the following.

Consequently, this case is considered to possesses distinctive research value due to its representative nature (as the first case worldwide), and its participatory nature (given its involvement of New Zealand and Kiribati, the refugees themselves, the media, and the people of Kiribati).

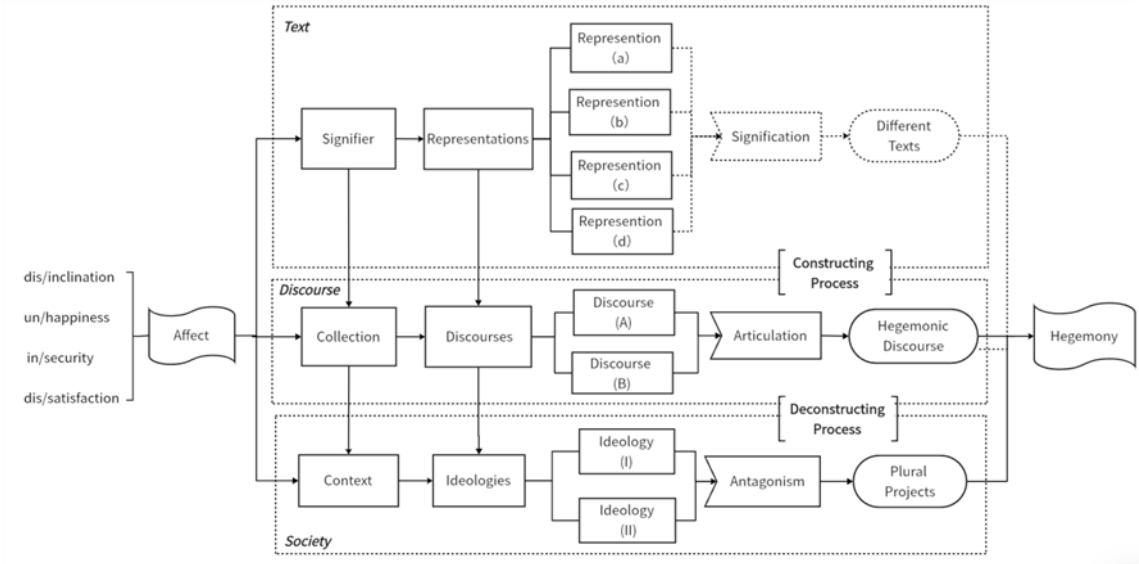
This study's text review is in-depth and specific rather than broad. Through the interaction of affect, we are able to discover representations and advance the hegemonic discourses by using the complete content of the texts that offer insights on different representations.

The study summarizes the four major representations of climate refugees based on massive related studies (e.g., Mascia, 2020; Farbotko et al., 2015). Each text is filtered and classified according to each representation, so that its affect resources can be further manually annotated using UAM Corpus Tool for manual annotation.

In this sense, it is believed that the affect constitutes the core concepts that deserves to be discussed in more detail, which is crucial not only for the methodology of Laclau's theory, but also for the investigations of discourse not reduced to purely institutional or rational perspectives.

The polarity of affect resources allows for the selection of resources for attitude construction(negative, positive or neutral) during discourse output. The analysis part begins in a quantitative way, examining the distribution of affect resources and their polarity scores across different representations associated with 4 affect categories. A qualitative explanation is subsequently provided to illuminate how affect resources contribute to the signification of representations and further are collected for the articulation of hegemonic discourses. Finally, the study leads to the antagonistic focal points and underlying social-ideological factors of antagonism through co-occurrence network analysis of affective words.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework for the Study



4. Affect Signification: Representations Signified in Text

The representations are primarily signified in the text where categories of affect resources are channeled towards "climate refugee" by affective laden signifiers. The following table provides the distribution and the polarity of affect resources engaged in four representations concerning climate refugees. Dis/inclination refers to the emotion of avoiding or desiring to do something; un/happiness relates to one's interior feelings; in/security refers to one's sense of security on the financial and social dimensions; and dis/satisfaction refers to one's emotions about achieving a goal.

Table 1: Distribution of Affect Resources and Their Polarity Scores

	In/security	**Un/happiness**	**Dis/satisfaction**	**Dis/inclination**	***General***
Vulnerable entities	-0.25(49.6%)	-0.10(4.7%)	-0.18(42.6%)	+0.34(3.1%)	-0.20
Security threats	-0.06(33.3%)	0	0	-0.1(66.7%)	-0.08
Resilient actors	+0.07(26.3%)	+0.06(17.5%)	+0.1(13.4%)	+0.31(42.8%)	+0.18
Political subjects	-0.10(40.1%)	-0.03(0.8%)	-0.34(32.3%)	+0.32(26.8%)	-0.064

Note. Polarity is categorized into positive, neutral, and negative, with scores ranging between -1 and 1. These scores reflect the intensity of polarity within the text: the lower the score, the more negative the sentiment, while scores closer to 0 indicate neutrality (scores between -0.1 and 0.1 can be classified as neutral).

