

Ecological Framing in Documentary Discourse: A Study of *A Life on Our Planet*

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Abstract:

Climate crisis is a debatable issue among scholars of various disciplines. The framing of discourses in this regard plays a considerable role in presenting climate change in either a beneficial or a destructive way. The following paper investigates media representations of climate change in the context of documentary. The paper takes the theoretical framework of framing which integrates insights from ecolinguistics to analyse the ways climate change is framed linguistically. For the said purpose, the climate change documentary “A Life on our planet” by David Attenborough released in 2020 is chosen to analyze the framing techniques used to conceptualise the process of representation of the abstract phenomenon of climate change in media discourse through trigger words used as frames. The content analysis technique is used to identify trigger words that are later used to recognize frames. The findings reveal that climate change is most importantly presented in three significant frames: as an environmental catastrophe, as a decline, as a treasure.

Keywords: climate change, ecolinguistics, framing, documentary, trigger words

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of the present time and one that depends considerably on political and public action. The quality of cinematic representations about climate change is of vital importance in order to foster the necessary widespread public and political understanding and engagement with the issue. Investigating the current practices of the media in the communication of climate change as well as contributing to their improvement is an important

goal that is motivating a large and growing body of literature in the social sciences, in cultural studies as well as in media and communication studies (Schäfer & Schlichting 2014).

Examining the issue from the disciplinary perspective of linguistics, Ecolinguistics emerged to question the human agendas with an “anthropocentric” perspective, where humans are regarded as the center of the universe. As a result, they have utilized, exploited, and mismanaged nature and natural resources. Eco-linguistic strives for an “ecocentric” approach which shares the ecocentric perspective regarding the impact of language use on the construction of meaning, ideologies and worldviews.

In the light of the above-mentioned notes, the present study is interested in evaluating how the discourse of documentary presents the climate change with a particular focus on trigger words. There have been few studies that have already analysed the ways climate change is presented as an “environmental justice” or “climate justice” approach (Dreher & Voyer 2015, Viherala 2008). However, the present study uses a different technique to explore further the discourse of documentary as well as the approach i.e., Ecolinguistics. The technique for the said purpose used is framing from ecological perspective. It helps to reflect how climate change has been framed in the selected documentary *A life on our planet* by David Attenborough. Trampe (2008, p 53) has proposed that the ecological crisis can be interpreted as “a crisis in the perception and interpretation of the signs of nature”, thus the present study examines the perception and interpretation of the climate crisis from the context of documentary. For the present study, the subtitles of the documentary provide the source text which is analysed with reference to the framing technique.

Research Objectives:

The key research objectives are to:

- To analyze how climate crisis is framed in the selected documentary
- To examine the framing strategy used for climate crisis with reference to the Ecolinguistic approach (Stibbe, 2015)

Research Questions:

- How is climate change framed linguistically in the sub titles of the documentary?
- How framing of climate crisis in the documentary can be interpreted from an ecological perspective?

The research is significant for understanding the constructions of meanings through frames while at the same time considering the implications of the reality of the dynamic object of climate change. It helps to shed light on investigating cinematic representations of climate change as a significant issue to be resolved. Moreover, it aims to contribute to the domain of Ecolinguistic research depository in particular and Linguistics in general.

Literature Review

This section outlines a comprehensive commentary on the relevant terms, concepts, and theoretical propositions. Scholarly attention to climate communications and climate change in media has grown in recent decades (Boykoff and Roberts 2007; Schäfer and Schlichting 2014) as scholars continue to ask how to engage the public with climate change. Previous studies of climate change mainly focus on two academic approaches. One is to carry out research along the path of journalism and communication, focusing on disseminating media information regarding climate. The other is along the path of linguistics, such as the study of language features from critical discourse analysis and ecological discourse analysis, thereby exploring the role of language in mapping climate reality, building climate discourse power, and deepening the process of climate governance. Existing research demonstrates that documentary has a unique potential to promote both individual and collective climate action through a combination of imagery, narrative storytelling, and celebrity messengers in both cognitive and emotional appeals (Manzo 2017). Studies of documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Gasland*, and *The Age of the Stupid* (Beattie et al. 2011; Cooper and Nisbet 2016; Howell 2011, 2014; Jacobsen 2011; Manzo 2017; Nolan 2010) have suggested reframing climate change to focus on gain frames, solutions and development, and not just impacts.

The present research is different in the sense that the main aim is to examine the different frames in which climate change is portrayed in the documentary *Life on our planet* aired on netflix in 2020. Ecolinguistics is a domain that focuses on the use of language for and from ecological perspectives. Bang and Trampe (2014) have defined Ecolinguistics as an umbrella term covering two research traditions: “on the one hand traditional linguistic methods applied on texts and discourse of ecological importance and on the other hand deeper reflections on the theories of language inspired by the holistic paradigm of ecology” (p. 83). Stibbe (2015) considers it as a way to analyze stories of the ways human beings live in this world and the stories of the different sources they believe. The term story is well defined by Okri (1996) as a reservoir of values followed and maintained by the human race. However, these stories become unhealthy when based on some anthropological values. According to Kingsnorth and Hine (2009), the most fatal of the stories is the one where the human race is considered supreme and more valuable than the other creatures.

