

Language and aesthetics of climate discourse and its implications for our view of the future



<https://www.artstation.com/artwork/xJKoX>

Abstract

Climate change as a socially constructed phenomenon is deeply connected to language. The latter, shaping our world and emotional reactions, should be closely regarded when discussing problems towards a future rich in equitable solutions and social transformation. The current discourse around climate change seems to be shaped by dystopian elements of looming danger and the inevitability of its catastrophic effects on us humans. What changes when shifting the focus to more positive elements of effective, green and solutions rich in the awareness of mental health?

Theoretical background

Climate discourse has since the 90s taken to an alarmist language that creates a sense of urgency and catastrophism. Rightly so, some argue, as the crisis we face measures up to that level of emergency. Disastrous news everyday can impact the mental well-being of people, as well as their ability to act towards a more sustainable future. And importantly, as the crisis is not just an individual one, this certain language and aesthetics can withdraw the attention of systemic issues.

Thesis

- Compared to the 80s, where the future was portrayed as exciting and close to science-fiction, the future today seems like a dystopia.
- People who consume mass media, shaped by outlooks of negative futures, can be left hopeless and disdained, resulting in stressed states of emotional wellbeing.

Methodology

- aesthetic analysis based on colors, shapes, and their messages portraying different moods and feelings
- focus on students, specifically Fridays For Future, because of accessibility and general engagement

Research Question

Why and in what ways is the climate discourse dominated by alarmist language and negative images?

What benefits arise from a more hopeful and positive approach?

Methods

- literature review
- awareness walk with quantitative assessment of stickers/posters
- participant observation at Global Climate Strike of FFF

Research results

Discourse analysis: Hulme (2008) identified three dominant discourses, climate as judgment and then pathology over the past centuries, whilst modern discourse of climate is, now pervaded as being catastrophic. This is mirrored in the state of the ecosystems and to a certain degree still eligible. Yet in skimming through the popular German Tagesschau News, I didn't observe alarmist language. It seems to have shifted to actors of right-wing parties, like the Alternative für Deutschland, where 17 of the first 21 articles contained alarmist and extremist language (i.e. "climate terrorists"), as the anthropogenic influence on the climate crisis is publically acknowledged.

Awareness walk: Different aesthetics noticeable, but namely more reasonable ones as opposed to the Instagram Post of Fridays For Future. 13 out of 30 designs used alarmist aesthetics, and only 10 of 30 alarmist language. I assume, that on the street, more reasonable ones are suited better for the diverse audience, while Instagram has already a narrower target audience.

Aesthetic elements
greens; simple; bold letters;
date emphasized

- plain
- appealing for more diverse audience



poster from Fridays For Future in Göttingen



Instagram Post of Fridays for Future Göttingen

Aesthetic elements

bold letters; flags of Antifashist and queer community create movement; busy; purple filter; barrier tape; numerous elements; sense of looming (danger)

- alarmist language visualized
- urgency
- pressing issues matched with urgent aesthetics

Further research...

Take part at global climate strike of FFF and note down used language and aesthetic elements of the speakers but also demonstration signs, maybe speaking to demonstrators as well.

What kind of language appeals to people more in order to take action?

Central literature

Hulme, 2008: The conquering of climate: discourses of fear and their dissolution. *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 174, No. 1
Risbey, 2008: The new climate discourse: Alarmist or alarming? *Global Environmental Change*. Vol. 18
Upton, 2014: Aesthetic education and discover New York: Inquiry, the arts and civic engagement. *Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning*. Vol.2
Keulartz, 2007: Using Metaphors in Restoring Nature. *Nature and Culture* Vol. 2, No. 1
Green, 2018: How Aesthetic Style Can Influence Reception of Visual Communications of Climate Change. In: *Handbook of Climate Change Communication*: Vol. 1