

CLIMATE CHANGE IN MEDIA DISCOURSE: ANALYZING GRETA THUNBERG'S SPEECH

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Abstract:

Caused by industrialization, urbanization, transportation, deforestation, and coal burning at a massive level, climate change is one of the alarming issues today, resulting in over production of heat trapping gases like methane, carbon dioxide, etc., and hence rising the temperature of earth above normal range. Natural disasters like floods, cloud bursts, soil erosion, etc., are the consequence of climate change, increasing every year. For examining the representation of this issue in mainstream media discourse, a critical discourse analysis of Greta Thunberg's speech has been done in the current study, by applying Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis. Moreover, exploration of the interplay between language, power, and ideology i.e., the role of language in shaping, challenging, or creating the ideology and power dynamics, is the main purpose of the research. The findings of current study affirm Fairclough's idea that language shapes and is shaped by the social structures, recreating, reshaping, or challenging the social or political ideology.

Keywords: Climate Change | Language | Ideology | Power | CDA

1. Introduction:

Climate change (change in earth's weather conditions) is one of the rising and alarming issues, of the world. Due to industrialization, urbanization, transportation, deforestation, and coal burning, at massive level, heat trapping gases like Carbon dioxide (CO₂) and Methane (CH₄) are produced uncontrollably in excessive amount, resulting in global warming (rise in earth's temperature above normal level/range). Floods, cloud bursts, soil erosion, and other natural disasters are a result of climate change, making earth's environment / ecosystems more vulnerable and less sustainable. In today's modern world of technological advancements, framing an issue in such a way that could help in raising awareness among common people, suggesting possible solutions and measures to overcome it, becomes very easy. With the emergence of technologies and advancements in media platforms, issue of climate change has been brought into light with more prominence, just like other social issues. In this regard, the speech of one of the popular and youngest climate change activist, Greta Thunberg from Sweden, is taken as sample, and is critically analyzed using Fairclough's three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, in order to gain insights into the relationship between language, power, and ideology. On September 23, 2019, Thunberg addressed the U.N. Climate Action Summit, held in New York city, on the alarming situation and destructive consequences of climate change, that needed proper attention.

2. Literature Review:

Climate change, despite being recognized at global level, lacks meaningful global action in its control. This may be due to the differences between the scientists and the politicians' point of view / perception regarding the issue. Salehyan and Hendrix (2010) highlighted the contradiction between strong scientific consensus on climate change and weak political action taken by the states. Such as, in global events like Copenhagen Conference 2009, world leaders failed to agree on binding commitments to reduce emission of greenhouse gases. Salehyan and Hendrix (2010) argued that there is very strong scientific agreement on the physical reality of the climate change, where human activities like fossil fuels, etc., have pushed CO₂ to 389.8 ppm in 2010, far above natural historical levels, and its (CO₂) emissions accelerated after 2000, due to growth in developing countries. They further predicted that there will be rise in global

temperature to 1.8 - 4.0°C by 2099, sea levels may rise over 1m by 2100 (putting around 600 million coastal residents at risk), and rainfall patterns will shift dramatically (i.e., more droughts in Africa, Middle East, South America, and more rainfalls in Northern Hemisphere, and Horn of Africa). Furthermore, unlike physical impacts, the human consequences of climate change are more uncertain and harder to predict, due to complex human behavior which is influenced by politics, culture, economics and technology. Nonetheless, they also predicted that climate change will likely reduce agricultural productivity (especially in Africa and Southern Europe), increase water scarcity (i.e., 75 - 250 million Africans exposed by 2020), and lead to large-scale human migration, potentially 200 million, from vulnerable regions. They further explored the reasons of limited political action. One of the major reasons is public skepticism i.e., many individuals like in U.S., (influenced by political ideology), believe that the threat is exaggerated. Another obstacle is behavior of countries, like every prefers others to reduce emission while avoiding economic sacrifices themselves, which makes cooperation difficult. Then, the conflicting interests among wealthy countries and emerging economies like India, is another reason, making it hard to agree on who should bear the costs of climate action. Finally, the time inconsistency problem is also the reason, i.e., climate change requires short-term costs for long-term benefits, which politicians often avoid due to their focus on elections and public opinion. At the end, they suggested that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) must produce clearer and more accessible reports, and develop educational programs to engage students and the general public.

