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**Mobilizing Climate Action: A Critical Discourse Analysis of
Thunberg's Rhetoric**



¹Swaira Rasool

²Isra Irshad

³Ghulam Ali

¹M.Phil Scholar, Celts, University of Gujrat, Gujrat

²Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat

³Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad

Abstract

The present study aims to critically analyze Greta Thunberg's 2019 speech "Our House is On Fire," focusing on the discursive strategies she uses to confront political leaders and mobilize global climate action. It seeks to explore how Thunberg employs language to challenge political leaders and institutions, rally public support, and foster a sense of international solidarity in the fight against climate change. It examines how an entire argument can be built on such a structure that challenges inaction and demands accountability. Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, the study shows how Thunberg's direct, emotive, and morally charged discourse activates collective consciousness and shapes global narratives on climate justice. This research enhances understanding of rhetoric in environmental activism and highlights the importance of youth-led movements in framing global narratives.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Greta Thunberg, Climate Activism, Power Structures, Youth Voice

Introduction

Climate change is among the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, demanding borderless cooperation. Often, it is accompanied by political inaction, and more attention is placed on high economic growth than environmental preservation (Beck, 2010). Against this backdrop, youth-led climate advocacy has become a powerful catalyst for change, with Greta Thunberg leading from the front. Her 2019 World Economic Forum speech was an instant momentous event within environmental activism, as her direct and emotionally charged speech confronted world leaders and evoked responses from the public.

This research critically examines Thunberg's speech, emphasizing the discursive strategies and linguistic techniques she employs to address political leaders and a global audience. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers insights into the language of power and ideology. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach are used to analyze Thunberg's speech. Through CDA, this study explores Thunberg's speech within the broader socio-political and cultural

context where power, ideology, and resistance are negotiated through language.

Significance of the Study

This research highlights the significance of rhetorical framing in shaping public discourse, influencing policy debates, and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, particularly young people. Ultimately, this study is valuable because it aims to deepen our understanding of how language serves as a tool of resistance and transformation in the ongoing fight for climate justice.

Research Questions

In the light of Fairclough's three-dimensional models and Van Dijk's sociocognitive model, this study attempts to put forth answers to these questions:

- Which discursive techniques does Thunberg most frequently use in her 2019 address, "Our House is On Fire"?
- How does Thunberg challenge political leaders and institutions through her use of discourse?
- How does Thunberg use language to mobilize public support and promote international solidarity around climate change?

Literature Review

Greta Thunberg's activism and rhetoric have attracted considerable attention within academic and public discourses, reflecting themes of climate justice, youth-led movements, and the power of language in social change. This literature review situates her speech within the contexts of rhetorical theory, climate activism, and critical discourse analysis, offering insight into how her communication strategies reverberate across global audiences.

Rhetorical Strategies of Activism

Understanding the rhetorical strategies, for instance, has constituted a central focus of research into persuasive speech within social movements. From Aristotle's work on rhetoric to more contemporary scholars, traditional building blocks of ethos, pathos, and logos remain foundational modes of persuasion in analyzing activist discourse (Aristotle, 2007). Recent scholarship has again emphasized the role of emotional appeals, moral arguments, and personal stories in mobilizing public support for such causes. These are strategies most prominently deployed in youth-led advocacy, where authenticity and urgency tend to heighten rhetorical effectiveness.

Language and Power in Climate Activism

There are particular rhetorical challenges in communicating climate change, calling for striking a balance between scientific precision and straightforward language. According to O'Brien et al. (2018), persuasive climate messaging frequently combines moral appeals for action, helping people understand and take action. While researching climate discourse, attention was given to how language is used to frame political accountability. Thunberg's speech highlights this approach, employing emotionally charged discourse to engage powerful political actors.

Youth Activism and Global Solidarity

These movements have largely been studied for their potential to disrupt traditional power hierarchies and introduce new paradigms of activism. Thunberg's leadership within "the Fridays for Future movement" has come to symbolize the broader potential of youth advocacy in catalyzing systemic change (Pickard, 2020). For instance, youth activists use social media and global platforms to develop unity across diverse communities by highlighting their shared risks in the climate crisis.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Speech

CDA provides a critical perspective on how language functions in the construction, reproduction, or challenging of social power. This has been notably emphasized by scholars such as Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2001), who insist that discussing the interplay between language, ideology, and power is paramount in socio-political contexts. The speech by Thunberg, who speaks with an unapologetic tone and directly attacks global leaders, is therefore one of the most apt case studies to investigate how discourse can be both a site of resistance and transformation.

While there is a growing body of literature on the issue of youth climate activism and rhetoric in social movements, (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2018; de Moor et al., 2020; Cox & Pezzullo, 2016), very few studies have looked at what linguistic and rhetorical strategies were used in individual speeches, such as the speech of Thunberg 2019. Moreover, few studies have focused on how such speeches mobilize public solidarity worldwide. This paper, therefore, attempts to fill these lacunae by undertaking a CDA of Thunberg's speech and providing a complex understanding of its rhetorical and discursive dimensions.

