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METAPHORICAL FRAMING IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE CLIMATE DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL PHILOLOGICAL APPROACH

Abstract. Climate communication depends not only on the information presented but also on the linguistic frames through which readers interpret it. The article offers a critical philological approach to metaphor in English-language climate discourse, distinguishing conceptual mappings, local lexical choices, implied actors and the evaluations they introduce. It synthesizes cognitive metaphor theory, critical metaphor analysis and experimental findings on metaphorical framing. A structured procedure is proposed for contrasting war, race, journey and health frames without treating any of them as ideologically neutral or universally effective. Invented examples illustrate possible interpretations; they are not represented as sampled media texts. The analysis identifies a central trade-off between urgency and shared agency and argues that contextual interpretation must precede normative recommendations. The outcome is a transparent framework for linguistic comparison and for critically informed communication.

Keywords: climate discourse; conceptual metaphor; framing; critical discourse analysis; agency; evaluation.

Introduction

Climate change is an environmental process, but public discussion of it is also a linguistic event. Journalists, institutions and campaigners repeatedly face the problem of describing risks that are complex, distributed across time and unevenly visible in everyday experience. Metaphor helps organize this difficulty by mapping a familiar domain onto a less familiar one. A society can be said to 'fight' climate change, 'race' to a target or 'follow a pathway' toward a lower-emission economy. Such expressions may sound conventional, yet they direct attention to different relationships among actors, actions and possible outcomes. The problem for philology is how to describe those relationships rigorously without assuming that metaphors have a single predictable effect.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) place metaphor at the level of conceptual organization rather than decorative language alone. Charteris-Black (2004) adds a critical orientation by connecting patterns of metaphor use to discourse, purpose and relations of power. Experimental work provides another form of evidence: Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) show that metaphoric framing can shape reasoning in a particular task, while Flusberg et al. (2017) compare war and race metaphors in climate communication. These bodies of work are related but not interchangeable. A qualitative account of a phrase cannot itself establish behavioural effects, and an experimental difference does not prove that a framing device always operates identically in real-world discourse.

The aim of this paper is to develop a transparent method of reading English climate metaphors as pragmatic choices that distribute agency, urgency and responsibility. This is a conceptual synthesis, not a report of a newly collected news corpus or an opinion survey. The examples are intentionally constructed to make the interpretive steps visible. Such a design is appropriate for testing the logic of an analytical model before a more extensive empirical study is attempted.

Conceptual metaphors and the limits of analogy

The basic logic of conceptual metaphor involves selective mapping. When climate action is represented as a battle, the source domain supplies opponents, threats, defensive

measures, victories and possible sacrifices. Yet the target domain rarely contains an equivalent of every source-domain element. Global warming is not a conscious enemy; emissions emerge from social and technical systems rather than from a single hostile agent. A reader may therefore accept the urgency associated with battle while questioning whether the metaphor clarifies responsibility. A philological analysis should record not only what a frame foregrounds but also what it makes easier to overlook.

A race metaphor instead privileges time, competition, distance and finishing points. In the sentence 'Cities are racing toward net zero', attention falls on speed and measurable milestones. Competition may promote institutional comparison, but it can also imply that success belongs only to the earliest finisher. A journey metaphor, by contrast, suggests stages, obstacles, navigation and collective direction. It may offer room for adaptation and continuity, although it risks normalizing slow progress when immediate intervention is needed. None of these values is contained unambiguously in the dictionary meaning of a single noun. Their relevance depends on co-text, speaker, addressees and the situation described.

Critical metaphor analysis asks who is allowed to appear as an actor and who becomes background context. 'We must defeat the climate crisis' supplies a collective pronoun without defining the responsibilities of governments, companies or households. 'Public authorities should revise the building code by 2030' names an actor, an instrument and a horizon without relying on metaphor. Comparing the two illustrates that a metaphor can mobilize attention while leaving implementation unclear. The interpretation of figurative wording consequently benefits from a parallel examination of transitivity, modality, agency and the specificity of proposed actions (Charteris-Black, 2004).