4.1 Vulnerable Entity

This representation is believed to be most widely spread as the first impression of climate refugee (Cooper et al., 2015). In this study, this representation is mostly seen driven by INGOs. In the case of climate refugees, who are portrayed as in need of "saving" through aid and even sanctuary, the portrayal of vulnerable entities primarily appeals to affect resources of insecurity, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness.

The most significant affect category is insecurity. This resource is heavily invoked to signal the sense of vulnerability and fear surrounding the climate refugees' situation, focusing on the erosion of basic living conditions due to climate impacts.

(1) Teitiota lives..., dreading [affect: insecurity-] that he will fall back into the ranks of the unemployed. (Article A)

It vividly portrays the emotional strain experienced by Teitiota, as he grapples with the fear of deportation to the unemployment status. The signifier dreading encapsulate a deep sense of vulnerability, compounded by the dismal conditions in Kiribati, such as high child mortality, lack of sanitation, and water contamination.

The category of dissatisfaction is the second most prominent, highlighting the frustration and unfulfilled needs of climate refugees, often tied to the failure to secure resources or opportunities for survival and adaptation:

(2) Before moving to New Zealand, Teitiota spent four frustrating [affect: dissatisfaction-], jobless years. (Article A)

The signifier frustrating captures Teitiota's dissatisfaction with his stagnant situation before relocating to New Zealand, implying that the socio-economic constraints faced by climate refugees are not limited to environmental challenges but also include limited opportunities for personal growth and stability.

Interestingly, a minor yet noteworthy positive polarity score is observed in inclination. While limited in scope, these instances provide a counterpoint to the otherwise predominantly negative affects, adding a layer of complexity to the representation.

(3) They wished to [affect:inclination+] have children, and had received information that there would be no future. (Document C)

A stark contrast is revealed within this sentence, where the inclination to "have children" signifies a positive aspiration sharply contrasts with the stark negativity of "no future". The juxtaposition of positive and negative affect resources conveys the complex emotional landscape of climate refugees, who simultaneously nurture hopeful aspirations while confronting the grim reality of their circumstances.

(4) We encourage [affect: inclination+] our partners...in this massive undertaking. (Statement B)

The example inscribes a positive inclination, calling for collective action. Ironically, the speaker is not the developed nations but the President of Kiribati. The dissonance in global responsibility is subsequently exposed. Moreover, the signifier encourage is strategically used to foreground euphemistic, careful (rather than forceful) tone and posture from a vulnerable state to appeal to the action of the international society.

4.2 Security Threat

It is common to portray climate migrants as a security threat (Myers, 2005). The misconception that underlies the portrayal is that, taken as a whole, migration related to them will intensify resource-related tensions and ultimately result in conflict, which explains why those nations are disinclined to take appropriate action.

Given the publicity and the attention it has garnered, stakeholders have employed particularly cautious affective signifiers -- while they implicitly suggest a security threat, the overall polarity remains relatively neutral (-0.08＞-0.1) thanks to the subtle and carefully crafted strategies. However, compared to the other three representations, this one demonstrates the most negative polarity.

In this representation, speakers avoid directly labeling climate refugees as a security threat, leading to relatively scarce signifiers of insecurity, unhappiness, or dissatisfaction. The following is an example of insecurity among the group:

(5) The primary concern [affect: insecurity-] is that any further expansion will spread the commissioner's staff too thin. (Document C)

Nominalization abstracts the emotional impact and avoids explicit articulation of insecurity. Such depersonalized phrasing aligns with the cautious tone often employed by institutional actors to obscure direct affective signification.

In this representation, speakers tend to employ the category of dis/inclination (66.7%) to convey resistance or reluctance:

(6) But it might not be politically acceptable [affect: disinclination-] for...to crowd into Fiji. (Article A)

The example use modality ("might not") and impersonal subjects "it" to soften the intensity of disinclination, which can be seen as the techniques to avoid direct confrontation while subtly implying reluctance to accommodate climate refugees.

(7) His application for refugee status was rejected [affect: disinclination-]. (Document C)

The use of passive voice strategically places the climate refugee as the subject, deflecting attention away from institutional decision-makers and diminishing emotional engagement. These resources of disinclination implicitly reinforce the perception of climate refugees as a destabilizing force without making explicit accusations.

4.3 Resilient Agent

This representation is gaining prominence in climate change discourse. Unlike the previous representations, it frames migration and related behaviors as "positive adaptation responses... rather than as a failure to adapt" (Baldwin, 2014). This shift aligns with policy outcomes such as promoting labor and circular migration. A notable advocate of this representation is Kiribati's President, Anote Tong, who has foregrounded the concept of "migration with dignity" as a cornerstone of Kiribati's climate change strategy.

Statistically, this representation displays the most positive polarity. The largest share of affect resources is attributed to dis/inclination (42.8%), reflecting frequent signification of hope and proactive calls to action. The rest categories collectively reinforce a constructive and forward-looking narrative.

