Warm Words II:

How the climate story is evolving and the lessons we can learn for encouraging public action

A summary report

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Let's talk about climate change

The climate is changing – and so is the way that people talk about it. And just as climate change is occurring more rapidly than it appeared just a few years ago, the language that we use in relation to the phenomenon develops and changes quickly too.

Last year, the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr), commissioned Linguistic Landscapes to undertake research into the use of language about climate change with sponsorship from the Energy Saving Trust.

'Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?' written by Gill Ereaut and Nat Segnit and published by ippr proved to be such a hot topic and the subject so fluid, that this year a follow up, extended report has been produced.

The new report is called 'Warm Words II: How the climate story is evolving and the lessons we can learn for encouraging public action' and this short booklet summarises its findings.

"I must do my bit for the planet"

Why so fast?

Much has happened in the year since our first report. The Stern Review on the economics of climate change suggested that climate change could result in a weakened global economy. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reached equally pessimistic conclusions on the impact of climate change. Meanwhile the media and the public have also become increasingly interested in and concerned about the subject.

Taken together, all of this has changed the way that climate change is communicated. So we thought we would take another look, and at the same time extend the research to investigate the similarities and differences between communications at national and local levels.

Where we were

The 2006 Warm Words report grouped the language of climate change into a number of identifiable groups called linguistic repertoires.

Each repertoire defines the way in which people refer to climate change. Whilst we identified many repertoires, we noted that some were more dominant than others.

The biggest last year was 'alarmism', which constructed climate change as awesome, terrible and totally beyond human control.

The other dominant repertoire was mundane 'small actions' – the "turn down your heating and do your bit" argument. Sometimes there was a huge disparity between the two repertoires that was almost comedic. 'Avoid the apocalypse of a scorched earth by switching to low-energy light bulbs' could be one way of summing this up. So, as a result, we drew implications and recommendations so that future communications could avoid this problem.

Where we are today – climate change is everywhere

Newspapers, magazines, websites, advertisements, TV and radio programmes – all of them have something to say about climate change. Between March and July 2007, close analysis of over a thousand pieces of content was conducted and interviews were carried out with interested parties such as campaigners, local authority officers and energy advisers.

Today, discussion about climate change is everywhere – and there is a growing consensus that it is real and that human activity has played a part.

Consensus rules

A year is a long time in climate change communications. Last year we identified many disparate opinions. The debate was confusing, contradictory and chaotic. It would be hard to make the same claim today.

Language is always in a state of flux, of course, but when it comes to the language of climate change, its evolution has been astounding.

Twelve months ago, rightly or wrongly, a lot of the debate was around whether climate change existed or not. In 2007 an emerging consensus is clear. At its simplest, the existence of climate change – and a belief that mankind has contributed to it – is almost taken for granted. The prevailing message is stark: climate change is real. Radical intervention is required.

And now that a consensus exists, the alarmist undercurrent identified last year has changed too. However it is the rhetoric, not the content, that has been modified – that is, not so much what is said, but the way it is expressed.

Words of agreement

'Climate change' and related terms have become part of the national language.

Terms like 'carbon footprint', 'carbon neutral', 'offsetting' and 'emissions' are no longer unusual phrases that need translating to be understood, but the stuff of tabloid newspapers and everyday advertising.

Degrees of acceptance

Naturally, there are degrees to which the language appears to accept this growing consensus. And consensus has yet to be reached in some notable areas such as how bad climate change might be and what exactly should be done about it.

"**What's all the fuss about?**"

The repertoires

Consensus repertoires

The consensus comprises two strands of thought and language – alarm and resolve

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Repertoire Set 1 – Alarm

Alarm has three forms: alarmism, sober alarm and conservative alarm.

Alarmism

Alarmism is the language of shock, but to an extent it is being sidelined by its calmer cousins, sober alarm and conservative alarm.

As the dangers are of unimaginable proportions, with alarmism only linguistic shock tactics will do. So whilst most people believe that climate change happens over the very long term, this repertoire suggests imminent peril and largely excludes the possibility of successful human intervention. It seems that nothing can be done.

