

# THE PAST, THE FUTURE AND THE URGENT of climate change

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**Abstract:** Do we focus on a better future or a more stable past when discussing environmental problems? What do metaphors say about the urgency of climate action? What do those temporal references suggest for human-nature relations? To answer those questions, this article refers to David Attenborough's speeches at COP 24 and COP 26. It analyses the metaphors and temporal references of messages on climate action. Through this interpretive analysis of the two speeches, the following metaphor themes were identified: *'The People'*, *'Responsibility'*, *'The Number'*, and *'Tale'*. The comparison of both speeches identified a shift from prevailing future-oriented messages to those focusing on the past or future. Moreover, the temporality behind each theme of metaphors provided a more comprehensive understanding of the climate situation. It also illustrated how the speaker communicated the urgency of climate actions.

**Keywords:** metaphors, temporal frames, climate change, COP, David Attenborough

## Minevik, tulevik ning pakiline kliimamuutuses

**Abstrakt:** Kas me keskendume keskkonnaprobleemide käsitlemisel paremale tulevikule või stabiilsele minevikule? Kas keskkonnakaitsjate sõnumid on rohkem tulevikule või minevikule orienteeritud? Mida ütlevad need ajalised viited inimese ja looduse suhete kohta? Nendele küsimustele vastamiseks uuritakse käesolevas artiklis David Attenborough kõnesid COP 24 ja COP 26 kohtumistel, analüüsis edastatud sõnumite ajalisi viiteid ja nendes kasutatud metafoore. Metafoore uuritakse nii ajalise perspektiivist kui ka inimeste, vastutuse, arvu ja loo kategooriates. Kahe kõne võrdluses ilmnes nihe valdavalt tulevikule orienteeritud sõnumitelt minevikule või tulevikule keskenduvatele. Samuti pakub metafoorsete teemade ajalise analüüsimine võimaluse kliimaolukorra terviklikumaks mõistmiseks ning illustreerib ka seda, kuidas kõneleja kommunikeerib sellega seotud tegevuse pakilisust.

**Märksõnad:** metafoorid, ajalised raamid, kliimamuutus, COP, David Attenborough

Metaphors are inseparable parts of our communication, and they help us understand abstract concepts (Keulartz 2007; Thibodeau et al. 2017). When used in communication, the explanatory power of metaphors can also attribute a certain degree of persuasiveness to transmitted messages, as indicated by Paul H. Thibodeau et al. (2017). More specifically, metaphors can transfer speakers' disposition towards a certain phenomenon, wanting the receiver to create an identical approach (ibid). Metaphors can also direct our actions concerning different phenomena. They do so

by creating "normative dualism", which proposes the direction of our action, "such as health/disease or nature/artifice" (Keulartz 2007:28).

Metaphorical expressions have been intensively used to communicate science, as noted by Brendon Larson (2011), and they can be used as descriptive tools when discussing environmental sustainability. Further, Larson (2011) has gone beyond the so-called "epistemic dimension of environmental metaphors", calling for a revolution in this field (ibid, 11-12). That revolution was mainly concerned with integrating society in this endeavour. Larson put it as such:

Environmental metaphors derive from everyday sources, so they reveal, to some extent, the worldview of the society that coins them. It is not so much that we choose a metaphor; rather, we are chosen by those within our cultural context. Thus, there is a tendency for environmental metaphors to engender circular feedback between our view of ourselves and our view of nature (Larson 2011:18).

Drawing from Larson (2011), it can be considered that socio-cultural context plays a crucial role in the construction of environmental metaphors. They also help to understand the essence of human-nature relations.

Therese Asplund (2011) identified three main groups of metaphors when analysing climate change communication in Swedish farm magazines. One group was the greenhouse metaphors, which discussed climate change from a scientific lens while not elaborating thoroughly on the term (ibid, 3-4). Asplund (2011: 4) also found some game-related phrases, such as "key players" or "winner", which, according to the author, mainly related to the positive outcomes of climate change for farmers ("such as climate-labelled milk"). Swedish farm magazines also attributed some war-related features to climate change, such as "threat" or "surrendering" (ibid, 4-5). Moreover, a study of UK newspapers found that metaphors related to religion mostly portrayed environmentalism and activists in a negative light (Woods et al. 2012).

The studies discussed above illustrate what metaphors say about the different attitudes towards climate-related issues. They demonstrate that various metaphors have different implications about the urgency of the matter.

