

A Proximization-Based Study on UNEP Foresight Report for Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing

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Abstract

This study applies Proximization Theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the Planetary Health Foresight Report issued by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), focusing on three dimensions: spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization. The findings reveal that the report primarily employs spatial proximization strategies to depict environmental crises, vividly illustrating their geographical distribution and scope of impact to intensify readers' perception of urgency and severity. Complementing this approach, the report incorporates temporal proximization (e.g., historical trajectories and future projections of environmental issues) and axiological proximization (e.g., linking environmental degradation to human well-being and sustainable development), thereby reinforcing a sense of imminent crisis. This research provides empirical support for the application of Proximization Theory in environmental crisis discourse. It also offers practical insights for crisis management and public governance, contributing to the advancement of environmental protection and sustainable development initiatives.

Keywords

Critical Cognitive Discourse Analysis; Proximization Theory; Environmental Crisis Discourse.

1. Introduction

Amid accelerating global environmental, technological, and social transformations, the health of both humanity and the planet faces unprecedented challenges. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)'s 2024 report, *Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on Planetary Health and Human Well-being*, provides critical insights into these pressing issues. The report not only highlights the escalating triple planetary crisis-climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste-but also identifies eight key global shifts, including: human-induced degradation of the natural world, rapid technological advancements (e.g., artificial intelligence), competition over natural resources, rising inequalities, and declining trust in institutions. These interconnected shifts are exacerbating, accelerating, and synchronizing multiple crises, with profound implications for the well-being of both people and the planet. Building upon UNEP's Foresight Report (hereafter referred to as the Report), this study examines the application of proximization theory in environmental crisis discourse. By analyzing the discursive strategies employed in the Report, we aim to uncover the underlying cognitive mechanisms and ideological motivations, thereby offering valuable insights for crisis management and public governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Proximization Theory

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines the interplay between language and social structures, with a focus on revealing power dynamics, inequalities, and ideologies embedded

in discourse. However, traditional CDA research has often overlooked perspectives from cognitive linguistics and evolutionary psychology, leading to potential subjectivity and one-sidedness in analytical approaches (Xin & Wang, 2024). The emergence of Critical Cognitive Linguistics (CCL) addresses this gap. Within this framework, proximization theory—a key concept in cognitive-critical discourse analysis—provides a more robust analytical tool for critical discourse studies, integrating cognitive mechanisms with sociopolitical critique.

Proximization Theory, developed by Polish linguist Cap (2008) based on Chilton's (2004) Discourse Space Theory, represents a significant theoretical advancement in critical discourse analysis. Influenced by Fauconnier's (1994) Mental Space Theory, Chilton (2004) posited that discourse processing involves a deictic center from which individuals cognitively map external entities along three axes: temporal, spatial, and modal. However, Cap (2013) observed that this model failed to account for the dynamic movement of peripheral entities toward the deictic center or address the extended temporal dimensions in political discourse (Wu et al., 2016). To resolve these limitations, Cap (2008, 2013, 2018) proposed Proximization Theory and the comprehensive STA (Spatial-Temporal-Axiological) Model, building upon and extending Discourse Space Theory. This framework has been empirically applied to analyze political discourse (Cap, 2013), health discourse (Cap, 2014), and cyber discourse (Cap, 2016) within critical discourse studies. As an interdisciplinary synthesis of cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis, Proximization Theory examines how discourse producers cognitively position external entities relative to a deictic center, subjectively reconstructing their attributes through linguistic means. The theory emphasizes that speakers strategically project distal entities into the proximal space of the addressee along spatial, temporal, and axiological axes. This discursive maneuver heightens perceived threats, thereby legitimizing responsive policies or actions.

