

Undermining or enabling climate action with language

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Introduction

Introduction

- any hopes of abating catastrophic **climate change** (according to careful scientific projection by IPCC, not 'doom thinking') rest on sustained and combined **action** to reduce green house gasses by three means
 - phase out fossil fuels
 - technological innovation
 - lifestyle changes

(Wittoeck 2022)

Introduction

- citizens are key in all three domains:
 - choose different lifestyle
 - put pressure on politicians to implement energy transition and technological innovation

Introduction

- important to know **citizens' opinions and attitudes** about climate (non-)action
- how do citizens' emotions and judgements **resonate** (cf. Rosa 2016) with political debates, government communications, journalism, societal debates, etc.?

Introduction

- where do we find expressions of citizens' ideas, emotions and judgements about climate change and climate action?
- -> can be studied in such contexts as
 - email chain letters
 - letters to the editor
 - comments to online news and facebook of political parties
 - answers to open questions in surveys
 - etc.

Introduction

- linguistic analysis of different semiotic layers
 - **representational** layer: event representations, narratives, categorizations, any lexically predicated properties contributing to 'representation' (De Smet & Verstraete 2006)
 - **connotative** layer, in Hjelmslev's 1947 sense of a new semiotic 'parasitic' on an existing semiotic:
 - metaphors, inferences, intertextuality, etc.
 - connotation, semantic prosodies, appraisal, etc.
- halfconscious attitudes associated with ordinary words
Victor Klemperer (1957) *Lingua Tertii Imperii*:
"Language does not lie"

Introduction

- main stances towards climate change
- deniers
- sceptics
- concerned citizens
- activists

(Pepermans & Maesele 2017, Metag & Schäfer 2018)

Introduction

- **deniers**
 - case study: email chain letter about Australian Bushfires 2019-2022
- **sceptics**
 - case study: online comments to Facebook climate messages by N-VA and Vlaams Belang
- **concerned citizens**
 - case study: compilation of letters to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald about Australian Bushfires 2019-2022
- **activists**
 - case study: answers to open questions of climate survey from Flemish 16-18 year-olds

Introduction

- linguistic analyses:
 - critical discourse analysis
 - identity markers
 - ingroup – outgroup categorization
 - macronarratives
 - appraisal analysis
 - positive discourse analysis

Case study 1: denial discourse

“Today it has a different and
dangerous name ...”

- context: worst **drought** ever
- in time: 2017-2020
- In area: west and east
- In intensity, aggravated by policies of conservative government regarding
 - Irrigation

“10 big irrigators responsible for 86% of water extracted from Darling River system, pushing it into drought three years earlier” (Guardian 21.08.2019)
 - Forestry

“Australia is among the 11 worst countries when it comes to deforestation. Queensland has the highest clearing rate” (WWF)



- catastrophic bushfires in Australia
- from June 2019 - January 2020
- over whole continent (incl. rainforest)
 - 1 billion animals lost, 1,000 unique species threatened
 - new types of fire (eg fire tornados)
 - populations of whole villages saving themselves from fires on beaches
 - cities shrouded in toxic smoke (over 12 times 'hazard' level)



Email chain letter 13 January 2020

13th January, 81 years ago was known as BLACK FRIDAY. Today it has a different and dangerous name

To think that we have that Greta and all the brainwashed young students claiming that we have to do something about “CLIMATE CHANGE” . They are cheering for those who started all those claims in order to make money from the new type of energy resources they own at the expense of our present-day availability of coal and uranium. Our documented history of fires and drought is as old as records kept. No different to years gone by, and a mirror image of January 1939.

Case study 1: denial discourse

- features
- representational level:
- minimal or no reporting of actual events

Case study 1: denial discourse

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Today it has a different and dangerous name

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Case study 1: denial discourse

13th January, 81 years ago was known as BLACK FRIDAY.
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records kept. **Ø** No different to years gone by, and a mirror
image of January 1939.

2019-2020 bushfires barely represented -> literal **denial**

Case study 1: denial discourse

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Our documented history of fires and drought is as old as records kept. No different to years gone by, and a mirror image of January 1939.