Similar to metaphors, temporal frames can also determine the effectiveness of environmental messages. Matthew Baldwin and Joris Lammers (2016) conducted several studies to support the hypothesis that conservatives are more attracted by past-oriented environmental messages than liberals. As the studies illustrated, in some cases, "conservatives liked past-focused environmental appeals more than liberals did (study 1) and allocated more money than liberals to past-focused environmental charities (study 6)" (Baldwin, Lammers 2016: 14956).

Although this current work does not concern the liberal/conservative divide in environmental protection, it is supposed that the analysis of the temporal frames can assist in interpreting the possible reception of texts among different groups of people, especially sceptics. Positive past-orientated messages could give hope for recovery (restoring the past). Positive future-oriented messages should not necessarily imply the possibility of 'full recovery' but a better tomorrow. While overly negative messages would take the hope out of recovery and make future action seem

redundant. Similar implications were suggested by Evi Zemanek (2022: 17) when analyzing David Attenborough's documentaries. The author illustrated:

Popular documentaries end up relying on a balanced rhetoric: If they did not communicate that we, animals and humans alike, live in fragile ecosystems and are thus vulnerable, the audience would not feel the need for action. But if the vulnerability is illustrated by images of irreversible destruction, it seems pointless from the outset to take action (Zemanek 2022: 17).

It is supposed that the analysis of temporal frames will provide more information about climate actions. They will also help understand the feasibility of recovery, as it is communicated in environmental messages.

Considering the functions and implications of metaphors discussed above and the role of temporal frames in information exchange, this study argues that they can help understand how the urgency of the climate situation has been communicated. They will also illustrate how human-nature relations are portrayed. To that end, this analysis examines the implications of metaphors from a temporal perspective. Concerning temporal frames, the analysis considers whether the messages are past-oriented and future-oriented.

This study analyzes two speeches by Attenborough (already transcribed)<sup>1</sup> from COP (The Conference of Parties) 24 and 26. The United Nations Climate Conference, the Conference of Parties, meets annually to describe and measure member states' efforts towards the ultimate goal of the convention.<sup>2</sup> For the first time, the COP met in Berlin in 1995<sup>3</sup>. The conference is a place where all countries, no matter how developed, are equally important in expressing opinions because decisions are based on consensus (Harvey 2019).

The rationale behind the choice of these two speeches has to do with a "tendency for environmental metaphors to engender a circular feedback between our view of ourselves and our view of nature" (Larson 2011: 18). It is believed that the texts on behalf of people, not politicians, would better illustrate the mentioned tendency.

Those speeches, one way or another, represent the public in climate discussions. The speech from COP 24, 2018, was the "People Seat Address" when the "People's Seat" was introduced.<sup>4</sup> That initiative connected people to world leaders

<sup>1</sup>Attenborough, David. 2018. The People's seat. In UNFCCC [Speech]. COP 24: 2018, Katowice, Poland. [https://unfccc.int/documents/185211\\_06012023](https://unfccc.int/documents/185211_06012023). Retrieved 31.08.2023.

Attenborough, David. 2021. David Attenborough COP26 Climate Summit Glasgow Speech Transcript. In Rev [Speech]. COP 26:2021, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/david-attenborough-cop26-climate-summit-glasgow-speech-transcript>. Retrieved 07.01.2023.

The references are made according to the lines of each transcribed text

<sup>2</sup>United Nations. Climate Change (n.d.). Bodies. Conference of the Parties (COP). <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

<sup>3</sup>United Nations. Climate Change (n.d.). History of the Convention. <https://unfccc.int/process/the-convention/history-of-the-convention#Climate-Change-in-context>. Retrieved, 31.08.2023.

<sup>4</sup>United Nations 2018b. Climate Change. Sir David Attenborough Launches UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People. Retrieved from: <https://unfccc.int/news/sir-david->

through the means of social media. The address contained a video with messages from different people who joined the social media initiative.<sup>5</sup> The work also analyses Attenborough's speech from COP 26, where he was chosen to speak as the "People's advocate".<sup>6</sup>

This study also considered Attenborough's role and reputation in the endeavour. The 'Attenborough Effect' is a phrase related to the impact of his documentary *Blue Planet* on the increased interest in the matters of plastic pollution (Males, Van Aelst 2020).

