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KATHERINE E. RUSSO

THE EVALUATION OF RISK
IN INSTITUTIONAL
AND NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE
THE CASE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION

preface
Giovanni Bettini

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Preface

*Giovanni Bettini**

In this volume, Katherine E. Russo offers an important contribution to current debates in the humanities and social sciences that explore how climate change is understood, represented, communicated, and thereby governed. The tasks that this rapidly expanding field of enquiry faces are as salient as thorny. Climate change has challenged many settled understandings in politics, economy, history and culture (Chakrabarty, 2009), resulting at times 'unthinkable'. Amitav Ghosh's recent volume *The Great Derangement* (2016) offers an illustrative example of how complicated it has been to signify (and let alone act upon) global warming in many cultural, political, and economic contexts. Ghosh's monograph dissects how climate change has been an almost intractable subject for literature, exposing the inability by most contemporary literary production to make climate change a central character in their narration. More broadly, the inscription of climate change in societal imaginaries, representations and practices has been a highly contentious matter, mediated through complex interactions with broader historical, cultural and political relations (Hulme, 2017).

This volume goes to the crux of these issues by focusing on some of the most pivotal actors in the politics of knowledge and

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communications of climate change – media and international organizations. *International organizations and institutions* such as the United Nation (UN), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the European Commission (EU) have been instrumental to the emersion and consolidation of discourses on climate change, creating and adapting institutional and legal contexts, lexicons and legitimacy, audiences, as well as leading the production and systematization of knowledge. It goes without saying that *newspapers* (and media in general) have been key players in communicating climate change, animating debates, producing audiences and modulating affects.

Importantly, international organizations and the news industry have been on the frontline of the controversies surrounding climate change. While the consensus in the scientific community over the most fundamental aspects of anthropogenic climate change has been unanimous for almost two decades (Oreskes, 2004), the communication of that scientific evidence and its mobilization in societal debates has been an intricate and far from uncontroversial process, challenging settled routines and norms both in scientific research and news production. Most representative is probably the trouble surrounding so-called ‘denialist’ or ‘skeptical’ positions in climate change debates, which has posed serious challenges to media and institutional communications. For instance, IPCC (the intergovernmental panel tasked to synthesise global scientific advances on the understanding of global warming) and scholars contributing to it have several times been the targets of the denialists’ attacks, in a succession of orchestrated attempts to undermine the credibility of the evidence behind ‘the science’ of climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2010, Sharman, 2014). How to react to, report on and represent the position of denialists has been a great conundrum for media and newspapers. For sure, the denialist position has gained traction thanks to the efforts of powerful actors not seldom funded more or less directly by oil companies and other fossil-fuelled industrial sectors that have

effectively financed scepticism (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). But it has also been indirectly favoured by the principle of balanced coverage (granting both positions in a debate equal footing) in news outlets, which has contributed to offering a disproportionate coverage to denialist' outlier positions with little currency and credibility in the research arena (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004; Boykoff, 2013).

The representation of competing views on the 'science' of climate change has not been the only factor making communication a tricky matter for media and organizations. The deep, systemic causes of global warming and the epochal magnitude of its impacts also contribute making it intractable, in particular for mainstream agendas. Climate change is not 'simply' a market failure or the result of a temporary malfunctioning to be rectified with a technological fix. It cannot be explained 'only' in relation to the operations of a few carbon-intensive economic sectors or factions of capital, such as the fossil fuel industry or the automotive sector. Climate change is a symptom of the modern capitalist global economic 'system' and some of its key material, institutional and cultural dynamics (Malm, 2016, Klein, 2014). Taking climate change 'seriously' thus means bringing power, politics and inequality at centre stage. It means questioning key dynamics of the current global political economic and cultural order, unsettling dogmas such as 'development' and economic growth. It also entails facing a series of monumental injustices, which stem from the 'original sin': there is a direct correlation between levels of income and emissions (in extreme synthesis: the more affluent, the more responsible for climate change), but an inverse one between wealth and exposure to climate impacts. This means that those least responsible for the creation of the problem are going to pay the dearest price and have the least means to respond and adapt to the challenges ahead (Ciplet et al., 2015, Bond, 2012). There are also other forms of inequality involved. Being a systemic problem, one mediated through a number of cultural,

historical and political relations that structure contemporary societies, climate change is entangled with and mobilizes deep undercurrents and affects. Studies on the representations of climate change in media have for instance highlighted how dominant imaginaries draw on colonial repositories and risk reproducing international inequalities. The disempowering and often racializing representations of vulnerability and ‘the vulnerable’ are a case in point, in particular in debates on so-called ‘climate refugees’ (Methmann, 2014, Farbotko, 2010, Manzo, 2010, Baldwin, 2016). Together, these politically troubling dimensions of global warming have contributed making it a contentious object to handle for international institutions, and a tricky one to discuss for newspapers.