Inclination emerges most frequently, particularly in President Tong's statements, reflecting the active agency of Kiribati and similar nations and positioning their capacity for adaptation rather than passive vulnerability awaiting salvation:

(8) For sure, we leaders...share or should [affect: inclination+] share the same ultimate goal... (Statement B)

The modal verb "should" and modal adjunct "for sure" in statements adds a sense of moral obligation and collective responsibility. As an important part of the interpersonal functionality of language, modal adjuncts are found to indicate the extent to which a language user estimates and determines statements and proposals, which is broadly seen in Tong's speech.

Despite these largely positive resources, negative affect resources appear in a certain scale, highlighting existing challenges in a strategic manner:

(9) Arabaio Erika scowled [affect: unhappiness-] when I showed him pictures. (Article A)

The example highlights the reality that, despite the fact that Teitiota is being hailed as a symbol by many in the worldwide community, this attention has only served to demonize him in his native country. Through these negative affect resources, domestic people in Kiribati including the President, strongly show their resistance to gain its fame solely as vulnerable victims, and their refusal to the reductive representations that undermine the agency of his people.

(10) The issue remains the most single pressing challenge [affect: insecurity-]. (Statement B)

Here, although Tong resorts to resources of insecurity, but unlike the "vulnerable entity" representation, he intends to emphasize the urgency and necessity to take action.

(11) Climate change is an existential challenge[affect：insecurity-] .., and I again call for [affect: inclination+] urgent global action. (Statement B)

The combination of "negative affect + positive affect" is a compelling strategy extensively used in Tong's speech. This example demonstrates an interplay between insecurity and inclination, where negative signifiers that signify the crucial situation are juxtaposed with positive signifiers that inscribe the hopeful call for action. By firstly describing climate change as an existential threat and then coupling it with a proactive appeal as a follow-up, Tong adds to the signification of this representation as well as its discursive power that amplifies the urgency while positioning his nation as resilient agents capable of driving meaningful change.

4.4 Political Subject

According to Teitiota, "New Zealand violated his right to life under the Covenant" by sending him to Kiribati (Document C). Teitiota's struggle for his rights serves as an example of the still-emerging representation of vulnerable groups as political subjects, which is based on the idea that, despite being limited by unequal power dynamics, these groups have the ability to change socioeconomic structures and the laws that sustain environmental vulnerability. Researchers and non-governmental organizations that care about justice and equity in resettlement or migration policies are among the actors who take on the role. At the nexus of research, politics, and activism, both groups engage and develop revolutionary concepts.

The overall polarity of this representation is neutral, with prominent affect resources being insecurity and dissatisfaction reflecting critical engagement with issues of inequality, marginalization, and governance failures. Positive category of dis/inclination provides a counterbalance, signifying a focus on action and policy reform. The minimal presence of un/happiness suggests an objective tone typical of legal and policy documents, which prioritize structure and argument over emotional appeals. One important aspect of this portrayal is its propensity to emphasize empowerment, self-determination, and access to and control over resources (Tschakert, 2012, p.144).

(12) The risk of serious harm [affect: insecurity-] arises from environmental factors indirectly caused by humans. (Document C）

This example reflects a critical perspective on the systemic origins of climate-induced harm through the inscription of insecurity. By attributing harm to structural inequalities rather than immediate violence, it shifts focus to the deeper socio-economic and political processes driving vulnerability.

Researchers and NGOs advocating for this representation frequently stress the importance of locally derived solutions, echoing Marino's (2009) assertion that externally driven negotiations can exacerbate vulnerability. The political subject representation thus favors the influence of affected communities in shaping the international laws and regulations concerning their futures. This focus on empowerment is reflected in the use of inclination resources:

(13) If successful, it would [affect: inclination+] "set off an avalanche as a precedent". (Article A)

The conditional modal "would" here is a crucial signifier, projecting a hypothetical yet highly impactful outcome by inscribing inclination, suggesting the potential for systemic transformation while maintaining a cautious, forward-looking tone. In doing so, it aligns with the representation's signification of taking empowerment, presenting advocacy and reform as achievable goals.

5. Affect Articulation: Hegemony Constructed in Discourse

Laclau emphasizes that the establishment of hegemony necessitates an act of "radical investment" (Laclau, 2007, p.71, 115), associated with the domain of shared affects (Laclau, 2007, p.21–64). An inquiry of discourses enables locating the "radical investment" through the collection of affectively laden signifiers that share similar affect resources, which "articulate" different but similar elements into hegemony (Solomon, 2015, p.36). Four representations therefore construct two climate refugee discourses: Apocalypse and Adaptation. The former is relatively negative in affect, consisting of "vulnerable entities" and "security threats" representation while the latter is comprised of "resilient agent" and "political subjects" representation, possessing higher polarity scores. Two discourses vie for dominance, with affect playing a pivotal role in elevating them to hegemonic status.

This part introduces some emotions, which, as a result of the collection of the affect resources above, are particularly suitable to construct hegemony over another discourse.

