



# The role of language in climate change conversations

*Behavioural linguistics is about nudging responsible action through communication.*

Making decisions comes down to instinctive reasons that we are often not aware of. A central part of making decisions is through communication: what we read, hear, say and mentally process leads to the decisions we make and the actions we take.

New to the world of behavioural science, Behavioural Linguistics is the science-based use of language to persuade. It is rooted in 'nudge theory' combined with psychology, sociolinguistics, and applied principles of content marketing.

The theme of nudging responsible and pro-social action is important in the context of climate content. Despite climate conversations becoming more and more relevant in mainstream media, there is still a lack of individual action by many people.

## Language offers one of the solutions to motivating people to act

The words we choose to use when discussing the environment matters. There is no more pressing issue facing humanity today than the consequences of climate change. How people view climate change is closely linked to how it is communicated, and so the language used reflects and expresses facts and observations, as well as influences attitudes, ideology, and behaviours.

Storytelling is crucial in the fight against climate change. Content creators need to find a way to create compelling stories or narratives to make people feel a sense of shared purpose and identity and pay attention to our global environmental issues.

## Words matter

Over the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in more emotive and strategic language being applied to stories about climate change. In early 2019, *The Guardian* newspaper made an editorial decision to refer to the 'climate crisis' rather than 'climate change'. When they did this, there was a 40% increase in people using 'climate crisis' during 2021 compared to previous years.

Similarly, other climate campaigners, including the United Nations, talk about a 'climate emergency'. The move away from the word 'change' reflects the idea that change is not necessarily negative, whereas 'crisis' and 'emergency' have a much clearer sense of imminent danger and invoke a stronger, and more immediate, call to action.

*"The language we use has to speak to a person's values and resonate with them. If it doesn't, people will simply say, 'I'll deal with the problem when I see it.' But by then it will be too late."*

*~ George Marshall, Founder of Climate Outreach*

The Guardian newspaper made other language updates to their style guide when reporting on environmental issues:

- **Climate science denier** or **climate denier** instead of **climate sceptic**, as denier is more accurate given the overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change. This links to our sense of self and our innate desire to present ourselves to the world in positive ways. People who previously considered themselves ‘sceptics’, which suggests critical thinking, are less likely to want to be seen as ‘deniers’, which has more of a negative connotation.
- **Global heating** instead of **global warming**, because this is more scientifically accurate, as greenhouses gases form an atmospheric blanket that stops the Sun’s heat escaping back to space. **Warming** most typically conveys a positive or desirable quality – we warm our toes by the fire, enjoy warm baths and feel

warm and fuzzy inside. Heating is more purposeful, even uncomfortable, and refers to the systematic process of increased temperature – we see it used with plumbing and ventilation, where we can take action to turn it up, down, on and off. Evoking this sense of control can also be helpful. We are unlikely to change our behaviour for a lost cause, but if we feel that our actions can make a difference, we are more persuaded.

- **Wildlife** instead of **biodiversity**, which is, again, a more accessible word and less clinical when talking about all of the creatures who share the planet with us. This shifts us more to the familiar, as most of us have a concrete sense of wildlife but are perhaps less clear about what biodiversity really involves. This term helps to ‘humanise’ the animal world, elevating them from the innate to living, breathing souls that we should care more about.

## Tips to include Behavioural Linguistics in climate content

### 1. Frame statements positively

While certain semantics about climate change are moving towards more negative connotations, there should be a strong push to frame our actions positively. Of all our cognitive biases, the framing effect is one of the strongest affecting our decision-making processes. This is where we make decisions about information depending on how it is framed, i.e. framed positively or negatively. In general, humans are more likely to change behaviour when challenges are framed positively, instead of negatively.