In the face of these challenges, media and mainstream organizations have often given into two ‘temptations’, which this volume explores in great detail. On the one hand, climate change has been narrated in very strong tones, not seldom conjuring up sensationalist apocalyptic or catastrophic imaginaries, generating fear and anxiety. On the other hand, it has been framed as a ‘problem’ to be solved, deprived of the political connotations highlighted above, and narrated through technocratic lexicons that erase political responsibilities, contestations and subjectivities. This volume provides directions helping to explore the relationships between these two tendencies, drawing on studies that have interrogated the *apparent* paradox between the apocalypticism of many climate discourses and the technocratic visions and language through which climate change is made governable in mainstream institutional and policy contexts (Swyngedouw, 2010, Swyngedouw, 2013).

Risk, to which the volume dedicates considerable attention, is indeed a key element of contact between the two poles in the apparent paradox illustrated above. A key ‘technology’ through which reality has been made governable in contemporary societies (Beck, 1992), risk has represented a device through

which apocalyptic imaginaries and the anxiety for known and unknown catastrophic futures have been mobilized to make phenomena like climate change amenable to government (Aradau and Munster, 2011; Oels, 2013; Boas, 2015; Rothe, 2015). To be sure, the mobilization of fear and risk and the mechanisms through which climate change is made governable through it open up a number of complicated questions. For instance, the activation of fear in the face of a threat is not an automatic process, rather goes through the affective modulation in the public of possible responses to a certain threat or 'stimulus' (Massumi, 2005). Similarly, risk entails the assessment of the possibility or likelihood of the materialization of a danger/threat, a complex process that entails the creation of an audience, the negotiation of the expertise and evidence on which the assessment relies, communication, and often contestation. It is a salient task to investigate those processes in detail, details in which the proverbial 'devil' often resides. This volume engages with these important questions.

To do so, it elaborates a solid theoretic framework based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics that, understanding discourse as generative and inherently linked to practices, provides tools to explore the linkages between the linguistic modes and forms through which meanings are articulated, and the production of social relations and shaping of practices. The analytic machinery of CDA and its emphasis on the struggles through which meanings are fixated and become part of social exchanges is particularly useful for debates on climate change, in which the risk of 'naturalization' of meanings and social relations is always present. The volume builds and analyses a corpus of texts (from newspapers and institutional communications) on climate change and on climate-induced migration that cover the years 1996-2017. The volume looks closer at the language and imaginaries through which climate change and climate-induced migration have been

understood and communicated by newspapers and international organizations, delving into the ways in which lexical choices have contributed to forming and legitimizing specific understandings, modulating affects, and thus contributing to the complex politics of climate change and migration we introduced above. In relation to risk and its evaluation, the volume looks in depth at the complex processes through which issues are pointed to as threats and dangers, tracing the production of perceptions, 'opinions' and knowledge in the public. It investigates the 'micro-politics' of language central for governing (through) risk, pinning down how individual expressions and modes – by repetition and other reactions – imprint certain representations, positions and roles, thus producing important impacts on publics.

A key strength of the theoretical frame and methodology on which the volume is built is the ability to follow the *travelling* of meanings *across genres and styles*. Given the essential role of scientific evidence for the representation of climate change and because of the related need to 'translate' it to the public, tracing the voyage across genres is vital in order to understand not only how scientific knowledge is produced, but also how legitimacy is sought for, communicated, contested. And as this volume testifies, the way in which media does represent the 'scientific perspective' has been far from problematic.