In recent years, Proximization Theory has witnessed significant interdisciplinary expansion within discourse studies, extending its analytical framework from traditional political discourse to critical examination of contemporary global issues. Scholarly applications have demonstrated the theory's versatility across diverse domains, including discourse analysis of the Sino-U.S. trade war (Yan & Zhang, 2018), public health emergencies (Li, 2021), energy policy (Zhao & Zhao, 2021; Zhao & Song, 2023), philanthropic institutional communication (Yang et al., 2022), and Arctic environmental discourse (Sun & Chen, 2024). This broadening application spectrum reflects an emerging scholarly consensus, as noted by Luo and Cao (2023), regarding the theory's evolving focus from its original military and political applications toward ecological preservation and media discourse analysis. This research applies Proximization Theory to analyze environmental crisis discourse in UNEP's Navigating New Horizons Report, systematically examining how global environmental discourse constructs temporal urgency, responsibility attribution, and action pathways. This analysis reveals how the report's strategic deployment of "spatiotemporal proximization" brings future risks into immediate consciousness while its "axiological proximization" reinforces collective global responsibility. These discursive mechanisms effectively bridge scientific knowledge, policy formulation, and public understanding, thereby providing both theoretical insights for environmental discourse studies and practical implications for global environmental governance. The findings offer empirical evidence of how environmental crisis discourse mobilizes cognitive and emotional responses through sophisticated proximization strategies, contributing to the ongoing development of ecological communication research within critical discourse studies.

2.2. The Analytical Framework

The STA Model provides a theoretical framework for explicating how perceived threats from peripheral entities are discursively constructed through spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization. Within this model, two distinct types of entities are conceptualized: the deictic

center entity, termed IDC (Inside the Deictic Center), and the peripheral entity, designated as ODC (Outside the Deictic Center). The IDCs occupies the central position within the discourse space, while ODCs are typically situated at the periphery of this conceptual space.

2.2.1. Spatial proximization

Spatial proximization refers to the cognitive process through which external deictic entities (ODCs) are construed as physically encroaching upon the space of internal deictic entities (IDCs). By employing spatial proximization strategies, discourse producers construct a perceptual framework wherein recipients interpret ODCs as presenting imminent threats to IDCs. This discursive maneuver serves to heighten the salience of potential dangers, emphasizing that failure to implement timely countermeasures may result in irreversible consequences for IDC-protected values or entities. Cap (2013) identifies six categories of lexico-grammatical items (Table 2.1) that serve as discursive markers for ODCs' encroachment upon IDCs:

Table 2.1 Spatial Proximization

Spatial Proximization	Categories
S1	(1)Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements of the deictic center of the DS (IDCs)
S2	(2)Noun phrases (NPs) construed as elements outside the deictic center of the DS (ODCs)
S3	(3)Verb phrases (VPs) of motion and directionality construed as markers of movement of ODCs towards the deictic center.
S4	(4)Verb phrases (VPs) of action construed as markers of impact of ODCs upon IDCs.
S5	(5)Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as anticipations of impact of ODCs upon IDCs.
S6	(6)Noun phrases (NPs) denoting abstract concepts construed as effects of impact of ODCs upon IDCs.

2.2.2. Temporal proximization

Temporal proximization operates along the temporal axis, with the speaker's present moment serving as the deictic center. This discursive strategy functions by (1) reconstructing past threatening events and (2) projecting anticipated future threats, thereby creating a cognitive imperative for immediate response and preventive action. Through this dual temporal framing, discourse producers compress perceived threat trajectories to heighten the urgency of present-moment intervention. Temporal proximization is typically realized through five categories of lexico-grammatical devices in Table 2.2:

Temporal proximization functions as a strategic discursive mechanism that manipulates temporal perception through specific linguistic realizations to construct both the enduring nature and immediate urgency of potential threats. This process is linguistically realized through multiple interconnected systems: non-finite noun phrases and nominalization structures abstract concrete events into timeless conceptual entities, expanding their perceived impact from specific moments to unbounded temporal ranges. The strategic interplay of simple past and present perfect tenses establishes causal connections between historical events and current conditions, while modal verbs project threats into future temporal domains, weaving a continuous narrative of danger across past, present and future timeframes. At the discourse level, contrastive syntactic patterns create oppositional dynamics along the temporal axis, intensifying the perceived need for urgent intervention. This sophisticated linguistic orchestration operates through grammatical metaphor to temporalize threat perception, establishes deictic simultaneity between chronologically distant events, and ultimately serves

to legitimize responsive actions through carefully constructed temporal framing, demonstrating how language systematically shapes the cognitive representation of time in crisis discourse.

