

## Listening to the voices of citizens in climate communication

Kristin Davidse, Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenberghe & Wout Van Praet

The debate on climate change is still very much alive, both internationally and in Belgium, and among policymakers as well as among the general public. While the scientific predictions are becoming reality - faster than expected - the international debate is becoming increasingly polarised. Scepticism and denial - not so much based on scientific grounds but rather on ideology and political or economic interests - are by no means diminishing. Confronted with this situation, “investigations of climate change communication cannot avoid attending to the role of language”, as Nerlich et al (2010: 103) put it. Indeed, linguistic analysis allows us to broaden the perspective from factual (dis)information to the role played by ideology, identity and worldview in climate change communication. Linguistic analysis of both climate-aware texts and of sceptical and denialist discourse can reveal, amongst others, the different narratives of climate change they construe, often polyphonically, and the attitudes that are explicitly or implicitly conveyed towards the participants in the climate debate.

Linguistic analyses of climate communication have so far focused mainly on discourse by the more visible participants in the debate such as journalism, science communication, political debates, policy texts, etc. The voices of citizens in the public space have been studied much less. Yet, citizens are key in the debate as they make electoral choices for parties and their climate programmes, decide on climate-friendly actions, etc.

The aim of this talk is to make a – modest – start with the analysis of communications by citizens representing all the main stances towards climate action, i.e. activists, concerned citizens, doubters and sceptics (Pepermans & Maesele 2017, Metag & Schäfer 2018). We will study citizens’ voices in such contexts as letters to the editor, comments to online news and social media, answers to open questions in surveys, etc. The analytical tools we use include: polyphonic narrative analysis (Fløttum & Gjerstad 2013), discourse analysis and appraisal analysis (Martin & White 2005). In doing so, we confirm the importance of what Fløttum & Schäfer (2022: 52) call ‘inreach’, i.e. “*dialogic* communication in which ... researchers and authorities ... *listen* to citizens, and acquaint themselves with citizens’ viewpoints, needs, demands and (maybe seemingly irrational) fears.”

### References

- Fløttum, K & Gjerstad, Ø. 2013. Voix citées dans le discours sur le changement climatique : comparaison de deux textes journalistiques français et anglais. *Arena Romanistica* 13, 54-73.
- Fløttum, K., Schäfer, M. in collaboration with Davidse, K., Simon-Vandenberghe, A.-M., Van Praet, W., 2022. *The Language of Debate and Communication about Climate Change in Flanders. Report of the Thinkers’ Cycle of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts*, Brussels: KVAB.
- Martin, J. R., White, P., 2005. *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, London, 2005.
- Metag, J., & Schäfer, M. S. 2018. Audience segments in environmental and science communication: Recent findings and future perspectives. *Environmental Communication*, 12(8), 995-1004.
- Nerlich, B., Koteyko, N., Brown, B., 2010. Theory and language of climate change communication. *WIREs climate change*, 1/1, 97-110.
- Pepermans, Y., & Maesele, P. 2017. Climate change communication in Belgium. In M. C. Nisbet, S. S. Ho, E. Markowitz, S. J. O’Neill, M. S. Schäfer, & J. Thaker (eds). *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.