The volume delves into the debate on climate-induced migration, a 'case study' that reveals many of the tensions and struggles that characterize the communication of evidence on climate change and the evaluation of related risks. In several ways an extreme case, as scientific evidence has constantly been misrepresented, and a set of empirically wacky narratives with toxic normative implications has often dominated debates. To be sure, the relation between climate change and human mobility opens up a set of complex, crucial questions for the decades to come (Baldwin and Bettini, 2017). However, in many media outlets and institutional communications, the relation between climate

and migration has been represented through reductive frames foreseeing mass international climate-induced displacement. Apocalyptic images of hundreds of millions of destitutes uprooted from climate change and threatening international security in their desperate flight have been circulated in media and by institutional communications and NGO campaigns, often legitimized by referring to 'science' and 'numbers'. To be sure, such narratives on 'hordes' of climate refugees are very problematic descriptions of the complicated and mediated ways in which ecological conditions and climate change do and will intersect with human migration. They have been proved inaccurate and toxic by 'experts', and solid empirical evidence has been presented to suggest more advanced understandings of the impacts of climate change on migration. While referred to as 'scientific' in many policy documents and campaigns (Bettini and Andersson, 2014), the 'numbers' that have contributed to popularize the figure of the climate refugee have been proved to be little more than back-of-the-envelope estimates (see ch. 12 in IPCC, 2014; Gemenne, 2011). But regardless, narratives on 'climate refugees' continue resurfacing and still inform many newspaper and media communications, as well as the campaigns promoted by many organizations (Bettini, 2013, Hall, 2016, Ransan-Cooper et al., 2015). This poses important questions: how do these narratives, in spite of their exposed contradictions and very questionable scientific grounds, become so successful? Where do they obtain their power and grip on public's imagination? This volume provides tools to shed light on subtle mechanisms at the lexical and semantic level through which representations and narratives on the climate migration emerge. In particular, anticipating here the contents of chapter 4, it explores the 'niceties' through which strategies such as nominalization lead to the success of the figure of 'climate refugees'. For instance, by making a complex set of primarily future-oriented relations (the nexus between climate change and human mobility) attached

to the present, amenable to feelings and imagination, and by assigning clear positions (who is vulnerable, who is dangerous, who will be responsible).

A number of themes this volume grapples with make it of great salience, even beyond climate change. The complex and subtle processes highlighted in the volume for what concerns the mobilization of evidence, the positions taken and the agencies foreclosed, the deliberate mobilization of affects at the expenses of intersubjectivity, as well as the difficult relations to 'truth' and evidence, all sound very familiar in the face of the modes of communication and political interaction that some have labelled 'post-truth'.

To end on a slightly more hopeful note, one of the key findings of the volume is that the language, terms and significations related to climate change and climate-related migration show a high degree of instability. This semantic instability reinforces the importance of the type of inquiry carried out in this volume, which provides precious tools to detect the directions undertaken by rapidly evolving discourses, as well as to understand the 'semantic struggles' that contribute to the shaping of a still-to-be settled landscape. We can also take the instability of the terminology surrounding global warming as a sign of the 'openness' of its future. The volatility of the signification of climate change and climate-migration nexus can allow us to see climate change as a political question about the futures that we want or do not want, still to be shaped, and to a large extent still to be envisioned.

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Introduction

In 2011, while doing some research on the Indigenous Australian battle against mining companies in the Northern Territory, I came across an interesting case of risk communication on the Australian ABC broadcast channel. Marra Indigenous leaders of the area were battling against plans to pipe iron ore through their land. During their interviews traditional owners pointed to the highly predictable risk of cyclones and tidal waves in the area. Yet their battles were framed as a claim against the invasion of sacred sites with the sensational headline, "Mining outrage: Indigenous leaders in the Gulf of Carpentaria are concerned about a mining company's plans to pipe iron ore through sacred land". When a journalist foregrounded Indigenous claims in relation to sacred sites and traditions, Betty Roberts, a Marra Elder, gave a report on the risks and outcomes of the piping: the potential pollution of waters and rivers due to the rust and rot of the pipes, and the increase of tidal waves and cyclones in the area. Moreover, the elder suggested a sustainable, but costly option: to rail or truck the iron ore. An assessment of risk outcomes and value which would have been highly helpful in what is currently the most urgent issue in Australia: water shortage and desertification due to rising temperatures as a consequence of climate change. Hence, as the report reveals, the communication of risk is inherently related to meaning, perception and evaluation since risks are "threats to outcomes that we value. Defining risk means specifying those valued outcomes clearly enough to make choices about them"

(Fischhoff and Kadvani, 2011: 22).

