



Analysis

Metaphor as a mechanism of global climate change governance: A study of international policies, 1992–2012

Christopher Shaw^a, Brigitte Nerlich^{b,*}^a Environmental Change Institute, South Parks Road, University of Oxford, OX1 3QY, UK^b Institute for Science and Society, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of a global climate change mitigation regime through an analysis of the language employed in international science-policy reports. We assume that a global climate regime can only operate effectively on the basis of a shared understanding of climate change which is itself based on a shared language of governance. We therefore carried out an in-depth thematic and metaphor analysis of 63 policy documents published between 1992 and 2012. Results show that global climate science-policy discourses universalise the myriad impacts of a changing climate into a single dichotomous impacted/not-impacted scenario and aim to govern this world according to economic principles of cost–benefit analysis. These discourses use metaphors that draw on narrative structures prevalent in the wider culture to produce and legitimate a reductionist representation of climate change. This representation undermines public understanding of and engagement with climate change by marginalising subordinate policy framings which do not align with the prevailing dichotomous framing. The types of documents we analyse in this paper represent important sources for journalists reporting on climate change. We therefore suggest that any attempt to improve public communication of climate change should include revisions to these organisational discourses.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing sense that attempts at building an effective international governance regime for climate change are running out of steam (Conca, 2012; Geden, 2013; Jordan et al., 2013; Luers and Sklar, 2013). A lack of public support for emission reduction policies is one of the reasons given for this policy failure (Pidgeon and Fischhoff, 2011; Whitmarsh et al., 2013). This lack of support has been attributed in part to problems in the way climate change science is communicated (Pidgeon and Fischhoff, 2011; Carvalho and Peterson, 2012).

Despite a proliferation in media channels, the mainstream news media remains the primary source of information about climate change for the public (Painter, 2013). Mainstream news media reporting on climate change tilts towards powerful elite sources which provide a predominantly establishment view of the world (Mautner, 2008: 33). In this paper we therefore turn our attention to some of these ‘powerful elite sources’. Our analysis examines the themes, metaphors and analogies in influential climate policy-science reports from many of the most prominent international climate governance institutions. We focus on the period 1992 to 2012.

Some researchers, such as Gupta and Dahan, have analysed shifts in climate change policies over time (Gupta, 2010; Dahan, 2013), but no attempt has yet been made to map the emergence of themes and metaphors in the attendant policy discourses over such a period. Two summits held at Rio de Janeiro were important landmarks in policy debates about climate change, and bookmark the time period covered in this analysis: the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Summit, Rio Conference, and Earth Summit and the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also commonly called Rio+20 or Rio Earth Summit 2012 (see Hellsten et al., *in press*).

It has been argued that all governance is multi-actor (Newell et al., 2012), which is to say that policy emerges out of a decentralised interactions between a range of organisations, rather than just being the product of centralised decision-making within government (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2012). Hence one could justify an analysis towards a number of different documentary sources on the basis that to focus on government policy documents would be to ignore important contributions from non-state agencies (NSAs). However, corporate actors aside, research into governance has concluded that NSAs in fact often have only limited influence on policy development (Newell et al., 2012; Davies, 2011). Davies explains how governance and network theories often fail to recognise the extent to which power relations between public and private, structure and agency is exercised through a range of centralised

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: christopher.shaw@ouce.ox.ac.uk (C. Shaw), brigitte.nerlich@nottingham.ac.uk (B. Nerlich).

institutions. Coordination and maintaining coherence across these different governance mechanisms require shared discourses (including metaphors), or engagement across different discourses (Davies, 2011).

In the light of this debate we have chosen to focus on reports from prominent international organisations involved in the building of a climate governance regime because although they may not govern entire policy fields on their own, international organisations often set and implement key rules within them; create, channel, and disseminate knowledge; shape dominant discourses; frame problems and solutions; influence negotiations through their ideas and expertise; and oversee the implementation of projects on the ground (Newell et al., 2012: 96). This grants them an important, and often underestimated, degree of autonomy and power to shape outcomes (Newell et al., 2012). In the final reckoning, policies are ideas about how the world should be, and “ideas do not exist apart from language” (Marx, 1953, cited in Praver, 2011: 272). Because the sources we analyse are important sources for journalists, they have the power to define the language used to describe possible responses to climate change within the public sphere.

The wide attention paid to the Stern report on the economics of climate change (Stern, 2006) and the ensuing discussions about the relative financial costs of mitigation versus unmitigated climate change highlight just how central economic frames are to discussion of climate policy. We argue that there is nothing intrinsic to anthropogenic changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere which demands that decisions about whether and how to respond should be made solely through economic frames. Rather, we suggest that focusing attention on climate change as an economic problem is a conscious political act, performed primarily through language.