-> two different narratives and their ‘authors’

Case study 1: denial discourse

- features
- **connotative** level:
 - narrative – counternarrative
 - in-group – out-group categorisations
 - connotatively implied evaluations

Case study 1: denial discourse

- against (non-represented) narrative
 - ‘these bushfires are different from past; climate change is real’
 - ‘close coal mines’
- from (non-represented) sources
 - progressive news, WWF, UN, etc.
- **counternarrative**: developed as counter-construction to ‘dominant’ narratives construed as alienating and victimizing
 - ‘bushfires no different from past; there is no climate change’
 - ‘keep old and open new coal mines!’

Out-group vs in-group

13th January, 81 years ago was known as BLACK FRIDAY. Today it has a different and dangerous name To think that **we** have **that Greta** and **all the brainwashed young students** claiming that **we** have to do something about “CLIMATE CHANGE” . **They** are cheering for **those who** started all those claims in order to make money from the new type of energy resources they own at the expense of **our present day availability of coal and uranium**.

Out-group vs in-group

out-group - in-group categorizations and their inferable properties/values

they	<->	we
[that Greta + all brainwashed young students] (representing) those 'inventing' climate change to 'get rich' 'easily' as owners of new energy resources 'un-Australian, dishonest, new-fangled'	at expense of	'ordinary' 'hard working' miners 'traditional honest Australian'

In-group and out-group

- explicit / implied categorizations/properties in conservative discourse
- *The Greenies and the do-gooders want to forbid you to saw a branch off a tree on your own property.*
- (pro irrigation) *The Greenies want to let all that water run into the sea!*
- reasonable *climate cult/religion/ideology/nonsense*
- calm *climate alarmists*
- informed *brainwashed*
- quiet *loud*
- honest *dishonest*
- -- *greenies, warmies*
- -- *do-gooders*
- -- *woke*

In-group and out-group

- Australian English: morphological category ‘**depreciative**’: shortening of noun + pseudo-diminutive suffix: *mozzies*, *barbie*, *footy*, *pokies*, *cozzie*, *Aussie*, etc. (Wierzbicka 2015)
- -> **anti-sentimental** attitude towards designatum
- **identity marker**: Australian identity: ‘tough’, ‘humour’
- can be used
 - appreciatively, e.g. *firies* (firefighters)
 - pejoratively, e.g. *greenies*, *loonies*, *warmies*
- ! differs from English diminutive stem + -ie, eg *doggie*, *birdie*, which expresses affection towards ‘little’ thing or creature

In-group and out-group

reaction of volunteer fireman Chris Saul to chain email letter

- How do we get people to believe that climate change is really happening? Here in Australia, a lot of people get their back up straight away whenever it's mentioned, a lot of rural people too. The old mindset is still alive and well: take what resources you can, make a bob out of them, there'll be plenty left for tomorrow. The big proposed coal mine in QLD is an example. I can understand all the workers up there wanting this mine for continued job security but that's as far as they see, or want to see. Unfortunately, they seem to have no concept of what continual coal mining will do except offering them immediate work.

Resonance between conservative politicians and citizens

- conservative Australian discourse with **identity markers** (of group affiliation)
- conservative politicians **speak** and **act out** this discourse for electoral gain
- **resonance**, i.e. dynamic towards 'harmony', between discourses of conservative Australian **citizens** and Scott Morrison's conservative **government** (2018-2022)
- note: more neutral notion of resonance than in Rosa (2016)

Resonance between conservative citizens and politicians

Scott Morrison, PM of conservative coalition government (2018-2022)



Resonance between conservative politicians and citizens

- PM Scott Morrison:
- “have a sense of **calm** on **these matters** on the basis of **information**”
- “distressing for young people who haven't **seen** **that** **before**”
- -> **speaks** denial discourse
- and **acts out** denial discourse ...

Resonance between conservative politicians and citizens?



LEADER-DIP Australia PM Scott Morrison heads to the beach in his speedos as country is ravaged by wildfires
(*The Irish Sun* 7 January 2020)

Resonance between conservative politicians and citizens

- Deputy PM: ingroup <-> outgroup
- “We’ve had fires in Australia since time began, and what people need now is a little bit of sympathy. They don’t need the ravings of some pure, enlightened and woke capital city greenies.”
- PM Scott Morrison:
- no extra money for Rural Firemen: “They want to be there. The volunteer effort is part of how Australia has always dealt with these issues.”