When it comes to climate change, there’s a need to move away from the typically violent rhetoric that surrounds the

topic: the ‘war’ on carbon, ‘slashing’ emissions, ‘combating’ global warming. Through these metaphors, climate change is often presented as an evil force or as something happening to us that we are powerless to control, and this strips people of both agency and responsibility, forcing us into a victim role, simply through language. We need to flip this around and present climate change not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to innovate and reimagine our actions.

### 2. Highlight the herd

When communicating a sense of shared purpose, look no further than the behavioural principle of social proofing. This



is a bias that plays out in unfamiliar situations where we tend to follow the crowd and look to others when deciding how to behave.

By highlighting the desired behaviour as being the most popular behaviour or that of a representative group, using phrases such as ‘the majority’, ‘most people’ and ‘others like you’, you are more likely to persuade someone to take up a call to action.

### 3. Focus issues in the now

A big obstacle when it comes to making climate change tangible is that we like to live in the moment, preferring to satisfy our immediate needs rather than considering what may be better for us in the future. This behavioural bias, known as the present bias, means we overvalue present-based rewards or benefits at the expense of larger and more beneficial rewards in the future.

For example, in the case of choosing to drive or walk to the nearby grocery store, we often give in to the easier ‘self-gratifying’ yet un-environmentally friendly option and take the car. If the aim is to try and get people to make decisions that will change things in the future, they need to feel much more emotionally attached.

### 4. Pay attention to the messenger

The messenger effect is a behavioural principle that shows that when we send messages through someone we trust, it commands authority and credibility and makes it more persuasive. When we’re making decisions on an issue, we consider whether we believe the person informing us. Do we know them? Like them? Respect them? Trust, therefore, is key, and the communicator is often just as important

as the language used. It’s important to think about who would be most influential for your message, whether that might be Greta Thunberg (a young climate activist), David Attenborough (broadcaster and biologist) or even a high school geography teacher.

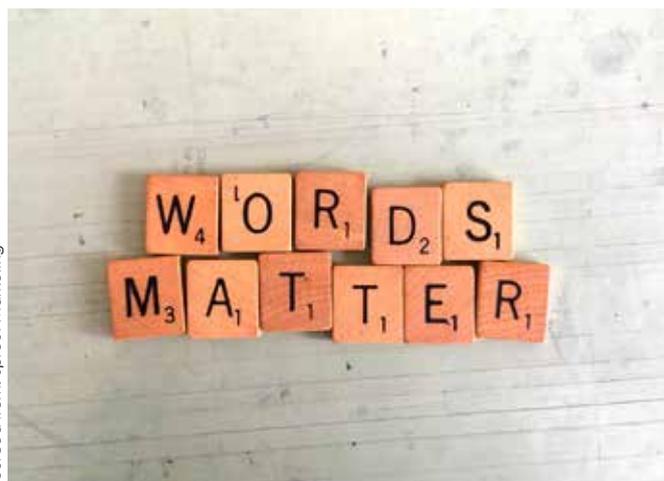
### Small, sustainable steps = big impact

Overall, we need to reframe climate change communication to be more urgent, tangible, relatable, and convey a sense of shared global responsibility. Once we get this right, more and more people will be encouraged to make the small changes in their lives to help the environment.

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Marito lawa hi wa tirhisaka loko hi vulavula hi timhaka ta swa mbangu. A ku na xiphiko xo tika lexi nga langutana na vumunhu ku fana na switanzaku swa ku cinca ka ntshamelo-maxelo. Leswi vanhu va vonisaka ku cinca ka ntshamelo-maxelo hi swixona, swi fana na leswi va vulavurisaka xiswona. Kambe ririmi leri ri tirhisiweke ri komba ntiyiso na vuxiyaxiya, mavonelo na matikhomelo. Mavonelo ya Nudge, I ndlela yo hlawuleka eka mvulavulurisano ku hlohlotela vanhu ku va va endla ku cinca ku ntsongo eka vutomi bya vona leswi swi nga ta pfuna mbangu.

*Translated by Millicent Masina, South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement*