

# Modeling Figuration in Climate Change Cartoons

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**Keywords:** Climate denier, Conceptual metaphor, Conceptual metonymy, Figurative imagery, Global warming

Editorial cartoons are a rhetorical genre of text and image in political discourse within an argumentative perspective functioning to shape attitudes. As such, they contribute to political discourse regarding climate change in that they “represent an important visual addition to the cultural repertoire that shapes how climate change is and can be represented” (Nielsen & Ravn, 2021: 146). Yet effective argumentation is difficult in a polarized world in which (i) people feel entitled to their own “facts” and see “climate change” from a purely ideological perspective, (ii) entrenched interests related to fossil fuels wield financial and political power, and (iii) people naturally resist thinking about hard problems with technical solutions, to name just a few reasons. To overcome this resistance, cartoonists, in their own words, attest to using humor, irony, satire, absurdity, and pictures as tools, select metaphors attuned to their readerships, and seek to engage the opposition to expose the folly of arguments against the scientific facts – and existential threat – of global warming (Toles and Kallaugher in *Politics and Prose*, 2016).

Those who resist confronting the scientific evidence of a global warming threat rely on various strategies, among them, contradiction, downplaying the danger, declaring unforeseen benefits, blaming/discrediting the messenger, making false equivalences, and so on, all of which can be represented pictorially and appear in climate change cartoons. The present investigation, extending previous work analyzing linguistic texts alongside pictorial representations (Panther, 2005; Panther & Thornburg, 2012), undertakes to apply the methods of cognitive linguistics to identify the pictorial and verbal representations of the attitudes and ways of thinking of so-called “climate deniers” in order to better understand not only why and how people engage in irrational thinking, but also how cartoonists represent and counter argumentative positions in the climate debate. To shed light on this human behavior as illustrated in climate change cartoons selected from the internet, we model the figuration in the imagery and text in terms of VEHICLES, i.e. conceptually speaking, SOURCE domains and TARGET domains, metaphorical mappings and metonymic associations, various cultural models and scenarios, including folk models of animals, action (vs. talk), speech acts, and pragmatic inferencing.

In questioning why people accept anti-science thinking, Kenrick et al. (2022) cite group-think and trust of known sources, confirmation bias, and social goals such as the desire to win status and conform to the views of a social network (even to win a mate); nevertheless, they believe within-group conformity may be broken down with a single counter-view such that scientific knowledge is spread to the public, made available for debate, and perhaps provoke positive action. The genre of the often humorous pictorial and verbally brief editorial cartoon repeatedly expressing satirical “good-natured ridicule” (Toles, 2016) makes it a potent tool for political persuasion, the inner workings of which cognitive linguists can shed some light on.

## References

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