Likewise, LI et al. (2021) argued that climate change does not produce isolated problems, rather it produces systematic risks that can cause large scale disruptions. They described two main forms of systematic risks, i.e., series effect in which one risk triggers another in a chain, and parallel effects in which one hazard produces multiple risks at the same time. They proposed three main indicators for assessment systematic climate risks i.e., impact domain, severity of impact, and probability of occurrence. Impact domain consists of five categories, which are economy (measured through monetary losses, GDP reduction, and damage to major infrastructure), society (effects such as poverty, migration, and conflicts), homeland security (like resource conflict, and political instability), human health (such as disease spread, malnutrition, and mortality), and living conditions (impacts on water resources, ecosystems, and land habitability). In severity of impact, severity depends on scale of the event, level of exposure, vulnerability of population, and effectiveness of response measures. In probability of occurrence, assessment focuses on high probability and high-impact risks, and low probability and extremely high-impact risks. They further discussed the snow and freezing rain in Southern China in 2008, which illustrated emergency systematic risks. Direct impacts of the risks included damaged power lines, transportation shutdowns, and agriculture losses, and the cascading effects included industrial shutdowns, drinking-water shortages, increased risk of forest fires and pests, and massive disruptions during the Spring Festival.

Finally, clouds which are about 66% of Earth's atmosphere, play a significant role in climate system. As per ZHAO et al.(2020), height of cloud tops matters, such as, high clouds usually cause warming because they trap heat, and low clouds usually cause cooling because they reflect sunlight. So, changes in cloud height can affect climate change. According to ZHAO et al. (2020), Cloud Top Height (CTH) has changed over East Asia from 2000 to 2018. CTH is important as it influences weather, rainfall, and how much sunlight or heat the Earth receives. They used satellite data from MODIS (a NASA instrument) for 18 years. They studied CTH in three areas i.e., whole East Asia, Eastern Land (China's Eastern Region), and Eastern sea (East China Sea and nearby ocean). They also compared cloud height with other factors like, sea surface temperature (SST), water vapor, and cloud fraction (how much sky is covered by clouds). Their findings revealed that the CTH has been rising across East Asia over 18 years

i.e., +0.020 km per year in East Asia overall, +0.035 km per year in Eastern land, and +0.034 km per year in Eastern sea. This means that clouds are slowly getting higher over time, especially over China's land and the nearby ocean, which became noticeable after 2009. However, some areas of China show cloud height falling in summer like middle-lower Yangtze River Basin, Tarim Basin, Turpan Basin, Northeast Sichuan Basin.

In short, the shifts in Earth's weather pattern is a warning signal that underscores the urgent need to treat climate change as an immediate and alarming global threat requiring swift and collective action.

3. Research Objectives:

To examine the representation of the social issue of climate change, in mainstream media discourse

To examine media text i.e. Thunberg's speech on climate change in the light of Fairclough's 3D model of CDA.

To explore the interplay between language, power, and ideology

3.1 Research Questions:

1. How is the social issue of climate change represented in mainstream media discourse?
2. How do linguistic choices in Greta Thunberg's speech, on climate change construct meaning ?

3.2 Methodology

For the current research, Norman Fairclough's three dimensional model of critical discourse analysis is used for the analysis of Greta Thunberg's speech. This model consists of three dimensions/levels which are interrelated, i.e., description, interpretation, and explanation. Description is the textual analysis of the text, with primary focus on linguistic features like, vocabulary, grammar, rhetoric, word's choice, etc., and it is the first dimension of the model. Interpretation, also called discursive practice, deals with how text is produced, distributed, and consumed, i.e., who is the speaker, to whom he is speaking, and how meaning is made/constructed, respectively. It is the second dimension of the model. Explanation, also called social practice, deals with the connection of discourse with wider social and ideological structures like power, inequality, social change, etc. It is the third dimension of the model.