The study is interested to evaluate how the discourse of documentary employs framing with a particular focus on climate change. Ecolinguistics uses a variety of tools to analyze texts, for example, framing, critical discourse analysis, metaphoric analysis, erasure techniques, etc. The present study uses framing as the main tool to evaluate the framing techniques of the selected documentary with a particular focus on climate change

The framing technique is based on the concept of frames that can also be referred to as cognitive schemata- the framework of storage as well as interpretation of knowledge used by the brain. Nijland, Aarts and van Woerkum (2018) consider frames as a result of semiotic behavior that helps us to construct charters of understanding. These frames initially help us to make sense of reality (thus creating knowledge) and further to relate any new knowledge with existing ones. However, in the case of new knowledge, new frames can also be constructed. The present study uses the concept of framing as a dynamic activity that helps to make sense of the world as also mentioned

by Aarts and van Woerkum (2006). They narrate that “frames are constructed and legitimated in interaction by combining and integrating cognitive building blocks referring to previous experiences, expectations, and objectives concerning the issue at stake (content), the actors involved (relations) and the process that takes place (process)” (para 24). There are many studies available that have been based on the use of framing techniques from ecological concerns. Foust and Murphy (2009) identified framing and reframing strategies in the discourse related to environmental catastrophes. Christmas, Wright, Morris, Watson, and Miskelly (2013) investigated various techniques used to frame biodiversity elements in common public conversational discourse. To be more precise of framing from the Ecolinguistics perspective is considered as a technique of creating stories that people use further to make sense of ecology (Stibbe, 2015). According to Stibbe (2015), we live in connection with the other parts of the world including the other creatures, thus human stories are important to analyze and understand. Midgley (2011) defines stories as equivalent to myths which can be defined as “imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world” (p. 1). In other words, stories are the ways of elucidation- or what we use to make sense of the world (thus closely related to framing concept). Stibbe (2015) delineates stories as an important “cognitive structure” (p.6) because they later inspire the ways humans recognize their world. This can be supported with symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1985) which explains the connection between language and stories. In other words, people initially use language to construct stories and further these stories when become popular narratives are converged to frames. These frames act as a source of inspiration to understand the world around us.

Research Methods

The present study uses Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistically oriented critical discourse analysis in terms of framing. According to Stibbe (2015), framing is a technique to impose (within cognition parameters) a story from one area of life to another one. Further, the framing analysis involves examining the use of source frames (knowledge schema) to structure the target domains. In this regard, what is more important is to locate the trigger words that are used to bring a particular frame in action in mind. Thus, it involves the two steps analysis: identification of trigger words to identify various frames and secondly to arrange frames with the associated trigger words. Though the study adopts the quantitative approach while focusing on individual words and phrases but at the same time quantification is not the main objective of the research. The discussion involves the interpretation of the frames with reference to the ecological implication. Thus, the overall research paradigm is based on a mixed-method approach. The content analysis technique is used at the data collection stage to identify and examine the trigger words/ phrases.

The data to be analysed is comprised of the subtitles of the selected documentary “A life on our planet” which investigates how climate change affects humanity. Storylines take viewers all over the world to show how prevailing climate change issues are being experienced. David Attenborough narrates the story of climate change from various perspectives such as deforestation and rising sea levels. A life on our planet was chosen as a case study due to its focus not only on impacts but on solutions and actions regarding the climate change

Analysis

The analysis of the subtitles of the selected documentary reveals the following frames used to talk about climate change. This study focuses on frames used to conceptualize climate change. As explained by George Lakoff (2006), “Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality and sometimes to create what we take to be reality” (p. 25). Framing involves the use of a conceptual narrative structure from one context or story applied to another context. Frames organize actors, actions, and how actors relate to one another in a coherent story line (Stibbe, 2015, p. 47). Within ecolinguistic practice, Analysing framing from an ecolinguistic perspective firstly requires identification of the source frame and the target domain. The target domain is the general area being talked about, while the source frame is a different area of life that is brought to mind through trigger words (Stibbe, 2015, p. 52).

climate change, can be viewed from a variety of different perspectives and understood as having consequences for multiple values or considerations. The first source frame is nuclear fatalism as an environmental catastrophe in which climate change is considered as a result of the race of nuclear weapons. According to David Attenborough human error is a cause of environmental catastrophe which is portrayed with a variety of sub-frames like bad planning(Attenborough,2020,2:03) environmental catastrophe (Attenborough,2020 2:11), biodiversity into a decline(Attenborough,2020,3:29) Our planet, vulnerable and isolated(Attenborough,2020, 19:53).The target words/phrases for the identified frame include “nuclear power station of Chernobyl exploded.” (Attenborough,2020, 1:34) , the loss of our planet's wild places, (Attenborough,2020, 2:37) A place in which we cannot live(Attenborough,2020,4:04) burned fossil fuels The natural world is fading. (Attenborough,2020, 4:12)“ a mass extinction(Attenborough,2020, 8:29) and Our intelligence changed the way in which we evolved(Attenborough,2020, 13:54) climate scientists had warned that the planet would get warmer (Attenborough,2020, 40:46) released carbon dioxide (Attenborough,2020,40:46) Our planet is losing its ice (Attenborough,2020,44:16) the speed of global warming increases (Attenborough,2020, 50:03) accelerating the rate of climate change dramatically (Attenborough,2020,50:23) Our planet becomes four degrees Celsius warmer(Attenborough,2020, 51:26) The above source frame conceptualize nature as an external nonhuman world of plants and animals while stating a belief that human interest is superior to other species. The inevitable nuclear warfare also conceptualizes nature as an object therefore sets up the possibility of indifference from the ecological responsibilities to overcome the environmental catastrophe.