In order to make sound risk decisions citizens need information, which often reaches them through news media, conversations with friends, family, doctors, or public meetings and polls. Hence, risk communication involves the social contract between individuals. As Fischhoff and Kadvani note, “one test of a society may be how it ensures that its weakest members receive needed information on risk” (2011: 121). Risks and their valued outcomes should be understood in common terms, helping societies to define their deepest worries.

News media shape public perceptions and through the articulation of public opinion they play an important role in policymaking and institutional discourse (Bell, 1994). Yet, the communication of risk is far from being stable and unproblematic (Latour, 1987). While outcomes, such as car mortality and premature birth, are widely defined as risks, outcomes such as environmental sustainability and climate change are often contested and their measurement often leads to controversies. Furthermore, risk communication faces the challenge of conveying specialized information to lay people, and bridging the gap between experts and lay decision-makers may be extremely difficult in the case of ‘contested science’ such as climate change (*ibid*: 116). Experts adopt non-persuasive communication, trusting data to speak for themselves, and describe both benefits and risks, often in quantitative terms. Scientists are cautious and generally speak about probabilities, which do not translate well in the “unequivocal commentary that is valued in the press” (Boycoff and Boycoff, 2007: 3). In contrast, sceptics explicitly address the fears of the lay public in a language that leaves lingering emotional effects and avoid technical terms, thus reaching a wider public.

Following this line of thought, the aim of the book is to provide an analysis of the evaluation of climate change and climate-induced migration risks in discourse. The analysis of risk discourse

in institutional communication and newspaper discourse may indeed reveal how social institutions and conventions influence risk decisions, providing a window into how societies express and define themselves as they grapple with uncertainty about facts, options, beliefs and common values. It may also be used to help readers to be critical about the spectacularization and apocalyptic description of risk science by institutions and news operators (Fischhoff and Kadvany, 2011). Indeed, while climate change is often depicted in apocalyptic tones, what defines risk in opposition to uncertainty and apocalypse, is the possibility of assessing event probabilities. As the economist Frank Knight noted before the 1921 great financial crash,

[u]ncertainty must be taken in a sense radically distinct from the familiar notion of risk, from which it has never been properly separated [...]. The essential fact is that risk means in some cases a quantity susceptible of measurement [...]. A measurable uncertainty, or 'risk' proper [...] is so far different from an unmeasurable one that it is not in effect an uncertainty at all. (1921: 3)

Risks are measurable and all risk decisions are set in a social context and framed in a language highlighting different ways of looking at a decision based on the same elements: options, outcomes and uncertainties (Fischhoff and Kadvany, 2011: 20). Yet risk decisions are also mediated by news agencies and media, which continually redefine the meaning assigned to risks and call lay people to think about public and private risk decisions, whether as active participants or interested observers. As Teun van Dijk argued in his popular work on news and social cognition, people rely heavily on news accounts for their knowledge, beliefs and opinions, which in turn form socially shared knowledge and limited interpretative repertoires (1988; 1996). Such limited "repertoires" may condition the social apprehension and response to climate change and migration (Blommaert, 2012: 12). Thus, the repetitive character of newspaper coverage should

not be understood as an ‘innocent’ trait – it has important power effects. As Norman Fairclough (1995) put it in his seminal work on media language and power,

the hidden power of media discourse and the capacity of power-holders to exercise this power depend on systematic tendencies in news reporting and other media activities. A single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader and so forth. (54)

In this light, news genres ‘recontextualize’ and transform scientific, political and institutional social practices conveying them in new texts and social practices, including, crucially, everyday life conversations. Mediation is defined by Norman Fairclough as a ‘chain’, which through the networking of different social practices constrains and transforms language events in their transit across domains or fields of social life (Fairclough, 2003). This complex process, which spreads information across ‘genre chains’ or ‘networks of texts’, is central to the present study on contemporary representations of climate change as it focuses on the spread of information and science across institutional communication and newspaper discourse.

