

# Climate discourses in energy system transformation: A cultural discourse analysis of climate change language

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Transdisciplinary scholarship on climate change has increasingly recognized the role of language and discourse in efforts to catalyze action to address the crises of climate change. Much of this research focuses on how language may lock humans into certain ways of defining, thinking, or interpreting climate change and how different frames might unlock new modes of action. Yet climate change itself has been conceptualized as a “series of complex and constantly evolving cultural discourses,” and we need to understand the matrix of power relationships, social meanings, and cultural discourses that Climate Change reveals and spawns in order to rethink political, social, and economic action (Nerlick, Koteyko, & Brown, 2010). This paper is interested in how different conceptions of cultural discourse can be leveraged to contribute to the transdisciplinary work of addressing climate change. To do so, it uses cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) to analyze “climate” talk within city council meetings. Cultural discourse analysis can highlight how talk about climate change talk includes explicit and implicit meanings that makes it possible to hear political positions, religion, and climate skepticism (Carbaugh & Cerulli, in press).

This analysis draws on a corpus of over 100 meetings and 2500 pages of transcription of public meetings on Boulder’s Energy Future from 2010-2017. The initiative to change the local energy system stemmed from the recognition that it would be impossible to meet climate change goals (e.g., the Kyoto Protocol targets) without transitioning the local energy system away from fossil fuels. The analysis starts by looking at references to “climate,” “climate change,” and “climate action” across this corpus, and these formulations are compared to less frequent forms of climate talk (e.g., “climate neutrality,” “climate smart loans,” “climate peril,” “climate change skeptics”). Cultural discourse analysis is used to explicate the meanings of dwelling, action, and identity within climate talk, with particular focus on “climate action” as a form of institutional discourse connected to local government and planning. This situated analysis is then used to discuss how different formulations of cultural discourse can contribute to the transdisciplinary research on this issue that is simultaneously global and local, political and economic, public and private.

Carbaugh, D. (2007). Cultural discourse analysis: Communication practices and intercultural encounters. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36, 167–182. doi:10.1080/17475750701737090

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Nerlich, B., Koteyko, N., & Brown, B. (2010). Theory and language of climate change communication. *WIREs: Climate Change*, 1, 97-110. doi: 10.1002/wcc.002