"It's the end of the world"

"Apocalypse now!"

"It's all too late"

"Environmental cataclysm"

"…so we might as well carry on polluting"

Sober alarm

Sober alarm is the language of seriousness, numbers, likelihood and proof. It still has alarming undertones – the future is no less stark after all – but it is framed in less inflated terms and suggests there is more room for human intervention.

Whilst alarmism can have a trivialising effect by sensationalising the issue, sober alarm attempts to invest the language of climate change with meaning.

"…starkest proof yet"

"…it's serious"

"…the prospects are bleak"

Conservative alarm

This marginal repertoire consists of a very British middle-class framing of climate change – a blithely unconcerned dismissal of the dangers. Whilst the repertoire acknowledges climate change, it often exploits the absurdities of global catastrophe in whimsical tones, such as the anticipation of olive groves in English villages or daffodils at Christmas.

"…it's just not England"

"It's the end of the world"

"Apocalypse now!"

Repertoire Set 2 – Resolve

Unlike alarm, the resolve set of repertoires is less concerned with the gravity of the problem than of the need to do something – the resolve to act. The four repertories within resolve differ about how to tackle the issue.

Reluctant belief

A new repertoire identified this year, reluctant belief is a weary, pragmatic acceptance that climate change is happening and that something needs to be done. It shares the sceptics' distaste for 'boring', 'annoying' energy saving measures while acknowledging that the overwhelming majority of scientists can't be wrong.

"…it must be admitted"

"…it no longer seems tenable"

"I'll believe it if I have to"

Small actions

This is the most dominant repertoire of all. The suggestion is that small actions make a big difference. Characterised by the language of ease and convenience and by the bringing together of ethics and self-interest, reducing emissions is said both to benefit the environment and be kind to your wallet.

Its weakness is its capacity to be magnificently dull – a nagging insistence that people switch off the lights or put on an extra jumper and turn down the heating. It contributes to what we call the 'wallpaper problem'. Happily there are some signs that the repertoire is becoming more compelling. Understanding your carbon footprint is in the realms of everyday science and it is no longer sad or absurd to know how you can lower it – and how much money you can save – by turning down the thermostat.

"I must do my bit for the planet"

"We can make a real difference"

Establishment techno-optimism

Large-scale technology will solve the problem of climate change, according to establishment techno-optimism. Arguably outside the consensus, its highly rhetorical language borrows from science, but without the evidence and

is more marginal this year than last. A form of denial, it speaks of technologies and of challenges without being specific and presumes that business will provide the answers. Generally evasive, it is most prevalent in the right-wing press and in energy company advertising. It is a wriggler's repertoire and advocates anything but reduction.

"…relax, it's all under control"

Non-establishment techno-optimism

Small technology will win the battle against climate change, say non-establishment techno-optimists. Unlike its establishment namesake, it proposes specific technological fixes and deals with science and numbers, rather than general assurances. Effective action is feasible, it says. But the repertoire is undermined by an emphasis that man can adapt to climate change, counter to the reduction argument that people should be emitting less. It is also susceptible to wild conjecture – that sci-fi inventions will cure all.

"…technology will provide the answer"

David and Goliath

Last year this repertoire, found largely in the aggressive communications of the campaigning left, was marginal. Since then it has become more visible, in part due to the vigour of emerging radicals like Plane Stupid and the Camp for Climate Action, and possibly provoked by the growing moderation of mainstream groups like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. The language of this radicalised fringe is inflated, rhetorical and highly adversarial. The potential danger is that this extreme use of language makes the entire green agenda easier to dismiss.

"Flying: an 'obscenity'"

"Climate change: 'genocide'"

"Departure from the green orthodoxy is 'criminal'"

Non-consensus repertoires: the sceptics

As the consensus on climate change grows, repertoires outside it are becoming increasingly marginalised – but they are still in evidence.

Settlerdom

Settlers imply that they and their audience are part of the sane majority in the face of a vocal onslaught from doom-mongers and the global warming brigade. They think they speak for common sense, but the common sense position has changed over the past year, pushing settlerdom into the comic margins.

