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

[1]Swaira Rasool
[2]Isra Irshad
[3]Ghulam Ali

[1]M.Phil Scholar, Celts, University of Gujrat, Gujrat
[2]Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat
[3]Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad

Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis offers a critical perspective on climate narratives. It helps reveal ideologies and power relations embedded within climate discourse. This study aims to examine Greta Thunberg's 2019 speech "Our House is On Fire" through the lens of critical discourse analysis. It investigates the discursive strategies employed by Thunberg. Moreover, it analyzes how she challenges political leaders and institutions through her discourse and how she uses language to mobilize public support and promote international solidarity around climate change. The study is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach. The results show that Thunberg has used emotive, direct, and morally charged language to create a collective consciousness. The study highlights how youth-led movements shape global narratives.

Keywords: CDA, Discourse, Ideology, Greta Thunberg, Climate Narratives

1.   Introduction

Climate change is the greatest challenge of this century, demanding global cooperation. It is often noted that global powers tend to prioritize the economic growth of countries by putting environmental concerns aside (Beck, 2010). Youth-led climate movements are significant in this context, where Greta Thunberg is a notable figure. Her 2019 address at the World Economic Forum was significant in this regard. By using emotionally charged expressions, she stirred the political leaders and evoked public reactions.

The present study analyzes Thunberg's speech to highlight how she uses discursive processes to address the political leaders and the general audience. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach were integrated to analyze her speech. By situating her speech in the large socio-cultural context, this study reveals how power relations, ideologies, and resistances are conveyed in the discourse.

The study is significant as it highlights how climate rhetoric shapes public opinion, magnifying the voices of youth. Thus, it reveals how language serves as a tool of resistance in the context of the fight for climate justice. It specifically deals

with the following research 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?

2. Literature Review

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.

CDA has highlighted that language plays an important role in constructing, reproducing, and challenging social power. The perspective was underscored by theorists in critical discourse analysis named Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2001). Thunberg's 2019 address was an important one, highlighting how language can be a tool of resistance and transformation. There are numerous works on climate activism. Carvalho (2008) analyzed media discourses on climate change and found that such discourses blame particular groups, highlighting the ideologies embedded in climate narratives. Charteris-Black (2014) analyzed metaphors in climate action speeches and revealed how figurative language can be used as an ideological tool in climate discourses. Similarly, by employing the principles of CDA, Stibbe (2015) investigated the role of language in ecological destruction or sustainability. While numerous research works are available on climate activism, a few studies have examined discursive strategies in individual speeches, such as Thunberg's 2019 address.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative research where Thunberg's 2019 speech is analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis.

Thunberg's 2019 speech was taken and transcribed from a publicly available website. It served as the primary data of the study. This analysis of the speech provides a comprehensive understanding of its discursive features. CDA helps to understand the rhetorical strategies (which identify how Thunberg employs ethos or pathos, and logos), argumentation (how Thunberg uses her arguments to assign responsibility to political leaders regarding the need for climate action), and aspects of language and solidarity (how Thunberg uses language that stimulates global solidarity).

4.   Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is based on the key principles of Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2001). These principles provide a strong framework for understanding Greta Thunberg's 2019 rhetoric.

4.1 Fairclough's Approach to CDA

He 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 construct them. He explains three stages of analysis.

   a. **Description:** This stage gives an understanding of Thunberg's choice of vocabulary, tone, rhetorical devices, and sentence structure.

   b. **Interpretation:** This stage helps in exploring how the speech of Thunberg is produced, distributed, and interpreted in the global context of climate advocacy and political discourse.

   c. **Explanation:** In this stage, the discourse is situated within the general socio-political and cultural frameworks. It helps us understand how such speeches reinforce the dominant ideologies of climate change and governance.

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

4.2 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 examine how Thunberg challenges the power structure.

The current analytical framework combines Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach to analyse the role of discourse in constructing identities, farming perspectives, and mobilizing solidarity. It helps uncover how Thunberg's discourse challenges power structures and creates global solidarity by taking action on the climate issue.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Thunberg uses various discursive strategies, constructing her speech intellectually persuasive and emotionally resonant. See the following 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.

6. 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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