A comparative analytical protocol

The suggested protocol starts with identifying a candidate metaphorical lexical unit and its contextual meaning. The analyst then records the source and target domains, the local mapping and the discourse function. A separate annotation describes who is constructed as the acting subject, which outcomes are treated as desirable and what alternatives remain implicit. A final annotation marks evaluative tone and communicative situation, including whether the passage is a headline, policy report, educational resource or persuasive speech. Those categories cannot be safely inferred from an isolated phrase.

For illustration, compare three invented headlines: 'The battle for a livable future intensifies'; 'The race to cut emissions enters a decisive decade'; and 'Cities navigate the transition to cleaner transport'. The battle headline centers conflict and emergency but says little about specific actors. The race headline adds a clock and an implied finish line. The journey headline suggests decision-making and route correction, while potentially softening the felt pressure. These are not findings about media prevalence or audience responses. They show how an explicit coding protocol can generate competing interpretations that later analysis may evaluate against textual evidence.

A future corpus study could sample climate reports and newspaper articles over defined periods, record publisher and genre and maintain a traceable archive of citations. Analysts would need to distinguish metaphorical from literal uses at the level of context and code ambiguous cases conservatively. A subset should be independently annotated,

with disagreements documented and a shared codebook revised. Reporting both recurrent patterns and divergent examples would prevent a list of striking headlines from masquerading as a representative description of English-language climate discourse.

Evidence from framing research

Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), in experiments using metaphorical descriptions of crime, demonstrate that framing can guide the kinds of solutions readers consider. The domain in that research is not climate change, and its results should not be directly described as climate-specific evidence. Flusberg et al. (2017) investigate climate wording more directly by contrasting war, race and non-metaphorical presentations of emission-reduction efforts. Their study reports that the war frame elicited greater urgency and risk perception than the race frame in the studied context. That finding supports attention to pragmatic consequences, not a general rule that militarized rhetoric is always best.

An effect observed in a controlled comparison depends on wording, population, task and the criterion used to assess reception. In a news report, an urgent metaphor might coexist with fatalistic predictions; in a municipal programme, the same metaphor might sit beside practical measures and collective planning. Critical philology therefore asks two different questions. First, what inferential possibilities does an expression make available within its text? Second, what do actual readers do with that expression under defined conditions? The first is approachable through close analysis; the second requires direct empirical evidence, such as experiments, interviews or longitudinal reception research.

This distinction guards against rhetorical overreach. A linguistic analysis can state that 'war' conventionally evokes confrontation and sacrifice, but cannot assume that every reader becomes more supportive of a particular policy. The strongest findings connect textual explanation with evidence about uptake. At the same time, empirical effects without contextual description may miss why a phrase can activate different interpretations among audiences. Language and reception remain complementary, not competing, objects of research.

Agency, ethics and inclusive communication

An ethical issue arises when the urgency of a climate frame overshadows the distribution of costs and responsibilities. 'Everyone must fight' presents collective action as self-evident, even though different groups possess different resources and degrees of political influence. Similarly, a race metaphor can depict countries as comparable competitors while concealing historical asymmetries and unequal exposure to harm. These are possible ideological effects of framing, not properties that attach inevitably to each occurrence. Analysts should examine what the surrounding text says about power, accountability, adaptation and social justice before evaluating the metaphor itself.

A practical editorial principle follows: metaphorical intensity should be matched with explicit agents, mechanisms and outcomes. An article may use a journey image to sustain attention but should explain actual policy stages and foreseeable obstacles. A battle image might sharpen perceived urgency, yet readers should still learn what specific actions are feasible and how success would be evaluated. A phrase that inspires but explains nothing is communicatively incomplete. The strongest climate discourse can combine emotionally intelligible imagery with precise causal and institutional information.

Multilingual comparison presents an additional philological complication. Direct word-for-word translation does not ensure the same conventional associations,

emotional salience or historical resonance. An English metaphor borrowed into another communicative community may shift its pragmatic force. For that reason, translation-oriented work should compare complete utterances and their settings rather than equating single lexical triggers. The present study is restricted to English-language description and does not advance claims about measured cross-linguistic equivalence.

Blended metaphors and contradictions in framing

Actual discourse rarely isolates one metaphor in the way an experimental comparison may do. A policy speech can portray climate action as a journey with milestones, describe innovation as a race, and conclude that a community must fight for its future. These frames are not always consistent: a race implies competing participants, a journey can foreground coordination, and a battle may imply an opponent whose defeat can be identified. A philological analysis should avoid selecting one dramatic phrase as the essence of a complete text. Instead, it can document sequences of metaphors and ask whether their combination produces a coherent plan or an unstable mixture of incompatible expectations.