Methodology

The analysis described below constitutes a CDA of Thunberg's 2019 address at the World Economic Forum. CDA is a qualitative research approach with a primary interest in studying the relation between language and power as exercised within society. Consequently, it is useful to examine how Thunberg's rhetoric clashes with convictions or otherwise appeals to political leaders and fosters public mobilization.

Research Design

This paper uses a textual analysis framework to systematically study the rhetorical and linguistic elements in the selected speech. This CDA analysis goes into the following aspects:

1. **Rhetorical Strategies:** Identify how Thunberg has used ethos or credibility, pathos or emotional appeals, and logos or logical arguments.
2. **Argumentation:** This paper tries to explore how Thunberg constructs her arguments to assign responsibility to political leaders regarding the urgent need for climate action.
3. **Language and Solidarity:** The paper explores the use of language that engenders a sense of collective responsibility and stimulates global solidarity.

Data Collection

The transcript of Greta Thunberg's speech is considered primary data in this study and is obtained from publicly available records. The speech is examined as a whole to provide a comprehensive understanding of its rhetorical and discursive features.

Analytical Framework

The rationale behind this analysis is informed by some key principles that guide the tenets of CDA as expressed by scholars such as Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2001). Their theories provide a strong framework for understanding Greta Thunberg's, which calls for greater public support for addressing climate change and challenges the role of political power in mitigating its effects.

Fairclough's Theory of CDA

The 1995 version of Fairclough's model of CDA focuses on the relationship between language, power, and society. He sees discourse not only as a reflection of social realities but also as a means to shape and transform them. Fairclough's three-dimensional model is applied in this study:

- a. **Textual Analysis:** Focuses on the linguistic features of Thunberg's speech, including her choice of vocabulary, tone, rhetorical devices, and sentence structure.
- b. **Discursive Practices:** Explores how the speech of Thunberg is produced, distributed, and interpreted in the global context of climate advocacy and political discourse.
- c. **Social practices:** situates the discourse within the general socio-political and cultural frameworks regarding how such speeches reinforce the dominant ideologies of climate change and governance.

Hence, Fairclough underlined how Thunberg used language to critique systemic failures and give voice to the marginalized, advocating for transformative action.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to CDA

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to CDA (2001) articulates the interaction between discourse, cognition, and society. He has elaborated that discourse structures, such as argumentation, shape mental models and social perceptions. This study has used Van Dijk's framework to explore:

- a. **Ideological Strategies:** It helps to analyze how Thunberg used ideological positioning to present the "us vs. them" paradigm, by dividing between those who want to end the climate crisis for future generations, and those contributing to the perpetuation of the climate crisis, the political leadership.
- b. **Mental Models:** It helps to analyze how Thunberg uses language to shape the audience's cognitive understanding of climate change as a matter of urgent collective accountability.
- c. **Power and Resistance:** It helps to analyze how Thunberg has framed inaction in her discourse as a betrayal of ethical responsibility and intergenerational equity in a manner challenging to existing power relations.

The current study combines these approaches to analyze Thunberg's speech as a site of power negotiation and ideological contestation. Fairclough's framework integrates sets of methods for examining structural and contextual dimensions of speech, and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach explores how language works in shaping perception, mobilizing solidarity, and constructing collective identities. This combined approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how Thunberg's rhetoric

critiques systemic power structures, mobilizes public sentiment, and builds a sense of global solidarity in the demand for climate action.

Analysis and Discussion

Thunberg employs a range of rhetorical strategies in her speech to make it emotionally powerful, logically compelling, and morally authoritative. Thunberg's speech is powerfully evocative; the imagery is urgent and poignant. The following are selected excerpts from her speech.

Excerpt.1: "I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day".

Thunberg's statement, "I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day", is seen as a thoughtful rhetorical strategy that combines emotional urgency with moral provocations. The repetition of "I want you" and the strong lexical choices "panic" and "fear" create immediate urgency, while the direct transition from "I" to "you" affects the public personally. The expression "every day" highlights the continuing, relentless nature of the crisis. It challenges the existing power relations, positions young activists as authoritative voices to guide political leaders, and disrupts the traditional hierarchy.

Excerpt.2: "The IPCC says we have less than 12 years left where we can still correct our mistakes."

Despite her youth, Thunberg establishes ethos by aligning herself with the scientific consensus. His reliance on authoritative sources strengthened his legitimacy, placed his speech within the framework of scientific evidence, and challenged any criticism of age or lack of experience. The term "less than 12 years" viewed the question as a time-limited and critical issue, while the expression "correct our mistakes" shifted collective responsibility to humanity, using an inclusive language that meant shared responsibility.

Excerpt.3: "The greater your carbon footprint, the greater your moral responsibility."