5.1 Apocalypse: "Climate Barbarians Flood"

One of the main characteristics of this discourse is the sense of crisis evocation, which is combined with pictures of enormous, uncontrollable, and dangerous floods of climate refugees from the global south. Two representations of "vulnerable entities" and "security threat", are gathered based on their affect resources to surround the nodal point of climate refugee, constructing one of the two possible hegemonic discourses - "apocalypse".

5.1.1 Frustration and Anger

Two emotions that are most frequently gathered are the frustration and anger (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017), largely from the affect resources of insecurity, dissatisfaction and embodied through disinclination.

The appeal to these negative affects is crucial in shaping the discourse, fulfilling a threefold function: first, it creates the perception that something is going wrong; second, it assigns responsibility for the negative developments; and third, it instills a sense of urgency (Tietjen, 2023).

Frustration, as a key emotion, evokes a feeling that something is amiss—one's desires are unmet or unlikely to be fulfilled (Roberts, 2003, p.216–217). More specifically, the dissatisfaction and unhappiness from "vulnerable entities" representation concerning the current situation is being treated. By highlighting a sense of unfulfilled needs or expectations, two affects are collected towards the emotion of frustration.

(14) Attempts to combat sea level rise have been ineffective [affect: dissatisfaction-]. (from Vulnerable entity representation: Article A)

People like Teitiota are frustrated by the passivity or poor responses of international organizations, highlighting the failure of present attempts to adapt to or reduce climate change and the resulting catastrophe that seems to have no end in sight. Anger-like feelings that aid in defining responsibility result from the emotion of frustration, which leaves open the question of whether any one individual, group of people, or organization can be held accountable for it at all. Insecurity and dissatisfaction fuel the search for responsibility in a situation of perceived failure, conflating as the strong force in constructing the Apocalypse discourse. Wealthy nations are often seen as the root cause of environmental degradation due to their historical and ongoing carbon emissions, especially from the perspective of the "refugees":

(15) He (Teitiota) characterizes his country as "drowning"[affect: insecurity-]-due to wealthy countries' irresponsibly [affect: dissatisfaction-] .... (from Vulnerable entitiy representation: Article A)

Teitiota's first inscription of insecurity firstly reveals the vulnerability of his homeland while the next inscription of dissatisfaction blaming wealthy countries for their disproportionate impact on climate change.

Many experts and policymakers, however, agree that the issue of blame attribution will affect much more than just the people directly involved. Ecological pressures are seen to be reinforcing factors that feed an unmanageable spiral by making poverty worse, causing migration, and igniting conflicts (Hartmann, 2010). Both in academics (Reuveny et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2007) and in some policy and activist circles, the connection between ecological stress, security, and conflict has gained traction and is "becoming 'conventional wisdom'" (Salehyan, 2008, p. 318). Reports from well-funded Northern think tanks and defense-focused organizations are the main sources that portray climate refugees as a possible security danger. Consequently, in response to the Teitiota case, the result of disinclination can be found:

(16)Few of the United Nations' member countries have shown much interest[affect: disinclination-] in...commissioner's mandate. (from Security threat representation: Document C)

All these ideas reinforce and depend on each other, ultimately converging and returning to a shared affective phenomenon—namely a sense of urgency and impending danger. The combined affective forces of frustration and anger, expressed through insecurity, dissatisfaction and disinclination, articulating two representations into grounding for the construction of hegemonic Apocalypse discourse. They unite disparate global actors—those suffering from environmental destruction and those responsible for its exacerbation—under a common emotional banner(albeit with different motivations and attributions of blame existing), thus emphasizing an impending danger that climate refugees as a crisis need addressing urgently.

5.1.2 Empathy and Sympathy

The second important step to construct the discourse is turning individual and private emotions into empathetic, sympathetic, group-based, and shared ones through the collection of insecurity and inclination. The construction of hegemony in Apocalypse discourse can be mobilized not only by presenting the grievance and sufferings from the affected groups but also anticipated ones from others. The emotion of empathy and sympathy derived from insecurity asks people to accept the grievances and sufferings of others as essentially equivalent to their own (Laclau, 2007, p.72–83). Although based on different private concerns, the affects not only invite people to feel with others but also to make others' viewpoint their own and take action to argue for them, as expressed in the inscription of inclination:

(17) ...Climate change will lead to mass displacement[affect: insecurity-] and ...his agency's mandate should[affect: inclination+]... (from Vulnerable entities representation: Article A)

There is a chance for solidarity and emancipation when one feels for others. Without any explicit normative judgment, the affect of insecurity experienced by others due to claims of "vulnerable entities" can serve as a catalyst for expressing the collective sentiments of people who feel the urgency and crisis of creating apocalyptic discourse, regardless of whether those sentiments are directly related to climate change.

Accordingly, it is thought that the component of care and compassion may be valuable to preserve since it may encourage reflection on how interconnected vulnerabilities are (Clark, 2012).

5.2 Adaptation: "Migration with Dignity"

In order to put the idea of "migration with dignity" at the center of Kiribati's long-term climate change policy, President Anote Tong has actively promoted this conversation. Both the positive and negative affect resources of dis/inclination from representations of "resilient agents" and "political subjects" have contributed to the development of self-esteem and further, the love of their land. Another possible hegemonic discourse - "Adaptation" - has been articulated through the affective force from within the climate refugee community and parts of the international community.