As mentioned above, the temporal frames of messages were coded drawing from Baldwin and Lammers' (2016) approach, namely as past-oriented or future-oriented. The identified metaphors were grouped into themes following conventional analysis, meaning the themes are derived from the analysis. They were not decided upon in advance. The study also employed an interpretive approach to describe the possible implications of metaphors in relation to human-nature relations and the urgency of the climate situation. Thus, the results of the study are not explanatory, suggesting certain causal associations, but rather interpretive, providing subjects for further analysis.

## The analysis: COP 24<sup>7</sup>

COP 24 was in Poland in 2018<sup>8</sup>. It was accompanied by protests against U.S. climate policy at the time (Chung 2018). One of the highlights of the event was David Attenborough's speech, officially known as the "People's Seat Address" to world leaders<sup>9</sup>. The analysis of the speech is below.

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attenborough-launches-un-campaign-to-promote-climate-action-by-the-people. Retrieved, 31.08.2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>GOV.UK 2021. Sir David Attenborough named COP26 People's Advocate ahead of crucial UN climate change summit. Press Release <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sir-david-attenborough-named-cop26-peoples-advocate-ahead-of-crucial-un-climate-change-summit>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

<sup>7</sup> The material of analysis: Attenborough, David. 2018. The People's seat. In UNFCCC [Speech]. COP 24: 2018, Katowice, Poland. Retrieved from: [https://unfccc.int/documents/185211\\_06012023](https://unfccc.int/documents/185211_06012023). Retrieved 31.08.2023.

<sup>8</sup>United Nations. Climate Change 2018a. COP 24. <https://unfccc.int/event/cop-24>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. Climate Change 2018b. Sir David Attenborough Launches UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People. <https://unfccc.int/news/sir-david-attenborough-launches-un-campaign-to-promote-climate-action-by-the-people>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

## Temporality

Attenborough's speech at COP 24 contained both future-oriented and present-oriented messages. One was as follows: "If we don't take action the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon" (Line 10-11). This was a call to act 'today' for a better tomorrow.

Attenborough's direct message to world leaders also had the same temporal implications about actions. He stated, "The continuation of our civilizations and the natural world upon which we depend is in your hands" (Line 36). Therefore, the speech was generally directed towards the future, implying that urgent actions mean a better tomorrow.

## Metaphors

Attenborough's speech from 2018 was not rich in metaphors. It indicated that the existing environmental situation was the worst ever. Therefore, there was a need to stand up against that disaster. Although he did not use metaphors to compare war and climate change, his speech contained descriptions of human reactions to wars. One example is the following: "[people]...willing to make sacrifices in their daily lives" (Line 29). This quote resonates with Asplund's (2011) war metaphors that describe climate change as a threat to be fought against. Indeed, sacrifices are also made during other types of disasters (natural disasters), but the rhetoric of fighting brought the message closer to representing war-like situations.

Overall, metaphors used in the speech at COP 24 can be categorized along the following themes: *'The People'* and *'Responsibility'*.

## The People

Attenborough's speech was about considering 'the People'. Several messages implied the need for more participatory and democratic environmental policies. The expressions, such as "The People's Seat" (Line 16), "the world's people" (Line 18), and "the Voice of the People" (Line 20) are metaphorical at first glance, but when put into the context of Attenborough's speech, they take on literal meanings. The temporal focus of this group of metaphors is twofold. The phrases indicating that: "The People have spoken" (Line 34) or "[people]...willing to make sacrifices in their daily lives" (Line 29) implied that the people had made their decision. More importantly, they made it before the world leaders. The fact that people made that decision earlier gave them a certain advantage in that particular context. It appears that the people have fulfilled their share of the responsibility to the given extent. Thus, the temporality of this message is not explicitly about the future or past but about who follows whom in climate-related actions.

Moreover, “People’s Seat” (Line 16) is “giving everyone the opportunity to join us [participants at the COP 24] here today” (Line 17). Thus, this group of metaphors is also about the here and now, indicating the immediacy of the matter.

## Responsibility

The speech mentioned: “The continuation of our civilisations and the natural world upon which we depend, is in your hands” (Line 36). The fate of human civilizations cannot be literally in politicians’ hands. This very metaphor can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the message directly indicated the politician’s share of responsibility for the planet’s future. On the other hand, Attenborough thereby accepted their significant role in climate action. However, certainly, the responsibility belongs to more than just the world leaders. At the same time, with the expression “in your hands” (Line 36), the speech put the responsibility of possible delays (in climate action) on the leaders.