Resonance between conservative politicians and citizens (?)



Case study 1: denial discourse

- there is no climate change
 - > no climate action of any kind
 - no phasing out of fossil fuels
 - no renewables
 - no lifestyle changes

Case study 2: sceptics

“They live on a cloud”

From: Van Praet, Vandenberghe, Davidse (forthc)

Case study 2: sceptics

- analysis of comments on facebook climate posts by

Party	Comments
PvdA (extreme left wing; communists)	105
Groen (green party)	154
N-VA (Flemish nationalists):	150
VB (extreme right wing; Flemish nationalists):	100

Case study 2: sceptics

- in terms of **appraisal** analysis (Martin & White 2005)
 - Semantic resources construing interpersonal meaning
 - Three interacting domains:
 - Attitude: Feelings as semantically construed in texts
 - Engagement: Dialogic perspective
 - Graduation: the force of an utterance on a scale (*very, kind of, truly*, etc;)

Case study 2: sceptics

Attitude		
Emotion (typically of speaker)	positive, e.g. happiness, hope	
	negative, e.g. anger, despair	
Judgement (of people + behaviour)	- esteem (e.g.capability, resolve)	positive
		negative
	- sanction (ethics, truthfulness)	positive
		negative
Appreciation (of things + states)	- positive, e.g. effectiveness	
	- negative, e.g. futility	

Case study 2: sceptics

- Affect, Judgement, Appreciation:
 - Inscribed
 - *I was desperate.*
 - *He is totally incompetent as a president.*
 - *The performance was a failure.*
 - Invoked
 - *I didn't know how to get on with my life.*
 - *Under his presidency the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.*
 - *The audience fell asleep during the performance.*

Case study 2: sceptics

- JUDGEMENT

- inscribed

VB comment: **negative**

- *[N-VA] is niet veel beter dan de rest van deze onbekwame corrupte VIVALDI regering*
- ' [N-VA] isn't much better than the rest of this incompetent corrupt VIVALDI government'

- invoked

Groen comment: **positive**

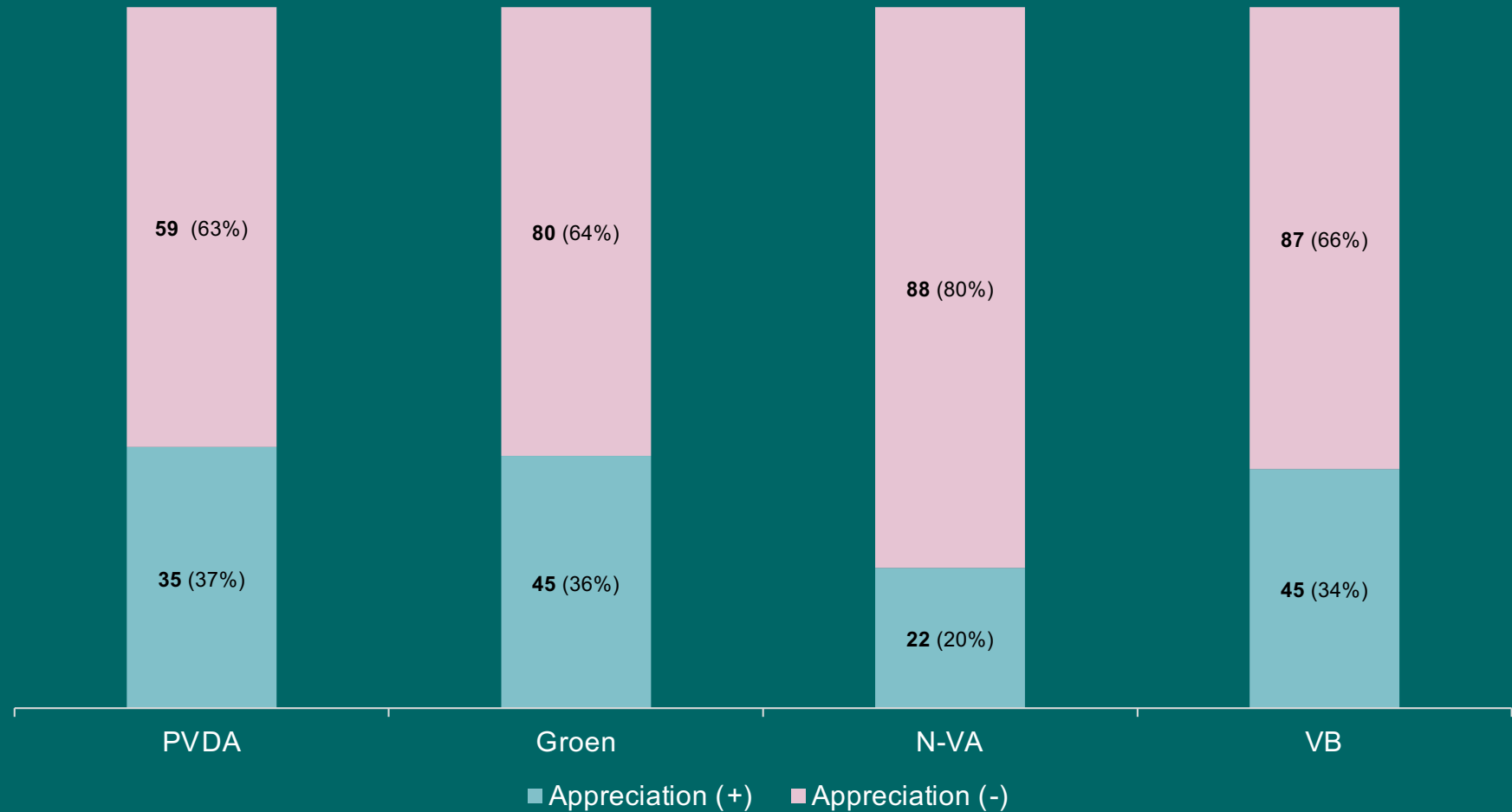
- *Eindelijk een regering met klimaatambitie! 🍀*
- 'Finally a government with climate ambition! 🍀'