5.2.1 Determination and Esteem

The shared affects of insecurity is amplified by frustration at the lack of global action(as explained in the previous part), but it is simultaneously channeled into determination to preserve their land, culture, and future, transforming fears and frustrations into a collective force that binds the community together in resistance to external Apocalypse discourse.

The determination and self-esteem derived from a group's collective dedication to a cause are the strongest examples of it. “The group members adopt the concern as theirs and socially commit themselves to each other” since they are part of the group. (Salmela, 2012, p.40). As highlighted by President Anote Tong, the determination to safeguard a better future for subsequent generations is a unifying affect among the leaders and citizens of Kiribati and similar nations:

(18) We share or should [affect: inclination+] ... (from Resilient agents representation: Statement B)

The determination and the deep-rooted self-esteem in the face of adversity was expressed through the inscription of inclination, which is a clear call to action. In this context, determination is not merely about survival but about asserting the agency to shape a future defined by dignity and resilience, contrasting sharply with the victimhood embedded in the Apocalypse discourse.

As Laclau (2007) argues, strong collective affects are important in constructing political subjectivities. The affective phenomenon empowers climate refugees by asserting their agency and self-esteem in the face of environmental and political adversity and therefore enacts the collected affect resources from them. Drawing on shared concerns and collective identities, the affect resources like inclination help articulate adaptation discourse challenging the apocalypse discourse, offering a powerful counterbalance that resonates with both affected communities and global advocates for climate justice.

5.2.2 Enthusiasm and Love

People's concerns must be converted into collective emotive attachments in order to create the collective power that articulates the hegemonic discourse. Love and enthusiasm are affective attachments to things that grow over time and contribute to an individual's or a group's identity (Frankfurt, 1999). Appealing to both enthusiasm and love for abstract political concepts, like national identity or popular sovereignty, as well as love for particular political entities, like one's country, completes the comprehensive construction of adaption discourse (Laclau, 2007, p.93–100).

Enthusiasm and love are characterized by the fact that they ascribe a final value that is not derived from any other value ascriptions; love entails a desire for the welfare and prosperity of one's beloved, while enthusiasm entails a desire to defend and advance the idea. Concrete political entities, such as one's nation, constitution, or a charismatic political leader, are and must embody abstract principles, such as the idea of justice (Nussbaum, 2013). It can be shown through the disinclination and unhappiness by Tong and his people when enthusiasm and love for Kiribati were offended.

Love for one's country is defended by Martha Nussbaum (2013, p. 204–56) in her theory of political emotions as a significant effect of liberal democracy and attitudes of "radical investment" (Laclau, 2007, p. 93–100). The value of the thing to which it is affectively related is added up, making it the most significant value and absorbing all other values into itself, therefore capable of constructing and defending the hegemony of adaptation discourse.

6. Affective Antagonism: Hegemony Deconstructed in Society

Multiple discourses are a fundamental component of social space, and each one helps to stabilize meanings around transient "nodal points" (Laclau, 2001:113). However, this stabilization is always precarious, as discourses are unstable and mutable formations. This inherent instability of discourse leads to a constant tension—what Laclau and Mouffe term antagonism—as competing discourses continuously interact, challenge, and reshape one another within the social space. The existence of antagonism is not an occasional occurrence but a permanent feature of the social fabric, an ongoing process that will never fully dissolve. The question arises: what are the contextual factors of the affective antagonism between two competing discourses, and how should we approach this tension? Or, more provocatively, should we attempt to resolve it at all?

6.1 Conflict: Contextual Disparity

Laclau and Mouffe argue that social space is never self-enclosed; it is always open to a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices (Laclau, 2001, p.110-111), wherein the object's identity in the discourse is divided: it represents the contextual position on the one hand, while on the other it retains its own "literal" sense (Laclau, 2001, p.63).

The contextual position expresses something the objects articulated in one hegemonic discourse all have in common (Laclau, 2001, p.128). Social space is thus split into two opposed sides (Laclau, 2001, p. 95), much as the term "class" in a particular historical moment denotes something that is shared by a number of conflicts, including racial, feminist, economic, and others.