It is possible that the position has receded in public but become entrenched in private – it is easy to feign concern but carry on regardless. Settlerdom is increasingly marginal in public, stubbornly persistent in private.

"What's all the fuss about?"

British comic nihilism

Even more marginal than it was last year, this repertoire exhibits itself in a very British, very middle-class whimsical refusal to mind very much about climate change, but the broad media consensus makes the joke harder to get away with.

"Sod it. Let's open another bottle"

Warming is good

Never particularly significant, this repertoire has been further marginalised by the consensus. It focuses on the potential positives of climate change – such as the fact that a warmer climate may encourage more tourists to visit the UK.

"Okay, but there are benefits"

Rhetorical scepticism

This repertoire attacks the notion of man-made climate change as bad science, aggressively confronting the arguments one by one and relying on spokespeople who are presented as 'eminent', 'senior' or 'impressive'. Its aim is to politicise the issue at the expense of concrete action.

"Global warming: a 'liberal hoax'"

"Environmentalists: 'failed socialists'"

"An Inconvenient Truth: a 'dinner-party movie'"

Expert denial

Deniers draw on marginal science to refute consensus about man-made climate change and have been boosted by Martin Durkin's Channel 4 documentary The Great Global Warming Swindle. Until recently, expert denial was characterised by a high level of science talk – multiple qualifications, long sentences – but now it has a more rhetorical tone.

"…we beg to differ"

Free rider

Like the Prisoner's Dilemma, this new repertoire is sceptical of the collective act and, while accepting that climate change might be real, suggests that there's no point acting unless everyone else does too.

"…We will, but only if you will"

Free-market protection

This minor repertoire holds that the negative effects of taking action on climate change outweigh the benefits – such as messages from the car industry complaining that they won't be able to produce low-emitting vehicles that people want to buy. The repertoire has been further marginalised by the findings of the IPCC and the Stern Review.

"It's not worth it"

"Sod it. Let's open another bottle"

The new consensus – weak spots

So in the last year, the reality of climate change has become more accepted, but this presents difficulties of its own.

The suppression of debate

Whilst there is consensus on the big picture of climate change, there remains much discussion about the detail – and this is to be expected. However, perhaps goaded by right-wing commentators who present consensus as inherently suspect, some parts of the climate-change campaigning movement have come to present any departure from the orthodoxy as heretical. "We don't have time to waste on nukes" is a typical articulation of this position. Such militant orthodoxy risks leaving what is now the mainstream agenda open to wholesale dismissal.

Greenwash

Greenwash is the dressing up of inaction in fine words. It is the gap between what people say and what they do.

At a personal level, for example, a yawning chasm exists between the public's stated belief in climate change and the will to do anything about it. And when it comes to business, too many organisations boast green credentials but pay only lip-service to the issue.

This is a hard problem for linguistics to overcome. Climate science is engaged in a process of selling people something they are ill-equipped to understand. To do so, communicators face the unenviable task of advocating 'actions not words' with words. That can be troublesome.

The local scene

For the 2007 Warm Words research, we explored the language of climate change in a number of localities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, at local level small actions dominate, with some evidence of local sober alarm and just a little alarmism. For example, we came across postcards of villages underwater published as a promotional tool by one council and newspaper reports about how local weather was more like being on the continent.

The perfect fit

Local news, advertising, council and campaign communications can have a parochial focus on the close-at-hand that runs counter to the national agenda. They reflect the concerns of the ordinary individual and though they sometimes appear insignificant, the domestic, the routine, the tangible – all of these fit the small actions repertoire perfectly.

Together we make a difference

At local level, potent collective action becomes achievable. People can actually do something. Significant community projects exist that drive public awareness and really make a difference – a hydropower unit on the River Wey at Guildford Mill, photovoltaic roof panels

at Sandford Primary School and a wind turbine at the City of Manchester stadium.

These are simultaneously symbols of effective action and a visible means of providing renewable energy for a small community. It all helps to make global action imaginable.