Table 2.2 Temporal Proximity

Temporal Proximity	Categories
T1	(1)Noun phrases (NPs) involving indefinite descriptions construal ODC actual impact acts in alternative temporal frames.
T2	(2)Discourse forms involving contrastive use of the simple past and the present perfect construing threatening future extending infinitely from a past instant.
T3	(3)Noun phrases (NPs) involving nominalizations construing presupposition of conditions for ODC impact to arise anytime in the future.
T4	(4)Verb phrases (VPs) involving modal auxiliaries constructing conditions for ODC impact as existing continually between the now and the infinite future.
T5	(5) Discourse forms involving parallel contrastive construals of oppositional and privileged futures extending from the now.

2.2.3. Axiological proximity

Axiological proximity refers to the forced construal of conflicts between IDCs and ODCs in discourse space due to opposing value systems. Similar to the approaches used in the previous two dimensions, axiological proximity can also be quantitatively analyzed through the following lexico-grammatical realizations in Table 2.3:

Table 2.3 Axiological Proximity

Axiological Proximity	Categories
A1	(1)Noun phrases (NPs) construed as IDC positive values or value sets (ideologies)
A2	(2)Noun phrases (NPs) construed as ODC positive values or value sets (ideologies)
A3	(3)Discourse forms no longer than one sentence or two consecutive sentences involving linear arrangement of lexico-grammatical phrases construing materialization in the IDC space of the ODC negative ideologies

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, axiological proximity constitutes not merely a selection of linguistic forms, but more fundamentally a practice of discursive power within ideological domains. Its deeper function resides in spatializing value categories to legitimize antagonistic relations between groups while reinforcing the discursive authority of IDCs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

The research focuses on addressing three key questions:

(1) What lexico-grammatical representations manifest in the Planetary Health Foresight Report across spatial, temporal, and axiological dimensions?

(2) How does the report employ tri-dimensional (spatio-temporal-axiological) proximization to shape readers' cognition and construct environmental crises?

(3) Can a proximization strategy model be systematically developed based on identified lexico-grammatical items?

3.2. Research Method

The corpus of this study comprises the *Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on Planetary Health and Human Well-being* published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2024, with a total text length of 22,328 words. The report underscores that the interplay of environmental, technological, and social transformations has precipitated a multifaceted global crisis encompassing climate change, biodiversity and natural ecosystem loss, as well as pollution and waste. Methodologically, this research adopts a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative component involves manual annotation of lexical items, syntactic structures, and discourse features in the corpus, guided by Cap's tri-dimensional framework of spatial, temporal, and axiological proximization and their respective lexico-grammatical realizations, with careful consideration of contextual factors. For quantitative analysis, AntConc 4.2.4 software was employed to conduct frequency counts of target lexico-grammatical patterns within their discourse contexts. In accordance with Cap's (2013) methodological protocols, linguistic items occurring with frequencies below 0.1% were excluded from statistical consideration to ensure analytical rigor.

4. Results

4.1. Spatial Proximization

The lexico-grammatical items identified in the report are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 The Lexical-grammatical Items in Spatial Proximization

Category	Lexico-grammatical items	Frequency
S1	humanity, ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees etc.	2.17%
	non-human inhabitants, mammals, animal immunity	
	planetary health, water quality, food, climate etc.	
	government, societies, international organizations, individuals, companies etc.	
	stratosphere, ozone layer, livestock, crops etc.	
S2	our, we, ourselves, us	2.36%
	global warming, biodiversity, food shortages etc.	
	technological advancements, fake news, economic, AI weaponization, mining conflicts etc.	
	them, themselves, they	
S3	face, spread, increase, transmit, cause, rise, arise from, accelerate, intensify, grow, experience	0.73%
S4	put, kill, force, affect, destroy, impact, impact on, converge, erode, undermine, impose, jeopardize, pose	0.45%
S5	regional climate variation, potential extreme events, acid rain, altered precipitation patterns etc.	0.24%
S6	polycrisis, global polycrisis, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, devastating impacts etc.	0.17%
Total		6.12%