This approach also clarifies the difference between a source-domain label and a rhetorical function. 'Pathway to net zero' may be conventional technical language in an institutional document rather than an extended narrative image. The analyst must inspect surrounding verbs, modifiers and implied alternatives before treating the expression as persuasive strategy. Repeated metaphorical phrases can become formulaic and lose their immediate vividness, although their conceptual organization may still be relevant. The degree of conventionality should therefore be recorded alongside the mapping itself. A rigid binary between literal and metaphorical speech is often too crude for texts that recycle established climate terminology.

Another difficulty concerns passive constructions. 'Emissions must be reduced before 2040' offers a requirement but leaves the acting institution unnamed. If it appears beside 'Our city is fighting for a clean future', the metaphor creates an impression of collective action while grammar conceals responsibility. A more complete analysis joins figurative language with actor representation: who is named as a decision-maker, who is positioned as a beneficiary, and who bears costs? The same text might mention households prominently while omitting industry or regulatory authorities. Such patterns warrant careful description, though a claim about systematic exclusion would require a sufficiently broad and documented sample.

A structured comparison for public communication

An applied reading exercise can place four carefully constructed sentences side by side: 'We must win the war on emissions'; 'We must win the race to cleaner energy'; 'We must find a fair path toward cleaner energy'; and 'The council will retrofit public buildings in a defined programme'. The first three supply distinct imaginative resources, whereas the fourth supplies an actor and action without an overt source-domain analogy. A responsible comparison would ask what each sentence highlights, which audiences it might address, and which missing details could influence interpretation. None of the four is universally preferable. Their appropriateness depends on genre, evidence and what adjacent sentences contribute.

For instance, in an emergency public-health context, mobilizing rhetoric may have a recognizable communicative purpose, but an environmental policy is not a single short confrontation with a clearly bounded endpoint. Readers need to understand structural changes that unfold over many years. A perpetual battle frame could help maintain urgency or, in some settings, contribute to fatigue and polarization. This is a hypothesis about possible reception, not an observed effect in this paper. It illustrates why metaphor evaluation should distinguish short-term attention, understanding of proposed mechanisms, willingness to act and sustained trust as separate outcomes rather than compressing all of them into 'persuasiveness'.

Editorial review can therefore use a two-column conceptual check even without presenting a formal table: first identify what a metaphor makes salient, then list the practical information required for a responsible recommendation. For 'race', information may include competing deadlines, fairness constraints and measures of progress; for 'journey', the sequence of decisions and contingency options; for 'battle', the relevant institutional obligations and realistic definition of success. When figurative wording is complemented by factual detail, readers are better positioned to interpret a message on more than emotional grounds. This is a normative proposal for communication design, not a claim of experimentally demonstrated superiority.

Finally, metaphor choice must be considered within the ecology of a whole text. A headline may intensify urgency, a chart may quantify risks, and a quotation may express moral evaluation. Analysis that isolates lexical imagery but ignores visual framing or reported speech may misunderstand where a public narrative obtains its force. Although the current framework focuses on words, it explicitly recommends recording multimodal and intertextual context for future work. Philological precision requires acknowledgment of those limits instead of treating the selected language sample as the entire communicative event.

Limitations and conclusions

The paper does not establish the frequency of climate metaphors in the press, rank frames by effectiveness or measure public attitudes. Its illustrations were authored for explanation, and the proposed categories need reliability testing. Later research could combine annotated text samples with reader studies and investigate interactions between metaphor, source trust and the specificity of an accompanying recommendation. The critical task is to prevent attractive explanatory diagrams from substituting for evidence.

Metaphors in climate discourse are interpretive devices that highlight certain relations and background others. A defensible philological model links source-domain mapping to agency, evaluation, genre and reader context. War, race and journey frames offer different communicative possibilities but should not be treated as intrinsically persuasive or harmless. By separating textual mechanisms from tested audience effects, analysts can evaluate figurative language with greater precision and contribute to public communication that is both engaging and accountable.

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