

Climate change discourse: viewpoint and blending in multimodal artifacts

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Environmental activists have created a robust discourse, particularly via multimodal artifacts, in an attempt to persuade the public that climate change is a pressing issue that requires immediate action. From the perspective of an analyst, it's clear that most of the artifacts produced rely on patterns of meaning construction routinely studied by cognitive linguists: blending, metonymy, frame evocation, metaphor, etcetera. However, many such campaigns do not seem to be particularly effective. In this paper, I focus on the work produced by an environmental activist group called Extinction Rebellion (XR) whose posters are unusually striking and persuasive. I investigate the underlying conceptual mechanisms used in XR's posters (available online) to understand the specific combination of conceptualizations used in their discourse. I argue that XR's persuasive power comes from their heavy reliance on patterns of embodiment, and that their effective use of lower-level profiling mechanisms, such as image schemas, alongside representations of experiential concepts, serve to attract viewers' attention and thus facilitate decoding. Unlike many rote depictions of climate change that focus on elements in the environment, XR posters often place the human body at the center of the blends that they create and conflate the human form and the natural world.

Examples include a melting glacier represented via a human form barely able to remain afloat, alongside the imperative, "Act Now" (see Figure 1), or a swarm of bees arranged into the shape of a human skull (see Figure 2). I discuss how depictions of relevant human body parts-- such as a drowning face, or a skull--and their concomitant metonymic and metaphoric associations facilitates viewers' grasp of the experiential impact of climate change consequences. The multimodal artifacts and images analyzed exhibit striking blends whose intricate viewpoint pattern is not readily transparent, yet provide an experiential perspective of ecological crisis that is visceral and persuasive, while remaining richly ambiguous. My analysis relies on the concepts introduced in Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier 1985; Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Particularly germane are the effects of compressions across vital relations of time and causation, in tandem with theoretical representations of viewpoint (Dancygier 2012; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017), especially experiential viewpoint. The conceptual patterns identified coerce viewers into reconceptualizing the ramifications of climate change as proximal and deadly (rather than distal and benign).

The analysis provides further analytical grounding for the investigation of the persuasive power of multimodal artifacts. The contemporary public is bombarded with such discourse on a regular basis and it's becoming clear that producers of multimodal campaigns consider intricate blends to be effective by the very virtue of being eye-catching and intellectually challenging. However, my analysis suggests embodiment and experiential viewpoint may be the necessary ingredients for successful multimodal persuasion.



Figure 1



Figure 2

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