The results demonstrate clear evidence of spatial proximization in the Report, with lexicogrammatical realizations accounting for 6.12% of the analyzed content. Noun phrases (NPs) identified as ODCs and IDCs represent 2.17% and 2.36% respectively. The Report primarily construes IDCs through terms like “planet”, “human wellbeing” and “governments”, emphasizing Earth as our shared home, the importance of human welfare, and governments’ role in maintaining planetary health. These internal entities form the core forces addressing environmental challenges and promoting sustainable development. ODCs mainly appear as descriptions of environmental issues and risks such as “climate crisis”, “biodiversity loss” and “COVID-19”. These external entities pose potential threats to planetary health and human wellbeing that require global cooperation to address. Motion terms and directional verbs like “face”, “spread” and “increase” employ spatial proximization to depict the expansion and intensification of environmental problems and social impacts, highlighting their urgency and the need for immediate action. Abstract noun phrases including “environmental challenges” and “limited resources” serve as anticipations of ODCs’ impact on IDCs, using spatial proximization to predict future severe challenges like environmental damage and resource depletion, thereby constructing a spatial cognitive framework for future risks. Regarding consequences, terms such as “environmental change” and “polycrisis” utilize spatial proximization strategies to demonstrate the actual impacts of these challenges-widely distributed and far-reaching consequences that emphasize the urgency of taking action to mitigate these effects.

(1) This situation is explored in a **growing** [proximization] literature on ‘**global polycrisis**’ [result], which captures the idea that the multiplying **shocks** [ODC] that **humanity** [IDC] **faces** [proximization] today-**wars** [ODC], **extreme weather** [ODC], **inflation** [ODC], **pandemics** [ODC] and **hunger** [ODC] - represent interwoven aspects of a larger phenomenon.

The term “growing” in (1) is construed as a marker of ODCs moving directionally toward the deictic center. Contextually, this can be interpreted as indicating increasing discussion about the “global polycrisis” where the growth itself may imply rising urgency and significance of these crises, thereby conceptually bringing them closer to the audience. The abstract noun phrase “global polycrisis” is construed as the resultant impact of ODCs on IDCs, emphasizing both the global scope and multifaceted nature of these crises. This conceptual framing transforms potentially disparate events into an imminent global threat by psychologically reducing their perceived distance. The noun phrases (NPs) “wars, extreme weather, inflation, pandemics and hunger” are understood as external entities located outside the deictic center in the discourse space. When these ODCs are enumerated, they represent threats that are either directly perceptible or cognitively accessible to the audience. This concrete enumeration psychologically diminishes the distance between these crises and the audience, enhancing the sense of immediacy.

(2) This year, in South and Southeast Asia, **record-breaking temperatures** [ODC] (well above 45°C for several days) has had **devastating impacts** [result] causing widespread **crop damage** [result] and **reduced yields** [result], **forcing** [proximization] thousands of **schools** [IDC] to close and **putting** [proximization] millions in distress and particularly **people** [IDC] living in refugee camps and informal housing.

In excerpt (2), “record-breaking temperatures” are construed as ODCs, while “people living in refugee camps and informal housing” are interpreted as IDCs. The characterization of ODCs

emphasizes both the extremity and persistence of high temperatures, psychologically reducing the perceived distance between these extreme heat events and the audience, thereby enhancing their sense of severity and urgency. The IDCs, meanwhile, specifically identify the most vulnerable subgroups within affected populations. This descriptive strategy emotionally bridges the distance between events and audience, eliciting both compassion and a sense of responsibility. Phrases including “devastating impacts” and “causing widespread crop damage and reduced yields” are construed as resultant effects of ODCs on IDCs. By detailing heatwaves’ agricultural consequences, these formulations amplify the emotional resonance of events, heightening audience awareness of their seriousness. Through spatial proximization strategies-employing precise temporal references, geographical locations, temperature metrics, impact descriptions, and demographic specifics-the discourse effectively brings extreme heat events in South and Southeast Asia and their consequences into the audience’s cognitive and affective spheres. This rhetorical approach successfully intensifies the perceived immediacy and gravity of events while motivating audience engagement and calls to action.

4.2. Temporal Proximization

The lexico-grammatical items identified in the report are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 The Lexical-grammatical Items in Temporal Proximization

Category	Lexico-grammatical items	Frequency
T2	ODCs bring bad things to IDCs (have uncovered, being faced), IDCs directly affected by ODCs (did something)	0.59%
T4	would, will, may, could	0.69%
Total		1.28%

The report constructs a sense of infinite extension of past environmental events as future threats by combining discourse forms of the simple past tense and present perfect tense, a strategy accounting for 0.59% of the total content, emphasizing the lingering effects of historical environmental issues and their potential long-term hazards. Meanwhile, modal verb phrases (VPs) such as “would”, “will”, “may” and “could” are employed to illustrate the persistent impact of environmental problems like ozone-depleting substances (ODSs) from the present into the future, constituting 0.69% of the analysis. This linguistic strategy not only enhances the expression of uncertainty about the future but also highlights the severity of environmental issues across temporal dimensions, urging immediate action to address current challenges and prevent potential future environmental crises.