Thus, in this group of metaphors, time and temporality were expressed through delays. That, in turn, indicated the vector of responsibility in climate actions.

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To sum up, Attenborough’s speech at COP 24 was oriented towards the future. It can be assumed that human-nature relations were divided into two categories: ‘People’-nature relations on one side and world leaders-nature relations on the other. Although leaders arguably have more power in heading climate actions, the speech gave more authority to the ‘People’ because they had made their decisions on climate before the leaders.

Similarly, in the case of metaphors, time and temporality did not only have a strict binary division between the past and the future. They were also interpreted implicitly in terms of the temporal precedence or delays. Those implications helped to interpret how responsibility and the urgency of the issue were approached throughout the speech.

## The analysis: COP 26<sup>10</sup>

COP 26 took place in Glasgow in 2021. It is known for reaching some agreement on

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<sup>10</sup>The material of analysis. Attenborough, David. 2021. David Attenborough COP26 Climate Summit Glasgow Speech Transcript. In Rev [Speech]. COP 26:2021, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/david-attenborough-cop26-climate-summit-glasgow-speech-transcript>. Retrieved 07.01.2023

the approach and actions to combat climate change.<sup>11</sup> The conference was also marked by Attenborough's speech, which Forbes magazine called "powerful" (Vetter 2021). An article in the Global Citizen referred to it as a "desperate plea to leaders" (Lock 2021).

## Temporality

Compared to the speech at COP 24, the temporal frames of Attenborough's messages in Glasgow were more diverse. Future-oriented texts were no longer the core of his speech. Moreover, he referred to the past, implying that the past climate situation was more stable than the existing one (creating past-oriented frames). That idea was implied from the following message: "Everything we've achieved in the last 10,000 years was enabled by the stability during this time" (Line 15-16, 00:48).

Future-oriented messages existed in the speech, but there was an implicit call for caution to remain realistic. The speech pushed not focusing on "some imagined future generation, but young people alive today [...]" (Line 32-34, 03:16). Thus, similar to COP 24, this speech stressed the importance of acting urgently.

Overall, the time frames of delivered messages were mainly placed between the past and the present, which was also manifested through words like "restoring", "recapturing", and "bring[ing] back the balance" (Line 44-46, 04:37). Attenborough also indicated about a possible new industrial revolution, which could imply a reinterpretation of the historical phenomenon in the present.

The general message of the speech was about urgent climate action, similar to the address at COP 24. At the same time, compared to COP 24, Attenborough refers to the past as 'better times'. That was especially obvious in the narratives about regaining or restoring previous stability. The speech was about 'bringing the past back to the future'.

Despite Attenborough's past focused speech, other speakers<sup>12</sup>, who joined his address through a video, delivered future-oriented messages, mainly sharing concerns about the feasibility of the future given the current climate situation. They did not depict the future as a better place. Neither was it a bad place. The future did not exist for the speakers and had a low chance of happening.

Despite the rather pessimistic messages that the video (accompanying Attenborough's speech) showed, Attenborough's references to restoring previous stability implied the possibility of getting back to 'better times for climate'.

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations. Climate Change 2021. Glasgow Climate Change Conference – October-November 2021. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/conference/glasgow-climate-change-conference-october-november-2021>. Retrieved 07.01.2023.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations 2021. David Attenborough, People's Advocate for #COP26, Address to World Leaders | Climate Action. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7EpiXViSIQ>. Retrieved 06.09.23

## Metaphors

Unlike COP 24, Attenborough's speech at COP 26 was full of metaphors about human-nature relations. Below, they are grouped under the following themes: 'The Number' and 'Tale metaphors'.

### The Number

This speech is built around a so-called 'number' representing carbon emissions. As put by the environmentalist, "the emergency climate comes down to a single number, the concentration of carbon in our atmosphere" (Line 3-5, 00:01). The goal of suggested actions was 'the decreased number', decreasing the concentration of carbon. The speech called to "stop the number rising and put it in reverse" (Line 37, 03:16).

The reference to the 'number' could be related to the need to provide more factual information. From the perspective of a temporal focus, the given group of metaphors communicated the past, present, and future. The number indicated a situation that was the result of past actions. Moreover, a better tomorrow was symbolized by a reduced 'number'.

