Word use of aviation industry: greenwashing the climate-crisis runway



In debates surrounding air travel, there is no consensus even on the terminology used. Official discourse suggests that everything is under control, that any issues remain within acceptable margins, and that there is absolutely no cause for concern. A more radical perspective, however, argues that "flying is the fastest way to fry the planet"[1]—and therefore calls for language that is not "soft and fluffy"[2], but rather conveys the urgency of the matter.

How we name an issue or a topic often predetermines how we judge it. If I ask whether we should **close** the Pest side of the Danube embankment to car traffic, I will likely receive negative responses. If, however, I ask whether we should **open** the Pest embankment to pedestrians on weekends, most people will say yes. Similarly, if I ask whether it is a good thing for **weeds** to grow in downtown flower beds, the response will be negative; but if I ask whether it is a good thing for **wildflowers and medicinal herbs** to grow there, the majority will say yes.



Wildflowers and medicinal herbs in a public park in Budapest. Image source: [3]

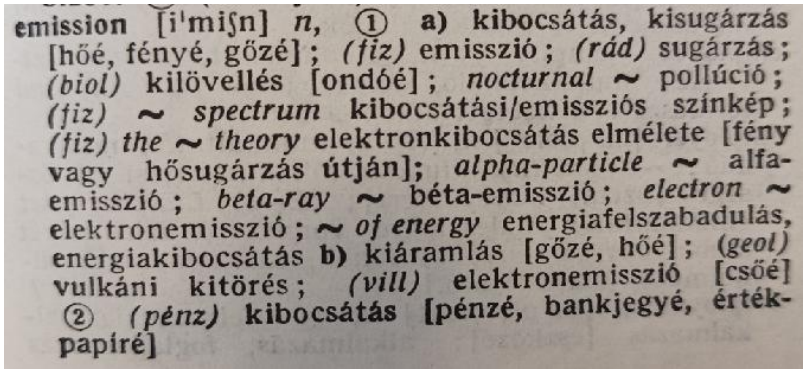
The sensitivity of language use has long been a feature of environmental discourse. As early as 2017, an article appeared on one of the government's websites discussing the distinction between **welfare and well-being**.[4] Another article on the same site[5] explains that the **"greeneconomy"** in the broad sense refers to all economic activities that are carried out in accordance with the principles of sustainability, meaning they take place without causing further damage to the environment. In contrast, the term **"green economy"** refers to the creation of a "green" image for current, environmentally damaging processes—a practice known as greenwashing.

"Renewable" literally translates to something that is capable of being renewed **("megújulható")**. In Hungarian technical terminology, however, the term **"megújuló" (renewing)** is used. The difference may seem insignificant, but it is anything but. For instance, whether we think of topsoil as a "renewig" resource or as a "potentially renewable" one can fundamentally shape how we treat it. If we view it as renewing, we might assume we can use it however we please—even taking from it—under the belief that it will naturally replenish or renew itself. If, however, we think of it as "potentially renewable," this implies that specific conditions must be met for replenishment to occur—and even then, renewal is neither guaranteed nor certain. This perspective is far closer to reality.

In a paper[6] co-authored with Csaba Pléh, Bálint Forgács highlighted the importance of how **metaphors** are employed. The core argument is captured in the article's title: **"To avert a climate catastrophe, we must move beyond soft and fluffy terms like green, eco, and bio."** For the sake of clarity, the table below summarizes these commonly used concepts, the recommended alternatives, and the rationale for the change.