(3) The frequency of **extreme weather events** [ODC] **has increased** [temporal] dramatically in the last half century.

The phrase “has increased dramatically” in (3) employs the present perfect tense (“has increased”) to indicate that the action began at some point in the past, continues into the present, and may persist further. This use of tense emphasizes that the rise in the frequency of extreme weather events is an ongoing process rather than an isolated historical occurrence, making the audience more acutely aware that the increase is a current and escalating issue.

(4) More recently, researchers **have exposed** [temporal] a new unseen **danger** [ODC] : reservoirs of ancient, mostly uncharacterized, **microorganisms** [ODC] and **viruses** [ODC] that **could** [temporal] be viable if not lethal.

In Example 4, the modal verb “could” highlights the potential nature or capability of these ancient, mostly uncharacterized microbes and viruses-specifically, that they “may be” viable. This expression of potentiality makes the audience aware that although these microbes and viruses may not currently pose a lethal threat, they possess the capacity to become one-a real and possibly imminent risk. In terms of temporal proximization, “could” serves to convey potentiality, enhance a sense of urgency, and establish a connection between the present and the future. It enables the audience to more clearly recognize the latent threat posed by these ancient, largely unstudied microbes and viruses, prompting proactive measures to address possible challenges.

4.3. Axiological Proximization

The lexico-grammatical items identified in the report are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 The Lexical-grammatical Items in Axiological Proximization

Category	Lexico-grammatical items	Frequency
A1	SDGs, Propensity, hope, peace, prosperity, prospect, sustainability, environmental sustainability, agency, empowerment, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, social cohesion, solidarity, fairness etc.	0.36%
A2	flux, the state of uncertainty and indeterminacy, global tension, pressure, deterioration, dysfunction, fragility, instability, interdependence, vulnerability, stressors, degradation, volatility, destruction etc.	0.24%
Total		0.6%

In terms of positive values, the report constructs an optimistic vision of sustainable development, environmental protection, social cohesion, and equitable responsibility through noun phrases such as “propensity”, “hope” and “peace”. These terms, accounting for 0.36% of the total content, highlight the report’s proactive stance and hopeful outlook toward the future health of the planet and human well-being. However, the report does not overlook current challenges and crises. Through negative noun phrases like “flux”, “global tension” and “deterioration”, it exposes the various environmental and socio-economic issues confronting the world today. Although these terms constitute a relatively smaller proportion (0.24%), they profoundly reflect the complexity and uncertainty of the present global situation.

(5) In 2015, UN Member States adopted the **SDGs** [axiological] -a call to action with a universal set of goals, targets and indicators, describing a desired future of **peace** [axiological] and **prosperity** [axiological] on a healthy **planet** [IDC].

In Example 5, the term “SDGs” (Sustainable Development Goals) functions as a proper noun representing globally recognized and pursued development objectives. The SDGs inherently embody humanity's shared vision and values for future sustainable development. The phrase “desired future of peace and prosperity on a healthy planet” depicts an idealized vision-one of

peace, prosperity, and a thriving Earth. This vision reflects humanity's aspirations for a better life, aligning with the positive values and goals emphasized in value proximization.

(6) As **the world** [IDC] enters this new era of **instability** [axiological] and **interdependence** [axiological], **crises** [ODC] are more likely to **converge** [proximization] and **erode** [proximization] development gains and environmental buffers, increasing **vulnerability** [axiological] to future **shocks** [ODC].

In Example 6, "instability" is interpreted as representing the negative values or ideologies associated with ODCs, emphasizing the risks and challenges facing the current world. "Crises" directly embody these negative values, threatening human well-being and security. The term "erode" describes a gradual weakening or destructive process, here depicting the adverse effects of crises on "development gains" and "environmental buffers". "Vulnerability" denotes a state of susceptibility to harm or influence, characterizing humanity's defenselessness against future "shocks". The phrase "increasing vulnerability" highlights this escalating trend of fragility, making audiences more acutely aware of the significant risks and uncertainties they may confront in the future.