This is not to deny the relevance of economics to climate policy making, but it has been argued that justice and ethics (e.g. Vanderheiden, 2008) and democratic decision-making principles (Machin, 2013; Carvalho and Peterson, 2012) are equally important frames for governance of climate change. Suggesting that climate change is primarily an economic problem reduces the policy space for these alternative framings and the resultant marginalisation of these less expert, technical frames undermines efforts being made elsewhere to build strong positive public engagement (Machin, 2013; Carvalho and Peterson, 2012).

Given the importance attributed to the communication of climate change, we suggest a better understanding of how institutional narratives are shaping downstream framings of climate change can offer guidance as to where in the communication process interventions should be directed. The cultural circuits model provides a longitudinal analysis of how environmental discourses evolve as they are received and re-communicated through the cultural filters of producers and consumers (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005: 1460). The model identifies media professionals as the producers of environmental discourses; “groups of media professionals...produce stories from source materials which will define the days news” (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005). These media professionals produce texts, in line with linguistic, visual and genre norms which help define the public sphere (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005: 1458). Our interest is in elucidating what sorts of stories are told by the source materials which journalists use, and what discursive resources are used to tell those stories.

In the next section we briefly examine some interpretations of how and why public climate narratives have changed in the last twenty or so years. Our results will be compared against these timelines, to identify whether the shifts in the public sphere are apparent in the science-policy documents we analyse. We do not attempt to prove causality if the changes in framings of climate change coincide.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. The Emergence of Market Mechanisms in Climate Change Narratives

Levy and Spicer (2013) highlight the role of competing imaginaries in shaping climate policy. Imaginaries provide a shared sense of meaning,

coherence and orientation around highly complex issues. They are closely linked to the ways in which institutions and economic activity are organised and structured, and the ways people think they ought to be organised and structured (Levy and Spicer, 2013: 660). Levy and Spicer analyse how different groups of actors – NGOs, business and state agencies – have employed these imaginaries at different stages in the history of climate policy negotiations. The authors propose three distinct phases in the history of climate politics since 1990. 1990–1998, the ‘Carbon Wars’, was a period when incumbent powerful fossil fuel regimes, against rising concerns about climate change, worked to keep climate change off the policy agenda. 1998–2008 was a period of ‘Carbon Compromise’ when the inevitability of carbon regulation was accepted. Since 2009 we have been in a period of ‘Climate Impasse’ (Levy and Spicer, 2013: 660).

Kotekyo, in identifying the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 2005 as a key driver for “corporate strategic change” (2012: 25) also recognises 1998 as a year heralding broad acceptance of carbon regulation. Both Koteyko (2012) and Liverman (2011) see the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol (together with the launch of the EU Emissions Trading Scheme), which put the idea of carbon trading at the centre of global mitigation strategies, as the date at which discourses of market environmentalism started to come to the fore. Rogers argues that 2006 was a pivotal year in climate politics, when “global warming was acknowledged by the last, very powerful, hold outs” (2010: 3).

According to Liverman’s study of international climate policy, the period up to 2008 saw three key narratives which emerge in the public discourse: that ‘dangerous climate change’ is to be avoided; that the responsibility for climate change is ‘common but differentiated’; and the neoliberal claim that the market, in the form of carbon trading, is the best way to deal with the issue (Liverman, 2009: 295).

These different, but sometimes overlapping histories will provide a reference which will guide analysis of the documents. Do the discourses emerging from these documents change in ways which reflect these timelines? After outlining why we think metaphors have an important role to play in climate discourse and policy we then explain how we selected the documents analysed and the methods we employed to identify and categorise the metaphors and themes which constitute the data for our analysis. In the results section we bring some coherence to this data through a discursive account of the patterns emerging from the distribution of these metaphors through time and across the different documents. The discussion conceptualises these patterns within a broad historical and social context.

2.2. The Role of Metaphor in Climate Policy Narratives

Discourse has many meanings (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2012) but, given the focus of our analysis, we work with discourse as a political strategy (Wodak, 2008: 1). It is assumed the narratives we are analysing are strategic, and intended to serve political ends (Hampton, 2009). We wish to understand how economic frames are deployed in these documents, and what themes and metaphors are used to build those frames.

Though metaphors have been “largely neglected in mainstream critical discourse analysis” (Hart, 2008: 96), cognitive linguists have shown that metaphors are important to thinking and acting in the world, including political acting (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). They can enable as well as constrain the ways we think about policy issues, especially with regard to largely abstract, complex and seemingly intractable problems like climate change. Whilst Lakoff and Johnson wrote about what they called ‘conceptual metaphors’ that map the concrete onto the abstract and the familiar onto the unfamiliar and thus create new knowledge and potential for action, the policy analyst Donald Schön wrote about ‘generative metaphors’, that is to say, ways of seeing something as something else by carrying over knowledge from one domain of experience to another (see Schön, 1993[1979]: 137); for example seeing a slum as a blight or an ecosystem calls for different policy actions. He argued that such metaphors derive their “normative force from

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