Usual term	Suggested term	Why?
Climate change	Climate warming, climate destruction, overheating, scorching	Change can be of many kinds, even positive. Climate change has become an accepted term, it is less specific and not as terrifying as warming. However, neither of these expressions is really suitable for conveying the existential nature of the threat, since none of them has a particularly negative emotional charge. Therefore, the term climate destruction or overheating can be recommended.
Climate decline	Climate destruction, biosphere killing	Language use can emphasize that climate destruction is not a natural process, but is taking place due to human influence, it is atropogene, we are causing it. This also suggests that we are able to change present pattern.
Greenhouse effect	Oven effect, bale fire effect	For a long time, greenhouse was exclusively the privilege of the wealthy. It became a symbol of eternal spring, fertility, and wealth, where the desired temperature and humidity could be precisely controlled. (Oven evokes stronger images, like the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel – author of this article)
Climate change	Climate collapse, climate crisis, climate catastrophe	Proposed terminology refers more strongly to the exponential, self-accelerating nature of the process (in which the tipping points are unknown).
Climate adaptation	Catastroph, crisis, depression	Climate crisis can trigger chain reactions that threaten human survival. This fight for survival must be expressed in words that convey the true depth of the dangers.

One of the most frequently used terms in the context of climate destruction — **"emission"** — is inherently misleading. For phenomena that damage the environment and trigger negative changes within it, the term **"pollution"** is more appropriate. Nevertheless, the professional community has convinced itself that "emission" is the correct term for climate-damaging gases—even though the word was originally used primarily for processes that are directed, planned, and regulated by humans (most notably the issuance of banknotes or securities), which in itself evokes positive associations.


emission [iˈmiʃn] *n*, ① **a)** kibocsátás, kisugárzás [hőé, fényé, gőzé]; *(fiz)* emisszió; *(rád)* sugárzás; *(biol)* kilövellés [ondóé]; *nocturnal* ~ pollúció; *(fiz)* ~ *spectrum* kibocsátási/emissziós színkép; *(fiz) the* ~ *theory* elektronkibocsátás elmélete [fény vagy hősugárzás útján]; *alpha-particle* ~ alfa-emisszió; *beta-ray* ~ béta-emisszió; *electron* ~ elektronemisszió; ~ *of energy* energiafelszabadulás, energiakibocsátás **b)** kiáramlás [gőzé, hőé]; *(geol)* vulkáni kitörés; *(vill)* elektronemisszió [csőé] ② *(pénz)* **kibocsátás [pénzé, bankjegyé, érték-papíré]**

Meaning of the notion EMISSION in the English-Hungarian dictionary[7] published in 1974:

1) Eradiation (of warmth, light, steam)

2) Issuance (of money, banknote, value-bill)

We use the term **"natural disaster"** to refer to increasingly frequent extreme weather phenomena—such as windstorms, floods, dust storms, and droughts. This terminology implies that these events are entirely natural—that they have always occurred this way and there is no cause for concern. In reality, however, we know that they are driven by unrestrained and irresponsible **human/anthropogenic** activity. A significant portion of what we call "natural disasters" are, in fact, human-made disasters.

Hungary's 2023 draft of National Energy and Climate Plan reflected the professional and political uncertainties characteristic of this field. The term "green" appeared frequently throughout the official document; while this is understandable, it was far from clear what was actually meant by terms such as "greening of industry," "greening of energy consumption," "green premium," or "energy types capable of being 'greened". Does the "greening" of electricity generation exclude sources not based on sustainable energy—such as nuclear power? Can electricity produced by gas-fired power plants be considered "green energy"? Can hydrogen produced at a nuclear or gas-fired power plant be labeled "green hydrogen"? Does hydrogen derived from carbon-based sources or nuclear energy become environmentally friendly simply by being called "green"?

At times, the document displayed a palpable reluctance to use the term "green" at all; when it finally did appear, it was used awkwardly and placed within distancing quotation marks: "In order for the country to emerge as a winner from the rise of the 'Green Economy'..." The use of terms like "greening of transport," "transport greening," and "greening of the transport sector" was similarly ambiguous.

The 2022 document by Stay Grounded, titled "COMMON DESTINATION – Reframing aviation to ensure a safe landing and lay the tracks towards a fair planet"[1] emphasizes the fundamental importance of language use. As it states, language matters: it is how we interpret the world around us, while a narrative is the system of stories associated with it.