Towards improved communications

Some local communications proudly stand out as energetic and compelling and much can be learned from this approach, which we have called the communal address.

This means addressing the potential energy saver as an individual defined by his or her membership of a knowable, geographical community, as opposed to a 'citizen of the world' which is the way most communications are currently constructed.

Rather than the voice of authority ordering people what to do, the communal individual becomes an equal partner in the collaborative process of tackling climate change. United by their locality, they have the power to act and are no longer insignificant members of an unmanageably large group such as the nation or the human race.

Unlike national communications, in which the language is imperative ("we must") or conditional ("if we all...") the emergent local communications consistently use the present and future tenses to frame positive climate-friendly activity as happening or about to happen. Their approach is pragmatic, descriptive and

inviting ("we are doing this – come and join in!"), rather than hectoring or rhetorical. The impact is to encourage individuals to engage and take action.

Making climate change communications persuasive

So apart from a minority of sceptical groups, there is now a broad consensus that climate change is happening and that man is at least partly responsible for it. The challenge for communicators is to capitalise on the media consensus to bring about positive change in behaviour.

Last year, we suggested that the chasm between the vast, unimaginable nature of the problem and the small, mundane actions on offer could be addressed by the creative myth of ordinary heroism. But now that the disparity is no longer as large, new strategies are required.

One recommendation from last year remains valid, however. Communications must make climate-friendly behaviour inherently sensible and desirable, not merely dutiful.

Four new recommendations

Having reviewed the linguistic evidence from our Warm Words 2007 research, we have four broad recommendations.

1. Capitalise on the consensus before greenwash erodes its potential

We might be at a tipping point, where climate-friendly actions become normal and we move towards a culture of environmental responsibility. Conversely, climate change could become yesterday's issue, with greenwash leaching it of all meaning.

So genuine distinctions and subtleties in the debate must be recognised, such as separating the issues about which there is consensus – such as the reality of climate change and the role of human behaviour in it – and questions over which there is still debate, such as how bad the effects of climate change might be and what should be done about it.

2. Make it easy for people to understand what they can do

People are being asked to do a lot – turning off lights, holidaying in the UK, offsetting emissions – but it is hard to make a connection between these actions and the complexities of the issue. Furthermore, some actions are actually inactions – stopping doing something. The result is that abstraction and intricacy become reasons for doing nothing.

There is a need to promote each energy saving action in a specific and targeted way so they are easy to implement and understand, whilst also ensuring that people directly relate and connect these actions back to the wider picture of behaving in a climate-friendly way.

"We can make a real difference"

3. Harness the opportunities offered by real communities

People like being connected and having a sense of belonging. And there's nothing like dealing with a shared issue to mobilise local communities and interest groups.

As big fish in a small pond, they have the power to act, but they don't want to be talked down to. Contemporary peer-to-peer communications are more relevant than the top-down voice of authority.

Being part of a community means it is easier for people to see or imagine the connection between specific collective actions and their effect on energy use.

4. Use all routes to engagement

Organisations trying to influence the climate change debate need to attract people to the issues and make it feel meaningful to individuals. "Do your bit" is a turn-off. When people are drawn emotionally to an issue they are more likely to change behaviour than if they act through civic duty.

There are lessons to be learned from certain communications coming from locally-organised initiatives. These benefit from using the rich, imaginative and playful language of popular culture, media and everyday discourse, rather than the discourses of politics, campaigning and the public sector.

Even though the mainstream media has changed the way it reports climate change, there are few signs that this has filtered through sufficiently to stimulate the public to act. And that is the challenge ahead.

The Energy Saving Trust

The Energy Saving Trust is one of the UK's leading organisations tackling climate change. Our purpose is to help reduce carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions through energy efficiency and renewable sources of energy in the home, on the road and in communities.

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Acknowledgements

This summary is based on the report 'Warm Words II: How the climate story is evolving and the lessons we can learn for encouraging public action', written by Nat Segnit and Gill Ereaut. The full report is available for download from both the Energy Saving Trust's and ippr's website. 'Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?' is also available for download from ippr's website.