

## **Words for climate change are powerful but not magical**

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**A better understanding is required of the role of language in societies, such as whether adoption of an emergency terminology could impact views and practices. For both researchers and communication strategists a thorough consideration of the interconnections between language and social contexts is crucial.**

The term “climate emergency” became commonplace in the last few years as a way of naming the seriousness of climate change. Oxford Dictionaries made it word of the year 2019<sup>1</sup>. Its usage rose sharply between 2018 and 2019 with the publication of a “Climate Emergency Plan” by the Club of Rome, the publication of the IPCC’s Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5° C, and the appearance of Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion. Since then, numerous countries and local governments have made “Climate Emergency Declarations”. However, it is unclear whether this new language will lead to a renewed engagement or change actions on climate.

### **Labelling effects in question**

The possibility that using specific lexic or giving discursive salience to a particular perspective lead to changes in people’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviours has attracted much scholarly interest. However, conclusions regarding climate change “labelling effects”, as well as framing and its effects, are often divergent. Some research suggests that word choice influences (declared) beliefs, concern or other factors; other concludes the opposite. In the USA, a 2011 survey experiment found that levels of belief in “climate change” were higher than in “global warming” with the wording effect especially large among Republicans<sup>2</sup> whereas a similar split-ballot experiment measuring perceived seriousness, rather than the existence, of the problem obtained similar responses with each term<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, using a comparable method in the UK, Whitmarsh<sup>4</sup> revealed that “global warming” evoked more public concern than “climate change”. Further survey experiments reported continuing differences in beliefs related to different climate language labels.<sup>5</sup> Research findings, it is well-known, are to a large extent a product of methodology, including epistemological paradigms, research design and methods. Most studies mentioned above have relied on survey experiments involving the manipulation of words or other textual elements. Similarly, “how-to-communicate” guidelines, issued by scholars, activists and others, tend to assume that tweaking a word or other framing devices can significantly alter the way people relate to climate change. Word use, perception and impact are typically examined in separation of the real world. However, there are good reasons to problematize this type of research and communication campaigns: a) words are not encountered in isolation but in particular semiotic contexts; b) people inhabit concrete social and material contexts, which are important influences and constraints on their

conceptions and actions. The meaning of one same word or term, say “climate emergency”, depends strongly on what is said before and after it, that is, on its co-text. It is a fact that terminology can be key to framing reality: a concept can shed light or obscure a given aspect. But the overall semiotic – or meaning creation – “picture” depends on the wider text. Multiple factors and filters are important in the development of ideas and behaviours: some, such as political orientations, have been assessed in research described above, but others, such as social relations and culture, have been disregarded. Moreover, specific lived experiences of e.g. energy, transportation and consumption are crucial for day-to-day behaviours. Individuals may declare a high level of climate concern when responding to a survey employing a certain terminology – and may indeed be honest in doing so. But that terminology may play a small role in their specific lifeworld, i.e. in the concrete circumstances where they have to juggle different priorities and make decisions, as social theories of practice and Shove’s<sup>6</sup> discussion of the “paradigm of ABC”, i.e. attitudes, behaviour and choice, have illustrated. The impact of language is thus limited and conditional. Although difficult to assess rigorously, the influence of social marketing approaches in climate-relevant actions is likely to be restricted.<sup>7</sup> The fact that climate change is tied to complex webs of practices and social systems is part of the reason why strategic communication efforts do not seem to have achieved much.

### **Discourse does matter for climate change**

Although not a magic bullet, language in use – or discourse – is vitally important to individuals and societies. As social semiotics and related approaches argue, its force lies in the production, reproduction and potential transformation of the meanings of everything that surrounds us. Discourse is constitutive of the worlds that we live in: “There is no meaning behind discourses that discourse represents; in the representation lies the constitution of what we come to accept as the real.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, social identities and relations are constituted in/through discourse.<sup>9</sup> For instance, very different subject positions can be created for citizens vis-à-vis climate change, e.g. either as spectators or as political agents.<sup>10</sup> Although social change can and does happen, in all the fields of discourse taken together the balance normally leans more towards maintaining the status quo than to pushing for change. Even when deliberate distortion of knowledge on climate change is not a significant problem, societies tend to have more inertia than openness to transformation: economic structures, material facilities and other systems create path-dependences, habits mould daily lives. Critically, many voices and arenas predominantly contribute to naturalize those ways in which societies are organized as they do not question or challenge the power relations that underpin much environmental damage; the distribution of costs and benefits associated with greenhouse gas emissions; or the aim of constant economic growth. These are traits of our social world with strong connections with climate change but that appear unalterable or without alternatives in most journalism or advertising, for instance. Access to and control of the massively powerful meaning-making systems that corporate media are, including all digital technologies, is profoundly differential across social groups. Hence, overall, language has been more effective in maintaining certain structures and practices in place than in modifying them.<sup>11</sup>

## **Possibility of transformation**

In the perspective presented above, communication is not a separate element from reality or an “add-on”. It is embedded in all things human and in the ways humans relate to the non-human world. As much as it has shaped our worlds, it will continue doing so. This means that change is possible and vocabulary can help. “Climate justice” is an example of a term that can “generate” novel responsibilities, especially when voiced by victims of climate change impacts, and there are signs that it is getting institutionalized in a few cases.<sup>12</sup> Both “climate justice” and “climate emergency” have gained semiotic vigor with the recent youth climate movement and this has arguably help politicize climate change in the pluralistic democratic sense as an intergenerational matter.<sup>13</sup> Due to a conjunction of factors, the movement achieved a wide social circulation of their claims and has been influential at various levels.<sup>14</sup>

So, again, can the language of “climate emergency” change the world? If we look at the all-important realm of social media, some research shows no effect of the term on engagement with climate change - emotional responses, efficacy beliefs, policy support, or intended political action<sup>15</sup> – but other finds that, as used by Fridays for Future, emergency speak is often linked to hope and acts as an “activator of action”.<sup>16</sup> In various analyses of policy and governance, discourses of “emergency” appear to have different purposes and open-ended consequences.<sup>17</sup> To all cases, specific social contexts are decisive. We need to better understand how discourses on climate change – and on the many issues associated with it – actually perform certain (situated and contingent) social functions within certain social settings. This poses a tall order to social scholars and to decision-makers. “Universalistic” research carrying out controlled experiments, producing numbers, and identifying statistical patterns continues to be awarded more authority in many circles than contextual research. Arguably, however, more attention and investment should go to studies with naturally-occurring data and to interpretive research involving “real-world” and “on-the-ground” observations of language use in connection with other social practices. Rather than carrying out experiments and asking people what they think or would do, that research analyzes what happens in spontaneous contexts.

In identifying and understanding possibilities of disruption of the state-of-things that causes climate change multiple challenges arise. Connections between language, on the one hand, and agency, power and materiality, on the other, require sophisticated modes of inquiry and no single kind of research can provide a complete understanding. Critical inter-disciplinary approaches to climate change and communication, such as Critical Discourse Studies,<sup>18</sup> critical phenomenology,<sup>19</sup> and others<sup>20</sup> can offer important empirical contributions to the making of social knowledge that not only describes and explains those connections but can also point to social and cultural opportunities for alternative futures.<sup>21</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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