Case study 2: sceptics



Judgements of people: expressing esteem and sanction

Case study 2: sceptics



Expressions of appreciation

Case study 2: sceptics

The closure of nuclear plants will saddle us with more pollution, more costs and more purchase of foreign electricity.

The N-VA advocates for a climate-friendly and affordable energy policy. Without green dogmas.



N-VA post (our translation)

Case study 2: sceptics

- **resonance** between
 - N-VA climate posts, e.g.
 - The closure of nuclear plants will saddle us with more pollution, more costs and more purchase of foreign electricity.
 - The N-VA advocates a climate-friendly and affordable energy policy. Without green dogmas.
 - “Nuclear exit boosts Belgian CO2 emissions sharply in coming years”
 - Stop the nuclear exit
 - Purple-Green’s polluting gas plants are bad for the climate
- citizen comments:
 - **Overwhelmingly negative**

Case study 2: sceptics

- comments to N-VA-posts:
 - **majority** negative (96% judgment, **80%** appreciation)
 - **minority** positive (4% judgement, **20%** appreciation)
- ‘when the greens participate in politics, **it costs us money**’
- ‘**Angry** because **it** [the nuclear phase-out] **is harmful**’
- ‘Gas plants? That’s not going to solve the matter. **Let’s be realistic for a minute.**’
- ‘Incompetent leaders take unrealistically wrong decisions and **the ordinary citizen has to foot the bill**’
- ‘I really don’t understand why everyone wants to get rid of nuclear power???? **OK, nuclear waste is not cool** but **for the climate, it is the cleanest energy there is, isn’t it...**’

Case study 2: sceptics

Anyone who cares about the energy bill of hard-working Flemish people, the climate and also wants to be sure it stays warm at home, invests in nuclear energy.

Purple-Green deliberately looks the other way and pushes energy prices higher by focusing on expensive and environmentally unfriendly energy sources.

Time for common sense: invest in nuclear power and keep energy affordable!