The impact of "**frames**" has been widely studied—from neuropsychology to applied linguistics—revealing that specific concepts and expressions activate particular interpretive patterns and neural connections within the brain. These patterns determine how we perceive information.

The document advises against the use of certain terms and suggests preferred alternatives:

Usual term	Suggested term/ stronger message	Why?
Air travel	Air traffic	Recalls the inconvenience of congested traffic, traffic jam and loud engines
Aviation fuel, jet fuel	Polluting fuel, dirty fuel	Reminds of the effects of fossil fuels and the fact that we must avoid them Reminds to the effects of fossil fuels and the fact that we must avoid them
Emissions from air transport	(Climate) pollution, toxic fumes, dirty gases	References to the effects on people and nature. Shows that pollution warms the climate and has other effects
Expansion/growth of air transport	More runways, more air traffic and more pollution	Highlights and clarifies the effects on people, livelihoods and nature
Carbon neutral flying	Greenwasing of aviation, greenwashed flights	Shows that there is no such thing as climate-friendly flying. Highlights the false promises of the industry
Future effects of climate change	The everyday reality of the climate crisis; the looming climate catastrophe; the losses and damages already inflicted	Shorter time horizon highlights the impacts and makes the climate crisis tangible
„Air miles"	Climate destruction reward system; polluter pyramid scheme	A reminder that these systems encourage destructive travel
Low-cost airlines, budget travel	External cost travel, travel paid for by others. Cheap for you, expensive for the planet	Reminder of the real loss and damage caused by aviation industry and climate destruction. Cheap flight means someone else is paying for it
Frequent flyer	Frivolous flyer, excessive flyer	Takes away the glamour of the elite and reframes it as more harmful
Everyone who flies	The minority of people who take flights	Reminds that only a minority flies
Alternative fuel / sustainable jet fuel	aviation fuel substitute; the scarce sustainable jet fuel; agrofuel, crop fuel, fuel instead of food (for biofuels)	Takes away the positive framing of "alternative". Shows that the kerosene substitute is not sustainable. Points out that agrofuel can displace food production.
Democratise aviation	Profit-driven expansion of the aviation industry	Highlights the real driving force behind aviation industry
Decarbonize aviation	Reduce air traffic	Decarbonizing air traffic through technology will not be possible for decades – Let's talk about something realistic
Tourisms	Mass tourism, Profit-generating tourism	Dependence on tourism is not a sustainable form of development
Tax free	Tax exempt, tax privileges, subsidised by taxpayers	"Free" is a positive phrase for something that's problematic
Climate change, global warming	Climate crisis, global climate catastrophe ahead; destruction of our life support systems	"Change" and "warming" provide misleading positive frames for something that's a serious problem
Private jet flights, shopping weekend trips by plane; space trips etc.	„Bullshit" flights, frivolous flights, unnecessary flights	You can call flights that you find unjust and unnecessary "bullshit" flights or useless travel. You can

		distinguish them from legitimate flights (e.g. an immigrant's occasional visit home).
Giving up flying, renounce flying	Slow travel, better and explorer travel, ground travel, responsible decision, climate-conscious travel	Show a positive attitude. Highlight what can be gained by not flying

Source: *COMMON DESTINATION – Reframing aviation to ensure a safe landing and lay the tracks towards a fair planet. Stay Grounded, 2022*

The text explores the issues of language use, word choice, and phrasing in great depth. It also provides a strong rationale for these recommendations, offering, in the process, a comprehensive overview of the aviation industry. Although the full work is not available online, a brief summary of the narratives presented within it can be found here[8], and in Hungarian language here [9].