Genre chains and networks are particularly important for this study because their systematic transformation and recontextualization of information may also ‘affect’ their evaluation (Fairclough, 1995: 77). The investigation focuses on risk communication related to climate change and climate-induced migration in different institutional and newspaper genres by analyzing the lexical and grammatical resources used to express evaluation (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek and Caple, 2012; Hunston and Thompson, 2000; Martin and White, 2005). Evaluation, as the writer’s expression of opinion or subjectivity, may involve different meaning dimensions or parameters which

refer to the standards, norms and values according to which people evaluate something through language in a given context.

Resources to express evaluation include both lexical and grammatical means and vary semantically in the way in which they express opinion and positively or negatively evaluate people, events, propositions. Such realizations may be explicitly inscribed in discourse through the use of attitudinal lexis or implicitly invoked through implicature, i.e. the “selection of ideational meanings [...] enough to invoke evaluation, even in the absence of lexis that tells us directly how to feel” (Martin and White, 2005: 61-62). Moreover, writers may express attitude or take up a stance oriented to affect, judgement or appreciation, covering the semantic regions traditionally associated with emotions, ethics and aesthetics. Hence, the study of evaluation is crucial to this study because it may be extended to the speaker/writer’s certainty in evaluation, to ‘epistemic modality’ and ‘evidentiality’, and to how textual voices position themselves in relation to other voices.

Hence, as Mauranen has aptly pointed out, evaluation cannot be easily allocated to a clear set of expressions (2002: 115). In addition, both semantic prosody and semantic preference are crucial to evaluation. Evaluative expressions are co-text and context-dependent, yet from the point of view of Critical Discourse Analysis they are also an expression of the value system, ideologies and discourses which are constructed in different texts and domains (Fairclough, 1992). Hence, Corpus Linguistics methodological tools such as quantitative techniques (lists of frequency, concordances and collocational analysis) have been combined in the volume with the analysis of context and discourse structural evaluation through qualitative assessments (Baker, 2006; Baker *et al.*, 2008; Bevitori, 2011b; 2014). The analysis was carried out by firstly taking into consideration the different subcorpora through the aid of *AntConc*, a concordancer developed by Lawrence Anthony (2011) to explore the frequency,

statistical significance, context of specific lexical items and terms, phrases, lexical bundles and multiword units. The data was later analyzed according to a combined approach which draws upon recent findings in the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis and Evaluation. The analysis took into account the following levels of analysis: frequency and statistical significance, the level of the text, the relation between different texts and discourses, the context in which texts are produced and the wider historical and political context (Wodak, 2001). It therefore situated the quantitative analysis and the qualitative analysis of a wide range of linguistic discursive strategies within a wider analytical framework, which includes extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, and situational frames (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001).

The volume begins with an overview of how discourse may be critically analyzed through the analysis of recurrent language features and how common questions may arise across different news and communication genres. For instance, regular patterns may be found in the ways in which persuasive or truth effects are achieved in different institutional and news formats. Moreover, language change may be affected by the rapid and often global circulation of language idioms, styles and formats. Hence, the first chapter addresses the debate on the evaluation of information, the circulation of messages and the 'viral' power of media dissemination.

In Chapter Two, the analysis focuses on how climate change has been evaluated in the communication of social and political institutions and organizations, such as the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the European Commission (EU). A study has been carried out by analysing attitude and evaluation regarding climate change in the 1996-2016 period (Swales, 1990; Tilakaratna and Ahmar Mahboob, 2013). The analysis centres on institutional and organizational discourse and argues that

semantic preference and lexicogrammar related to the case of climate-change is particularly relevant for the analysis of the many and often contradictory rhetorical and ideological strategies of organizational and institutional actors (Carta and Wodak, 2015: 1).

The analysis proceeds with the study of contrasting accounts in hard news and opinion reports from the newspapers *The Australian*, *The Global Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Washington Post* (1996-2016). Chapter Three provides an analysis of the appraisal of climate change in newspaper discourse with a focus on epistemic modality, attitude and evidentiality (Martin and White, 2005; Wodak, 2015). Moreover, the chapter tries to ascertain whether news reports “frame” climate change foregrounding and backgrounding sensational elements, chaos and catastrophe or planning, forecasting and risk assessments (Goffman, 1974).

Finally, Chapter Four provides an analysis of the use of linguistic resources for representing social actors across institutional and newspaper discourse, in order to provide the grounds for the investigation of the ways in which the climate change and migration nexus is appraised and recontextualised according to function. It focuses on strategies of representation by analyzing nomination strategies and nominalization.