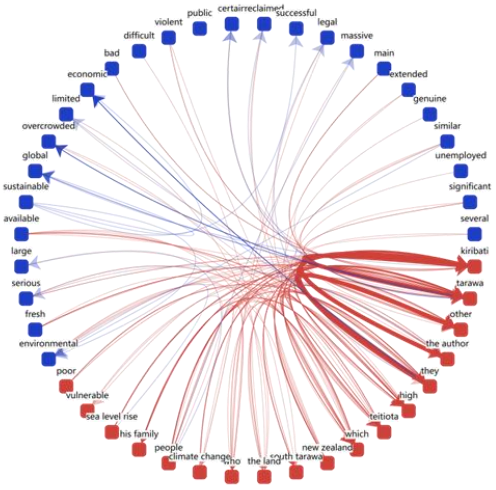
In examining the contextual origins of the Apocalypse and Adaptation discourses, it becomes clear that the social positioning and identity of those advocating these discourses differ sharply. The Apocalypse discourse, often associated with think tanks and policy-makers from the Global North, which, as noted by Busby (2007), High Representative and European Commission (2008), and U.S. Department of State (2014), have the institutional power to shape how climate refugees are perceived. In this discourse, climate refugees are conceptualized as passive objects in need of external intervention. The Global North, as the agent of aid, is presented as the rational savior, while the South remains the helpless other. The use of insecurity, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction in this discourse indicates an external gaze, often dehumanizing those affected by climate change and reducing them to mere objects of intervention. The vulnerable entity representation, frequently found in reports from International NGOs and the media, casts climate refugees as the passive vulnerabilities of global environmental mismanagement.

This dynamic is accentuated by the negative affects mbedded in the discourse, as seen in affective word statistics—where negative terms (in red) are overwhelmingly present.

Figure 2: Affective Word Statistics of Apocalypse Discourse

The co-occurrence network also reveals a telling pattern: the names Kiribati, Teitiota, and related references frequently co-occur with terms like “they,” “other,” and “which”. The use of “they” plus “which” signals a gaze on the “other”, where climate refugees are distanced and objectified. The word “which” frequently appears as a relative pronoun, often linking descriptive clauses that serve to characterize climate refugees negatively. This construction highlights the context of observer and judger position which distances itself from the subjectivity of the refugees and instead evaluates them from a detached, authoritative stance. The discourse, therefore, places the climate refugees in a position of passive victimhood, needing external aid to survive.

Figure 3: Co-occurrence Network of Apocalypse Discourse

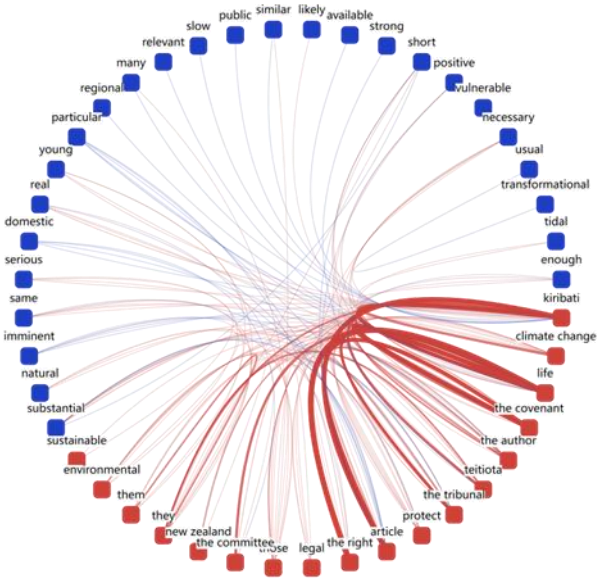


In contrast, the Adaptation discourse emerges primarily from the Global South and is promoted by leaders like Anote Tong of Kiribati. The affective word statistics for Adaptation clearly centers on positive terms, with "protect" standing out as key words and "life" in the co-occurrence network, indicating the protection of life as a core goal.

Figure 4: Affective Word Statistics of Adaptation Discourse

This goal is reinforced by the use of legal and political terminology, such as "covenant" and "right", highlighting the rights-based approach that advocates for legal protection and policy support to enable climate refugees to maintain their dignity and autonomy, signaling an emphasis on self-protection and empowerment through legal and policy means.

Figure 5: Co-occurrence Network of Adaptation Discourse



The contextual difference is crucial in explaining the antagonism between the two, with their conflicting affective appeals and implications. It is not merely intellectual or abstract—it is rooted in the very real geopolitical and economic struggles between these two regions, with each side attempting to define the terms of climate refugees and the responsibilities that follow.

6.2 Politics: Ideology Battle

A larger geopolitical and economic conflict between the Global North and the Global South might be understood as a component of the ideological conflict between the Apocalypse and Adaptation discourses. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the need to create a "common enemy," a shared entity that both sides can define against one another, is what motivates this hostility. Since the flood of climate refugees is seen as a destabilizing force that threatens national borders, economies, and political systems, the Apocalypse discourse frames this "enemy" in terms of a threat to the security of the Global North. However, some of these claims are not supported by thorough data and analysis. Furthermore, Bankoff (2001) has maintained that, in contrast to apparently disaster-prone nations that are usually found in the South, the beliefs ingrained in concepts like vulnerability are anchored in the colonial imaginations of Northerners as sophisticated and knowledgeable.

On the other hand, the Adaptation discourse challenges this discourse by positioning climate refugees as subjects with rights and capacity to adapt. This discourse often emphasizes the importance of local solutions and community-based approaches to climate migration, questioning the paternalistic Global North narrative of "saving" the Global South. The Adaptation discourse is grounded in a more horizontal and empowering vision of climate migration, one that acknowledges the agency of climate-vulnerable communities and promotes self-determination and resilience rather than dependence on external aid.