Thunberg presented her arguments based on factual evidence and logical reasoning. This, therefore, is an argument that links individual and collective responsibility to the extent of their contributions to the climate crisis. She is using a cause-and-effect presentation to appeal to reason and accountability. Fairclough's textual analysis highlights how these combine in a speech which is similarly engaging, credible, and persuasive. Thunberg structures her arguments in a way that would place her squarely

in the face of political leaders to expose contradictions in their actions and rhetoric.

Excerpt.4: “Our house is burning. I am here to say, our house is burning”.

Thunberg's speech is characterized by directness as she challenges inaction. The metaphor of a burning house is an expression of the immediacy of crisis and the failure of the leaders to act. Repetition reinforces her critique and strengthens the sense of emergency.

Excerpt.5: “We are at a moment in history where everybody with any insight into the climate crisis threatening our civilization must speak out.”

This statement highlights the gap between knowledge and action, framing inaction as an ethical failure. Thunberg lambastes the hypocrisy of political leaders who claim to address climate change yet prioritize economic growth over environmental protection.

Excerpt 6: “Adults keep saying, we owe it to the young people to give them hope. But I don't want

Your hope. I want you to panic”.

Thunberg views young people as victims and moral agents. Thunberg, who has withdrawn from passive hope and demands urgent action, places leadership in a position of responsibility and looks towards the future. Thus, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model shows how Thunberg resists ideologies rooted in economic and political complacency, framing public perception of responsibility and urgency. Thunberg's speech makes it clear that discourse might join global audiences by reframing climate change as a common existential threat.

Excerpt.7: “Our house is on fire.”

Thunberg uses the inclusive pronouns “we” and “our” to build unity. Inclusive framing places responsibility on the collective and encourages audiences to view this crisis as a shared effort. Repetition of the phrase "our house is on fire" serves as a crucial point that helps people remember the speech's main message.

Excerpt.8: “We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time.”

Thunberg highlights the message that little time is available to take action. By emphasizing temporal urgency, she catalyzes action in the present and focuses attention away from a future ideal to the present reality.

Excerpt. 9: “I want you to act like the house was on fire, because it is.”

She appeals to universal ideals by framing the climate situation as a moral one. This metaphor appeals to a common ethical framework and urges action across polarizing political and cultural divides. From this perspective, Van Dijk's model traces how Thunberg's discourse employs the remolding of mental models to elicit collective accountability, whereas Fairclough's framework locates speech in a social dimension where systemic critique is waged.

Excerpt.10: "You say you love your children above all else, yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes".

This statement exposes the contradiction between leaders' proclaimed values and their actions, positioning her as a voice of moral clarity. This speech by Thunberg breaks down the convention of power and status, as she is taking an upper-hand position being a young activist when speaking to global leaders.

Excerpt.11: "You are too immature to tell it as it is."

The statement reframes the idea of leadership and constructs leaders' inaction as a betrayal of their ethical obligations. Thunberg shifts the argument from a debate of technicalities to ethical imperatives.

Excerpt.12: "We cannot solve a crisis unless we treat it as a crisis."

It represents an ideological shift that challenges dominant narratives of prioritizing economic stability over environmental sustainability, calling instead for systemic change. Thunberg criticizes the ideology of constant economic growth.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thunberg's speech at the World Economic Forum stands out as a defining moment in the discourse on climate action. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the study examines how Thunberg employs rhetorical strategies to build an argument against political leaders and linguistically builds a call to worldwide solidarity and action (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1993).

Taken as a whole, the discourse examines how Thunberg generates rhetorical force by blending pathos and logical appeal in perfect measure, imbued with strong moral overtones, crafting a speech that appeals to diverse standpoints in acceptance (Aristotle, trans. Kennedy, 2007). Pathos arises in emphatic appeal made during moments of urgency, while logos supports her arguments through references to scientific facts and data. Ethos establishes her credibility as a representative for her

generation. These elements work synergistically to amplify the persuasive impact of her speech (Charteris-Black, 2011; Gill & Whedbee, 1997). Then, Thunberg's argument directly confronts the failures of political leaders, their moral responsibility, and the implications of the ethical consequences of their inaction (Lakoff, 2010).

In this speech, language becomes a tool of mass mobilization and global solidarity. Through her inclusive rhetoric, she has formed a collective sense of responsibility; the repetition and framing in a temporal dimension make the message of the climate crisis quite urgent. Thus, the invocation of shared values, along with the urgent tone in Thunberg's voice, surmounted all cultural and national barriers in uniting her audience on the platform. The present study realigns the significance of rhetoric within public discourse and the advancements of social movements. Thunberg's speech shows how language works as a tool of resistance, advocacy, and change. Her words do more than raise awareness; they catalyze action (Pickard, 2019; Bennett et al., 2014).

Further research might extend this analysis by focusing on other speeches of Thunberg or comparing her rhetoric to that of other climate activists. Further, investigating the long-term impact of her discourse on policy-making and public attitudes could provide deeper insights into the intersection of language, activism, and change.

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