CHEAP | SECURITY | SUSTAINABLE

**INVEST IN
NUCLEAR ENERGY**



 **VLAAMS BELANG**

Case study 2: sceptics

- **resonance** between
 - BV climate posts, e.g.
 - Anyone who cares about the energy bill of hard-working Flemings, the climate and also wants to be sure it stays warm at home invests in nuclear energy
 - Purple-green deliberately looks the other way and pushes energy prices higher by focusing on expensive and environmentally unfriendly energy sources
 - Time for common sense: invest in nuclear power and keep energy affordable!
 - Cheap | Security | Sustainable
 - Invest in nuclear energy
- citizen comments:
overwhelmingly negative

Case study 2: sceptics

- comments to VB climate posts:
 - majority negative (79% judgment, 66% appreciation)
 - minority positive (8% judgement 34% appreciation)
- ‘This green revolution is an improvement particularly for the rich, for ordinary people it means poverty and being dependent on the goodwill of the government’
- ‘Let them [i.e. European leaders] start by getting themselves driven around in more environmentally friendly vehicles. And maybe give less to immigrants and do something to admit fewer refugees into Europe’
- **Crazy bastard! Scumbag, you belong in the loony bin.**’ [directed at EU commissioner Frans Timmermans]

Case study 2: discourse of sceptics

- N-VA / VB leadership push ecopragmatism against doom-&-gloom but in fact new subtle form climate scepticism (Boussemaere 2021)
 - does not (explicitly) deny reality of climate change
 - but cripples climate action by
 - creating division
 - deriding climate activism as dogmatic and unrealistic
- politicised N-VA / VB climate action talk focuses:
 - more on technology
 - less on fossil fuel reduction and lifestyle changes

Case study 2: discourse of sceptics

- Negative Attitudes in Groen comments:
 - Judgement: 76% neg. vs. 24% pos.
 - Appreciation: 64% neg. vs. 36% pos.
 - ‘Such **deceitful** info, the plan is to build gas plants in Flanders/Belgium in the coming years which will actually **increase CO2 emissions**. I would ask the party Groen to **give the right info!!!!**’
 - ‘Company cars should never be fiscally attractive.’
 - ‘What should be encouraged is cycling to work.’
 - ‘And Tinne [Van der Straete, federal energy minister for Groen] will **happily** build gas stations that **emit CO2 and that will undo everything we’ve saved so far.**’

Case study 3: concerned citizens

“This is not normal”

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- The *Herald* was inundated on Wednesday with letters to the editor responding to our story “ ‘This is not normal’: Minister [Liberal Matt Kean] urges action on climate change” and a variety of other stories related to the NSW bushfire crisis. [...] The letters below represent as many of the views submitted as possible.

Lisa Davies, editor Sydney Morning Herald



Case study 3: concerned citizens

- corpus of
 - letters (75, +/- 5000 words)
 - comments (105, +/- 5500 words)
- analysed in terms of frequent keywords (and synonyms from same semantic field)

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- against Government's **counternarrative**

these bushfires no different from past

→ there is no climate change

→ keep our coal mines

- readers' **narrative**:
- these bushfires are different from past
- climate change is real
- failing leadership
- -> reduce emissions
- -> reduce coal

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- these fires (82x) are different from the past
 - in terms of
 - *smoke* (27x)
 - *drought /dry* (19x)
 - *damaging/destroying/killing/threatening* (15x)
 - *not normal* (8x), *different* (4x)

'This is not normal': starting with a simple sentence, let's hope it becomes a national chant.

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- failing leadership (21x) of
- Morrison (25x), PM/Prime Minister (31x)
 - *Get ready for an avalanche of Morrison photo ops. His advisors will drag him out to the fires in reaction to the public's damning response to **his lack of leadership**.*

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- act(ion) (33x) now (28x) and plan (18x) for future (15x)
- reduce emissions (22x)
- -> phase out coal (x63)
 - *quickly phase out mining of coal. **Start now.***

Case study 3: concerned citizens

- resonance between
 - Australian concerned citizens
 - journalism like *Sydney Morning Herald*: “The *Herald* agrees climate change, which has fuelled the fires raging across our state, is one of the biggest challenges facing Australians today - and our readers want to see action. (L. Davies, editor *SMH*)
- against denial journalism of Murdoch press



Case study 3: concerned citizens

- concerned citizens' attitude in 2020 'This is not normal' corpus
- reject climate change denial and scepticism
- calls for climate action:
 - strong: phase out coal
 - rather weak: renewables (5 letters)
 - very weak: lifestyle changes (1 letter)
 - *I know this is a pretty radical idea but we need to do something radical if we are going to slow down climate change. I think the government should bring in petrol rationing.* (from retired reader)

Case study 4: (potential) activists

“On my own I can do almost nothing
but...”