The ideologies between these two discourses—one that seeks to impose control and order through the lens of vulnerability, and another that asserts agency and self-reliance through empowerment—represents more profound political and historical conflicts between the Global North and the Global South. The conflict deconstructs the single hegemony by introducing a conflicting discourse to create the antagonism. It is not just an intellectual disagreement; it is also a crucial part of the ongoing geopolitical struggle over who has the right to define the terms of climate migration and who will be responsible for addressing its causes and consequences.

6.3 Plurality: Competing Democracy

While antagonism clearly eliminates the possibility of a singular hegemonic discourse, it also opens the way for more complex dynamics. Kelly (2012) highlights that problematic divisions, such as nationalism, utilize old, racialized distinctions between 'us' and 'them,' 'citizens' and 'foreigners,' 'friends' and 'enemies,' as powerful geopolitical tools. This framework leads us to ask: what should the future of climate refugee discourses look like?

According to Laclau, the ultimate resolution lies within the antagonism itself. Antagonism, rather than being a destructive force, transforms the articulating elements, including those that come to signify the emerging hegemony. Consequently, hegemony is not static; it is a fluid, dynamic collective subject (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

Antagonism manifests as an experience of the limitations of society, showing that society cannot fully construct itself. However, within these systemic differences, it is possible to achieve equivalence between competing demands. The competition between these demands creates a widening chasm, leading to ongoing struggles for discursive dominance, where discourses deconstruct each other's hegemonic positions through constant renegotiation. This process is inherently evolving, and, as a result, the discourses themselves undergo constant transformation, reorganization, and innovation. This constant flux creates a space for diverse voices, reflecting the plurality inherent in society.

In line with this view, plurality is not just a matter of coexistence; it is the essential basis for constructing a democratic society. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), a pluralist logic—one that acknowledges the equal right of other groups to demand equality—must be linked with the logic of equality in order to move toward democracy. Without one group stifling the other, this articulation ought to establish demand equivalency (Smith, 1998). In this sense, the demands emerging from different political subjectivities are plural, the demands driving democratic struggles are not uniform but manifold, reflecting a complex intersectionality of struggles (Laclau, 2007).

As Eklundh (2019) suggests, political subjectivity is not based on well-defined demands but on plural and often unrecognized demands that evolve over time. Therefore, as seen in this study, the affective dimension is key to understanding how new hegemonic discourse arise and interact with existing discourses driven by social contexts and ideologies, shaping the future trajectory of climate refugee debates.

In conclusion, the future of climate refugee discourse may lie in rejecting privileged points (hegemony) into a single space and accepting the multiplicity and indeterminacy of the social (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p.152). This means that plurality—allowing for the competing voices of different groups—is vital to avoid the dangers of a singular hegemonic narrative. It is through the recognition and acceptance of these diverse narratives that competing projects can not only coexist but thrive. Thus, plurality allows for the accommodation of multiple projects within society, enabling a democracy that respects differences and fosters dialogue rather than dominance. In this way, it is possible to counterbalance the dominance of one narrative and ensure that the voices of marginalized and vulnerable groups are heard, respected, and acted upon in the creation of a fairer, more equitable global society.

7. Conclusion

Laclau's theories support and uphold the idea that affects can be reclaimed for the domain of politics and discourse. The final link in the discourse that builds and dismantles hegemony in politics and society is this overt appeal to emotions and the breaking of the dominant sentiment.

This study draws on both the discourse theory of hegemony and the affective turn to explore how climate refugees are represented not only as subjects of displacement but also as objects of emotional engagement, with both positive (sympathy, determination and love) and negative affects (frustration and anger) being mobilized within discourses. Meanwhile, it provides a new way of understanding how affects and power dynamics shape the way of hegemony construction and deconstruction in discourses. Notably, the antagonism between hegemonies not only accounts for the nature of conflict, but also suggests a way out — a pluralistic approach involving competing claims and entangled affects within global conversation.

Noting the position, the study does not attempt to advocate either hegemonic discourse but to adopt a careful insight to bring into the critical conversation of discourses. In this sense, a conceptual platform could be provided for people, including future researchers, to engage more reflexively. Future study could enhance the generalizability of findings by moving beyond one single case to include diverse samples across geographic regions and media platforms. Moreover, in addition to analyzing English texts, incorporating multimodal discourse analysis and cross-cultural comparisons would offer richer insights. Given the interpretive nature of affect annotation, involving implementing reliability checks would further strengthen the credibility and validity.

To conclude, using Laclau's words (2001:193), the competitive game of climate refugee discourses is never zero-sum because the rules and players are never fully explicit. The antagonism between competing hegemonic discourses, as well as the dynamic of construction and deconstruction of hegemony, tells us that the everlasting game of hegemony calls for a pluralistic future, which is required to move the massive imperative of climate justice forward, even if it is only gradually.

Acknowledgement

None.