Perhaps the most significant narrative is the one termed **"Safe Landing"**, which posits that "*Changes are already happening that are only the beginning of a larger social, cultural and economic transformation. The most important question, especially for people working in aviation, is whether it will be through design or disaster, whether the industry will crash or make a safe landing. This makes a just transition for people working in aviation absolutely vital."*



Front page of "COMMON DESTINATION – Reframing aviation to ensure a safe landing and lay the tracks towards a fair planet"

The book of Stay Grounded sees the real-life depiction of the aviation industry as a series of clashes. It draws attention to the fact that *"you are against an army of highly motivated and experienced corporate public relations people whose job is to maintain the status quo. Your campaign work will need to be dynamic, experimental and extremely tenacious, looking for timely interventions where your message will land well…"*

In addition to using appropriate vocabulary, the work also emphasizes that **"…images are easier to remember than text"**. At the same time, it recommends that "***Try to avoid using images of planes in the sky*** *as these are the images the industry uses to promote frequent and unsustainable flying. If your intervention is around the future of mobility and transport, try and use pictures of that future: trains, trams, buses, slow travel options or other forms of mass mobility. If using images of planes is unavoidable, make sure that they are either grounded, or their noise shows to the left and/or downwards. Images of planes ascending are very common and used to show progress and hope – this is something we must challenge and try to avoid reinforcing visually. In western cultures* ***"up" is associated with good and "down" as negative****, and because of the reading direction in most languages, we perceive left as he direction of "past" and "right" as "future".*

Standing in stark contrast to these principles is **Guilt Trip**[10], a short documentary from The Guardian (July 2005), which boldly showcases the power, technical marvel, and breathtaking spectacle of aircraft. The creators likely felt empowered to do so by the strength of the story itself. In the film, young, successful airline pilots join an organization called **Safe Landing**[11] — a community of aviation workers advocating for the industry to take greater action toward climate protection. They organize meetings where aviation workers are invited to address these issues—issues that are largely neglected by politics and public policy.



Scene from the documentary titled Guild Trip[10]

All in all, it can be stated that aviation—or, to use a more somber term, the "aviation industry"—is not only a significant and growing source of pollution, but also actively seeks to obscure or overwrite this reality through its own specific narratives, terminology, and choice of words.[12]

Hungary is no exception in this regard. A case in point is an **airport notice**[13] issued by Budapest Airport on July 22, 2025. Under the subheading "Sustainable Renewal of the Airport's Taxiway G," the text states that "new basalt-concrete pavement and substructures, along with stormwater drains and channels, are being constructed over an area of approximately 17,000 square meters." Thus, the text deliberately **confuses the concepts of renewal/renovation with those of expansion and growth**—the former representing qualitative development, the latter quantitative. Furthermore, it **attempts to frame all of this within the context of sustainability**, even though quantitative growth is inherently contrary to the very concept of sustainability.[14]

Communication Research[15] presented in October 2026 found that three out of six Facebook posts from Budapest International Airport—which were examined in detail—constituted greenwashing,[16] warning a rather alarming trend. Perhaps even more thought-provoking is the finding that the airport—despite an explosive increase in freight traffic—**avoids the terms "freight" and "freight traffic"** (which did not appear in the posts analyzed), consistently replacing them with the word **"cargo"**—a term that sounds more mysterious and implies a sense of advanced development.

As long as aviation industry remains in denial about climate crisis and the need to respond to it—continuing, and even intensifying, its climate-destructive activities—it is hardly surprising that specialized discourse employs an aviation-related metaphor as a **synonym for the exponentially accelerating destruction of the climate**. A technical book[17] published in 2025 states: "Entering such a self-reinforcing process would exceed our worst nightmares." The book uses the term **"climate-crisis runway"** to describe a climate that crosses one tipping point after another, becoming unbrakable, beyond human influence, and—in all likelihood—unsurvivable.

Let us hope that the aviation industry veers off this path before it is too late.



Source of picture: https://climate.leeds.ac.uk/news/aviation-contributes-3-5-to-human-caused-climate-change/

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