In summary, the report employs three-dimensional proximization strategies (temporal-spatial-axiological) to comprehensively and profoundly influence readers' perception of environmental crises, thereby stimulating their willingness to take action and sense of responsibility. Through discourse analysis, this study facilitates a better understanding of the report's authentic intentions and reveals the underlying social, cultural, and psychological connotations embedded in the language. This approach enables more accurate interpretation of the conveyed messages, provides robust theoretical support for addressing global environmental changes, and holds significant implications for promoting global environmental protection initiatives.

4.4. Proximization Strategy Model

Based on lexical-grammatical analysis of the Report, this study establishes a three-dimensional model (Figure 1) comprising spatial, temporal and axiological dimensions. The horizontal axis (t) represents Time, indicating the temporal urgency of threats or signals. The vertical axis (s) denotes Space, reflecting the spatial distance between threats and the IDC (central point o). The z-axis (a) signifies Value, representing the impact level or significance of threats. The model plots 18 change signals and potential disruptions identified in the Report for monitoring. Each ODC (external threat/signal) is represented by a circle, with its size scaled according to value (a-axis). The circle's position is determined by temporal proximity (t-axis) and spatial proximity (s-axis). For instance: ancient microbes in thawing Arctic permafrost exhibit low temporal urgency (small t) but close spatial proximity (small s) and high value (large a); antimicrobial resistance approaching critical levels shows high temporal urgency (large t), close spatial proximity (small s) and extreme value (very large a); while orbital space debris expansion demonstrates moderate temporal urgency (medium t), distant spatial proximity (large s) and medium value (medium a).

The analysis reveals that environmental crisis discourse contains significantly more ODCs than other discourse types, consistent with Cap's findings. The most urgent threats requiring immediate attention are antimicrobial resistance (ODC3) and emerging zoonotic diseases (ODC2), while the most impactful include antimicrobial resistance (ODC3) and AI weapon systems (ODC8). Long-term concerns such as solar radiation management (ODC7) and space debris (ODC5), though less urgent, warrant sustained monitoring.

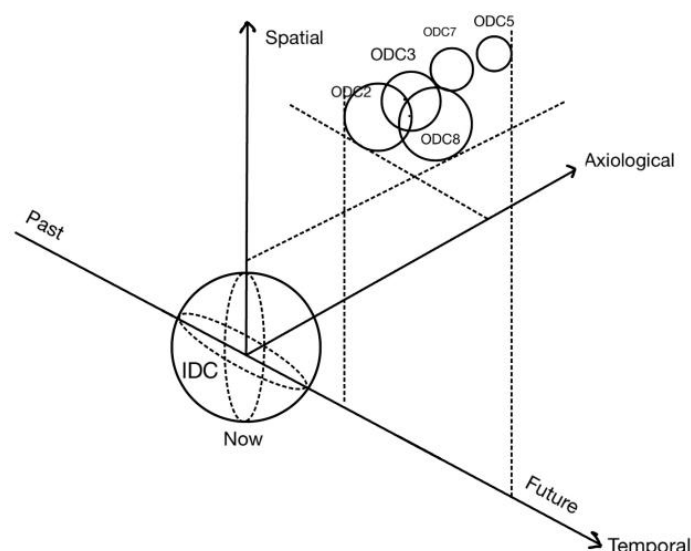


Figure 1. Proximization Strategy Model

5. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the United Nations Environment Programme's 2024 Global Environmental Outlook report, employing spatial proximization, temporal proximization, and axiological proximization strategies to systematically examine contemporary environmental threats and challenges. The findings not only reveal the urgency of environmental issues but also highlight the critical importance of environmental protection and sustainable development. However, the research is limited by its reliance on a single annual report, which necessarily constrains the scope of its conclusions. Given the complex and dynamic nature of environmental problems, future studies should expand the temporal framework to incorporate multi-year reports, thereby enabling more comprehensive understanding of environmental trends and patterns. Additionally, integrating field investigations and case studies would enhance the practical relevance of the research, providing stronger theoretical foundations and more actionable guidance for environmental conservation and sustainable development initiatives.

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