Funding Statement

This research was funded by the Research Funds for Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program at Sun Yat-sen University, Project No. 20251741

Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

None.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

References

[1]. Abdulaal, M., & Deen, A. (2024). The Discursive Strategies Used in Representing Refugees in the British News Media: A Critical Discourse Approach. World Journal of English Language. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n3p103.

[2]. Adger, N., Paavola, J., Huq, S., & Mace, M. J. (2006). Fairness in adaptation to climate change. MIT Press.

[3]. Bailey, A., Giangola, L., & Boykoff, M. T. (2014). How grammatical choice shapes media representations of climate (un)certainty. Environmental Communication, 8(2), 197–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2014.906481

[4]. Bankoff, G. (2001). Rendering the world unsafe: 'Vulnerability' as Western discourse. Disasters, 25(1), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00159

[5]. Barnett, J., & Adger, W. N. (2003). Climate dangers and atoll countries. Climatic Change, 61, 321–337.

[6]. Bell, A., & Garrett, P. (Eds.). (1998). Approaches to media discourse. Blackwell.

[7]. Bravo, M. (2009). Voices from the sea ice: The reception of climate impact narratives. Journal of Historical Geography, 35, 256–278.

[8]. Cherry, M. V., & Flanagan, O. (Eds.). (2018). The moral psychology of anger. Rowman & Littlefield.

[9]. Cooper, S., Olejniczak, E., Lenette, C., & Smedley, C. (2017). Media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in regional Australia: A critical discourse analysis. Media International Australia, 162(1), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16667832

[10]. Dun, O., & Gemenne, F. (2008). Defining environmental migration. Forced Migration Review, 31, 10–11.

[11]. Eklundh, E. (2019). Emotions, protest, democracy: Collective identities in contemporary Spain. Routledge.

[12]. Farbotko, C. (2010). "The global warming clock is ticking so see these places while you can": Voyeuristic tourism and model environmental citizens on Tuvalu's disappearing islands. Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 31, 224–238.

[13]. Farbotko, C., & Lazrus, H. (2012). The first climate refugees? Contesting global narratives of climate change in Tuvalu. Global Environmental Change, 22(2), 382–390.

[14]. Felli, R., & Castree, N. (2012). Neoliberalising adaptation to environmental change: Foresight or foreclosure? Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 44(1), 1–4.

[15]. Foucault, M. (1972). The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language. Harper & Row.

[16]. Hartmann, B. (2010). Rethinking climate refugees and climate conflict: Rhetoric, reality and the politics of policy discourse. Journal of International Development, 22(2), 233–246.

[17]. Kelman, I. (2010). Hearing local voices from Small Island Developing States for climate change. Local Environment, 15(7), 605–619.

[18]. Krzyżanowski, M. (2020). Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: Imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism. Social Semiotics, 30(4), 503–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766199

[19]. Laclau, E. (2007). On populist reason. Verso.

[20]. Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics (2nd ed.). Verso.

[21]. Lea, N., & Lynn, S. (2003). "A phantom menace and the new apartheid": The social construction of asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom. Discourse & Society, 14(4), 425–452. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926503014004002

[22]. Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English. Palgrave Macmillan.

[23]. Nussbaum, M. C. (2013). Political emotions: Why love matters for justice. Harvard University Press.

[24]. Oliver-Smith, A. (2002). Theorizing disaster: Nature, power, and culture. In S. M. Hoffman & A. Oliver-Smith (Eds.), Catastrophe and culture: The anthropology of disaster (pp. 23–48). School of American Research.

[25]. Parker, S. (2015). "Unwanted invaders": The representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and Australian print media. Media, Culture & Society, 37(3), 313–329.

[26]. Randall, A. (2013, May 17). Where is the dignity in that. The Guardian. https://www.the guardian.com

[27]. Salmela, M., & von Scheve, C. (2017). Emotional roots of right-wing political populism. Social Science Information, 56(4), 567–595.

[28]. Salehyan, I. (2008). From climate change to conflict? No consensus yet. Journal of Peace Research, 45(3), 315–327.

[29]. Solomon, T. (2015). The politics of subjectivity in American foreign policy discourses. University of Michigan Press.

[30]. Vollmer, B., & Karakayali, S. (2017). The volatility of the discourse on refugees in Ger many. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 16(1–2), 118–139. https://doi.org/10.1080 /15562948.2017.1288284

[31]. Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory, and methodology. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), Methods for critical discourse analysis (pp. 1–33). Sage.

[32]. Yılmaz, F., Elmas, T., & Eröz, B. (2023). Twitter-based analysis of anti-refugee discours es in Türkiye. Discourse & Communication, 17, 298 - 318. https://doi.org/10.1177/175048 13231169135.

[33]. Zhang, D. D., et al. (2007). Global climate change, war, and population decline in recent human history. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 104(49), 19214–19219.

[34]. Çetin, C., & Gürelli, M. (2024). Narratives of Securitization: Media Portrayals of Refuges in Türkiye During Election Periods. İletişim Kuram ve Araştırma Dergisi. https://doi.org/10.47998/ikad.1468819.