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- questionnaire filled in by Flemish 16-17-year-olds (N=131) in general secondary education (Davidse, Fløttum, Vandenberghe & Van Praet 2021)
- open questions provided young people's own words and discourse about climate change/action
- appraisal analysis of keywords (and synonyms from same semantic field)

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- which 3-5 words do you think of when you hear 'climate change'
- 41.5%: **effects** climate change: *invoked* negative **appreciation** (and **emotion**)
- *opwarming (van de aarde)* 'warming (of the earth) (40), *(natuur)rampen* '(natural) **disaster(s)**' (22), *smeltend ijs* 'melting ice' (23), *uitsterven, verwoesting, catastrofe, apocalyps* '**extinction, destruction, catastrophe, apocalyps**' (15), *stijging zeespiegel* 'rising sea levels' (13), *overstromingen* '**floods**' (11), *extreem weer* '(weather) **extreme(s)**' (7)

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- which 3-5 words do you think of when you hear 'climate change'
- 8%: attitudes: typically *inscribed* negative **emotion**
- *erg* (4) / *slecht* (5) / *ernstig* (2): 'bad'
- *eng, bang, angst* (semantic field **fear**) *depressie, stress, teleurstelling*
'disappointment' *onmacht* 'powerlessness' (**depression**)
- 8%: solutions: typically *invoked* positive judgement
- *protest* (3) *klimaatmarsen* (4) *Greta Thunberg* (9), *recycleren* (2),
actie, stop, vegetarisch, aanpassen 'adapt', *overeenkomsten*
'agreements', *rekeningrijden* 'road tax';
also: *geen oplossing* 'no solution'

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- “Climate change is a fact, but I can’t do anything about it” : do you or don’t you agree ?
- 74%: did *not* agree
- of which 57% added comments, often involving **positive** + **negative** clause
- 1/3 juxtapose positive first with negative second clause, e.g.
*‘The individual has some impact on the climate **but** it is very limited in comparison with the big corporations’*
- 1/2 juxtapose negative first with positive second clause, e.g.
*‘On my own I can do almost nothing, **but** I can contribute to an organisation or joint project’*

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- resonance with
- climate activism, e.g.
- Nic Balthazar's "Do it now"
- [Sing for the Climate - Bing video](#)

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- command[s] to be carried out by the addressees (the key figures, stakeholders, politicians) ... the refrain takes the form of a series of slogans as used in demonstrations. The song is an artistic version of a demonstration.
- We're on a planet
That has a problem
We've got to solve it, get involved ...
- Make it greener
Make it cleaner
Make it last, make it fast ...
- No point in waiting
Or hesitating
We must get wise, take no more lies ...
- and do it now now now
We need to build a better future
And we need to start right

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- Positive Discourse Analysis (Bartlett 2017):
- how can language be used to
 - construe a **positive / true** narrative (reversing false ones)
 - *We're on a planet that has a problem*
 - express **calls to action**
 - deontic / dynamic modals (*'ve got, must (not), need, etc. + predicates*)
 - imperatives anchored in speaker-now: *do it now!*
 - construe **inclusive** solidarity
 - inclusive 'we' and visuals
 - vague, contextually differentiated addressees of imperatives

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- Flemish young people in corpus:
- “In 20 years, we will have developed many technological innovations that enable us to live in a modern society barely affecting climate.”
- 37% agree
- a climate-friendly lifestyle is the most important action open to us now
- 61% agree
- ‘Do you consciously do something for the climate?’
- 89% say yes
- most frequently listed climate-friendly activities: cycle (45), use public transport (31), recycle (29), eat no/less meat (28), reduce energy use (17)

Case study 4: (potential) activists

- Flemish young people in corpus
- well-informed about reality of climate change
- climate action:
 - strong: phase out fossil fuels
 - relatively weak: technology
 - strong: lifestyle changes

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

- important and feasible to study
 - climate discourse by various groups of citizens
 - discourse by politicians, journalists, activists etc it resonates with
 - various possible alignments between

Attitude to climate change	Climate action
deniers	none
sceptics	technological
concerned citizens	fossil fuel phase-out
activists	lifestyle changes



Thank you – and do it now!

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