### Tale metaphors

In this speech, Attenborough described the history of human civilization as a "tale of the smartest species [...]" (Line 30, 03:16). This kind of metaphorical description could suggest the possibility of *the end*, which was sometimes explicitly stated in the speech, as in the following phrase: "Is this how our story is due to end?" (Line 30, 03:16). Moreover, it was also indicated that the story could be "rewritten" by "turning tragedy into a triumph" (Line 35-36, 03:16).

The speaker compared people's lives to a literary work and that the people could change the genre of that work. The possibility of that change was there in the speech, but whether there was an opportunity to stop *the end* remained an open question. The tale metaphors made that point ambiguous.

When it comes to rewriting the narrative, Attenborough called for unity between humans and nature. That point was reiterated metaphorically, saying that "Nature is a key ally" (Line 44, 04:37). Thus, our tale is also the tale of nature. Moreover, the need for alliance suggested the creation of links with nature. That call is close to the concept of semiotic fitting in communities, put forth Kalevi Kull (2019). It can be assumed that Attenborough implied better ties with nature. That appears to be the essence of semiotic fitting, as in "functional or communicational match with [...] surrounding" (ibid, 9). Supposedly, the implication was that better semiotic fitting would prevent tragedy.

Therefore, human history was portrayed as a process with a starting point and a finale, which, at a glance, supposes a linear development. However, humans' time was also mixed with the time of nature, and at this point, linearity fades away.

Similar to the speech at COP 24, Attenborough again implicitly referred to the responsibility for possible delays in climate action. In COP 26, however, this was more in the form of pressure on leaders. Attenborough indicated, "the world is looking to you [...] (Line 67, 06:09). The metaphorical expression suggested that the public monitoring of the process is inevitable.

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In summary, the temporal focus of this speech was both past-oriented and future-oriented. It consequently had the potential to attract a broader and more diverse audience, as there were positive and negative messages delivered in the speech. The negative one was that climate change made the end of human history feasible or rather obvious. The good one was that it is possible to challenge climate change.

The temporality of metaphorical expressions delivered two messages. Firstly, the postponement of climate action was not feasible, indicating the urgency of the issue. Secondly, the call for an alliance with nature also implied that such a union could add to the efficiency and effectiveness of climate action.

## Juxtaposing two speeches

The analysis of the two speeches suggested several similarities and differences in how the climate situation was communicated. It can be assumed that the metaphors of COP 24 were used to suffice their normative function, indicating the need for action (see more about the normative function in [Keulartz 2007]). They possessed a certain level of persuasiveness directed to the audience.

The metaphors from COP 26 were more descriptive (ibid), trying to make the situation more apparent and, therefore, encourage specific actions (see more about the persuasive influence of metaphor in Thibodeau et al. 2017).

Since persuasiveness was concerned, the temporal frames could have played a significant role, especially for those sceptical about climate change. Baldwin and Lammers (2016: 14954) noted that "conservatives can become more pro-environmental when being so aligns with morals and values that are consistent with their world view". Thus, it can be assumed that the speech at COP 26 should have been more persuasive for them. At the same time, regardless of the ideology, the second speech communicated the possibility of recovering things and the feasibility of the future if acting urgently. Thus, the speech was more enabling and empowering

and could have reached many layers of society (although it was directed at world leaders). Both speeches underlined the urgency of the matter, demanding action.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrated the implications of metaphors and temporal frames in the environmental messages of David Attenborough at two COPs. Those speeches were selected because they represented the people in those discussions. The work identified metaphors and grouped them into broader themes. Along with that, the study analyzed the prevailing temporal focus of speeches, and then the possible implications of those findings were interpreted.

Both speeches by Attenborough underlined the urgency of the matter and implied who is responsible for the crisis. The speech at COP 26 appeared to be more comprehensive since it covered different temporal frames and described the situation through factual information and familiar themes. The relevance of the action became more evident through the help of tale metaphors, which resembled an advocacy campaign to preserve the human species in partnership with nature.

The interpretive approach of this study allowed us to reveal some meanings of texts, which put forward different themes for further analysis. Namely, this study interpreted the implications of metaphors related to climate change but did not delve deeper into their actual impact on the public and the politics of climate change. Analyzing possible quantitative and qualitative effects of speeches at the COP or other environmental events could help better shape the advocacy of the case.

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