Diversity into decline which focuses on biodiversity and sustainability of wild species. This frame is built on the loss of planet's wild places. Mechanistic framing is used by narrator david Attenborough to describe interconnection of human with non-human. This second frame is important to identify how bio diversity helps to create balance as benefactors or providers. The target words/phrases for the habitat frame include “Working together to benefit from the energy of the sun” (Attenborough,2020,3:06) it relies on its biodiversity to run smoothly (Attenborough,2020, 3: 29) Great numbers of species disappear (Attenborough,2020, 8:29) a profound, rapid, global change. (Attenborough,2020,8:51) . The frame of the community system is observable through the use of the following target words/ phrases: 75% of all species were wiped

out” (Attenborough,2020, 9:31), empty of animals(Attenborough,2020, 17:26)“ ecosystem would come crashing down” (Attenborough,2020, 18:53) reliant upon the finite natural world (Attenborough,2020,21:00), Whales were being slaughtered(Attenborough,2020, 24:59) stop killing the whales.(Attenborough,2020,26:43) the whole system collapses(Attenborough,2020,35:18) an explosion of life(Attenborough,2020, 36:53). we have completely... well, destroyed that world(Attenborough,2020, 47:35) story of global decline (Attenborough,2020,48:33) catastrophic species loss (Attenborough,2020,49:33) the Arctic becomes ice-free in the summer(Attenborough,2020, 49:47) Pollinating insects disappear (Attenborough,2020,51:13) we must restore its biodiversity (Attenborough,2020,54:51). Nature is a buried treasure foregrounds the instrumental value of nature as a resource to be exploited for human ends, privileging financial interests and reinforcing

This third frame is important to identify how the ecological system has been kept in balance by focusing on nature as treasure. This frame as benefactors or providers can be identified through various target words/ phrases, like: the minerals of the earth (Attenborough,2020,3:11), “for buried treasure.” (Attenborough,2020, 7:15), story of slow, steady change” (Attenborough,2020,7:56), The biodiversity of the Holocene helped to bring stability, (Attenborough,2020, 12:00), “enormous area of healthy grassland(Attenborough,2020,18:42), Saving individual species(Attenborough,2020, 29:53), Rainforests are particularly precious habitats” (Attenborough,2020,30:53), future generations of many tree species would be at risk (Attenborough,2020,32:32). “tree diversity is the key to a rainforest.” (Attenborough,2020,32:37), cut down three trillion trees across the world (Attenborough,2020,34:15), the ocean is largely empty (Attenborough,2020,36:43), removed 90% of the large fish in the sea (Attenborough,2020,36:43) The ocean starts to die(Attenborough,2020, 39:05) Skeletons of dead creatures (Attenborough,2020,40:04) cut down over 15 billion trees each year(Attenborough,2020, 45:19) damming, polluting, and over-extracting rivers and lakes(Attenborough,2020, 45:26) run by humankind for humankind(Attenborough,2020, 46:37) non-human world is gone(Attenborough,2020, 47:39) Human beings have overrun the world (Attenborough,2020,47:43) Fish populations crash (Attenborough,2020,50:06). The analysed frames highlights the anthropocentric role of human beings towards climate crisis.

Findings

Framing is one of the useful linguistic techniques to identify how various concepts are portrayed in the subtitles of the selected documentary. The following study identified some major frames nuclear fatalism as an environmental catastrophe, diversity into decline and nature as a buried treasure based on target word identification. Various-frames like biodiversity into a decline(3:29) Our planet, vulnerable and isolated help us to understand the interconnection of men with nature. All of these frames stress upon the need of the change of anthropocentric attitude of men towards nature and highlight the significance of ecological responsibilities of men. Stibbe (2015) calls such discourses beneficial stories as they help to raise awareness about the importance of various species in sustainable living.

The present study aimed to study the ways climate change was linguistically framed in the Netflix documentary *A life on our planet* from an ecological perspective. For the said purpose, Stibbe's (2012) charter of framing and ecology was used. The target words/ phrases from the selected documentary were identified using the content analysis method. These target words were used to identify the various main and subframes in which climate change was portrayed in the selected documentary. In this regard, only highly visible frames were focused and further interpreted from an ecological standpoint. The findings revealed various main and subframes representing climate change as the result of bad planning and human error. All of these frames can be interpreted to consider the role of wilderness and biodiversity to maintain and sustain the ecological balance of the world.

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