4. Transcript of the Speech:

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/KAJsdpTPJpU?si=UGpXH11Lc3sLXzDg>

Transcript link: <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>

5. Analysis:

5.1 Description (Textual Analysis):

The speech consists of the following text:

First of all, pronouns i.e., '**we**' and '**you**' are used in the speech, constructing a kind of binary opposition between the youth (victims) and powerful adults (politicians), respectively. Then, the repetition of the utterance "**How dare you!**" reflects outrage of the speaker, who is condemning world leaders for their irresponsible and immoral behavior, and also '**you are failing us**' represents confrontation and accountability, along with the power of common people whose support can bring someone in or out of the power. Moreover, words like '**stolen, betrayal, evil, mass extinction, and collapse**', represent crisis. These choice of words may reflect that the crisis is due to irresponsible behavior of authorities, failed or corrupt policies, and failed strategical response. Likewise, modal verbs i.e. '**will, should,**' and '**must**' represent the necessity of the hour and urgency of the situation. Similarly, the combination of words like '**stolen childhood**', and '**future generations**', evokes empathy and concern, and the intertextual element of the speech like incorporation of scientific data such as, CO₂ level, emission

figures, and percentages, establishes credibility and rational grounding of the issue. Lastly, the lexical meaning of the speech revolves around injustice, ethical and moral failure, and urgency. In short, at textual level, the speech is both emotional and political, representing accusations on moral and ethical grounds, scientific and rational reasoning, and emotional as well as practical urgency.

5.2 Interpretation (Discursive Practice):

Production:

The speech is produced by Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish climate activist representing global youth, at U.N.'s international forum, challenging world leaders and policy makers, as an activist and not as a neutral report.

Distribution:

The speech was broadcasted worldwide, shared through mainstream and social media i.e., national and international news channels, social media platforms like Twitter (now X), YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, etc., articles, videos, memes, slogans, etc., reaching millions of people worldwide.

Consumption:

The target audience was world politicians (mainly, those whose policies determine the planet's future), and public all over the world (generally, reinforcing public awareness and active participation, regarding the issue).

5.3 Explanation (Social Practice):

The speech reflects a challenge to dominant political ideologies that prioritize economic growth over sustainability. It promotes the ideology of collective responsibility, intergenerational ethics and struggle, along with eco-justice. Moreover, the speech contributes to broader social movements, transforming climate discourse from a technical issue to a moral crisis.

5.4 Relationship of Language, Power, and Ideology:

Applying Fairclough's 3D model of CDA to the selected speech reveals crucial insights into the intricate relationship between language, power, and ideology.

The above analysis demonstrates that language is not a neutral medium of communication, rather it is an instrument through which social relations, hierarchies, and beliefs are constructed, transformed, and challenged. It can be illustrated that language operates as a form of power, especially when used to challenge political authority, as, the phrases '**we are watching you**', '**we will not forgive you**', '**how dare you**', etc., used in the speech represent so. Thunberg's accusatory tone places the leaders (authority having power) in the position of the accused, reversing the power relations. She is directly condemning the leaders by addressing them with pronoun '**you**'. Through repetitive vocabulary i.e., '**how dare you**', she challenges the legitimacy of established power structures. The pronouns '**you**' vs. '**we**' are redefining the power structures or dynamics, assigning moral and ethical responsibilities to authority (political leaders and policy makers), while empowering those without any institutional influence or power (public /victims).

Moreover, it also represents that language reflects ideology (embedded in discourse). Thunberg's speech directly confronts the political ideology that prioritizes economic growth over environmental sustainability. Her phrase '**fairy tales of eternal economic growth**' linguistically exposes its illusionary nature. By framing climate change as a moral and ethical crisis, she reshapes the ideological terrain of the debate. This shows how language can both expose dominant ideologies and construct counter narratives / systematic values that challenge them.

In addition, the analysis also shows that discourse can generate social power, just like Thunberg whose speech spreading worldwide through global media, became a rallying cry for climate

activism. Through discourse, she has transformed passive awareness to active resistance, reinforcing collective action and mobilization, illustrating the Fairclough's principle that discourse is both shaped by and shapes social structures.

Finally, the analysis suggests that language can empower individuals and groups to challenge systematic inequalities, just like Thunberg who has used discourse strategically, to gain symbolic power and global visibility. Hence, it can be said that language not only reflects power relations, but also provides a way to resist and reshape them.

6. Conclusion:

The analysis of the speech through Fairclough's three dimensional model of CDA, explores how language, power, and ideology interact with each other to construct social meaning. Textually, it has combined scientific reasoning with emotional tone and vocabulary (an example of intertextuality); discursively, it has functioned as a global event mobilizing collective consciousness; and socially, it has challenged the ideology of economic growth and political power over sustainability. The insights gained from the analysis reveal that language is transformative and an instrument of resistance, empowerment, and ideological redefinition. Thunberg's speech affirms Fairclough's idea that individuals can challenge the structures of power and contribute to reshape the political ideology or values, by creating counter narratives on rational and moral grounds.

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