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'The generation that blocks the streets!'

A critical discourse analysis of language against climate activism in Poland's right-wing online news media

1.0. Introduction

Discourses function for various reasons and have varying purposes, including playing a role in media, transferring knowledge, and perhaps most covertly, serving as the building blocks by which people embed themselves in understandings of ideological constructs (Fairclough, 1995; Amalia, 2019). Discourses on social problems are at the forefront of critical discourse studies and highlight their representations through linguistic means, whether a subject is explicitly referred to or referenced by indirect means.

Discourse analysis of text and talk on the subject climate change and climate activism has expressed a range of theory and various stances on the topic, including its politicisation, sentiment surrounding climate change, the necessity of awareness and bringing about change, as well as those discourses directed directly at activism (Dryzek, 1997; DeLuca, 1999; Stibbe, 2014). To date, sentiment analysis within the area of discourses about climate change has been conducted as a means of describing the problem of climate change and the narratives which surround it (Kleres & Wettergran, 2017), discourse analysis of ageist textual representations of climate activists has been carried out (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020), as well as the analysis of the discourses that young people use themselves in relation to the problem of climate change and its discussion in the sphere of social media (Hautea et al., 2021).

While discourses that are climate-change-averse, including those of climate change denial, have been described as using religious metaphors and asking that 'better science be carried out (Van Eck & Feindt, 2022), the Polish context of discourses about climate activists and their representations has largely been left undiscussed. As such, because critical discourse analysis contains within its agenda an approach to the analysis of language and discourse where manipulation and propaganda are concerned, it seen as a relevant and perhaps the best tool to undertake the analysis of such a phenomenon, providing the tools needed further investigate the effects such representations might have on social groups. Critical discourse analysis (hereafter referred to as CDA) provides systematic ways of looking at discursive data (i.e., longer pieces of text, usually longer than a sentence) to locate where power, manipulation, and inequalities lie and views discourse as having a major impact on social life, including on social structures. It is a framework which additionally provides various methods for the analysis of discourse.

An increasing tendency towards the politicisation of youth additionally contributes to what has been seen as ageist attitudes towards young activists, who are usually teenagers, and their efforts to combat climate change and raise awareness on the subject (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020). Discourse analyses on the representations of climate activists in Poland have yet to be carried out, especially from a critical linguistic perspective.

1.1. Climate activism and youth

Climate change, which is understood as those anomalies associated with an increase in average temperatures on Earth, is an issue considered by many scientists to be one of the greatest challenges, if not the greatest, facing humanity today. Although it is important to note that the discourse on climate change is impacted by subjects that surround it both directly and indirectly, this paper concerns the discursive construction of those activists whose aim is to draw attention to the problem. Youth climate activism is a global phenomenon that has been demonstrated through the Youth Climate Strike in Poland, as well as through the Fridays for Future movement (Medoń, 2020; Jaśko, 2021)

The Fridays for Future campaign in Poland, which began in early 2019, has since grown significantly in its reach. The movement itself has been at the head of the organisation of several protests and demonstrations across the country, including in major cities such as Warsaw, Krakow, and Gdansk (Kocyba et al., 2020). For the purpose of this paper, it is crucial to highlight that these protests have been attended by thousands of people, primarily young students, which is

a fact that impinges on the current discourses about both climate change and climate activism (ibid; Jasikowska & Pałasz, 2022; Kowalska, 2022).

Young people are known to undertake climate activism for a variety of reasons, including to express their politicised social identity, via which they see their role in society as impinging on future climate outcomes, knowledge of environmental threat, and shared responsibility towards the state of the planet (Haugestad et al., 2021). Some researchers have noted that age is a factor in the construction of the image of the 'excused rebel', acting as a justification for risk-taking that activists are known to partake in, such as protests in public places and public demonstration of dissatisfaction with governmental policy-making about climate change (Shah, 2019; De Moor et al., 2021).

Taking this aforementioned into account, the age of the social actors analysed is not of mere accidental importance in the discussion of their discursive representations, for it can be viewed as having a polarising effect on the evaluation of their persons. In fact, this highlights that what is important to the analysis of the way in which right-wing media discourses, more specifically, are harmful to these actors, one may view how their image becomes discursively distorted in the media, thus having an indirect effect on the perception of the goal of climate activism.

1.2. Critical discourse analysis

Although no generally accepted definition of the term *discourse* has been accounted for in the social sciences, including linguistics (Pedersen, 2009), it is understood in doing critical linguistic analyses that discourse is any text (oral or written) that is longer than a sentence and embedded within various contexts, i.e., physical and social ones. The text as constrained by social constituents cannot act or exist without the said context, which moulds it into the ideology-container that critical discourse studies aim to investigate.

Critical discourse analysis (hereafter referred to as CDA) looks in depth at text on the level of its structure within the sociopolitical context in which it has come about, by describing, interpreting, and explaining it (Fairclough, 1995). This process shows the relationship between discourse and existing ideologies, highlighting the fact that while they may look natural or common sense on the surface, they act in manifold ways and almost always contain and express some form of ideology.

CDA attempts to unpack discourses for their underlying ideologies and constructions of power, looking at the 'hidden' meaning behind syntactic structures, lexical choices, metaphorical reference, and intertextual constructs, among others. There is no monolithic approach to critical discourse analysis. It is viewed as a framework of varying methodologies by which one might analyse the ideolog-

ical structures present in language, including that of the representations of social actors, used here in this analysis.
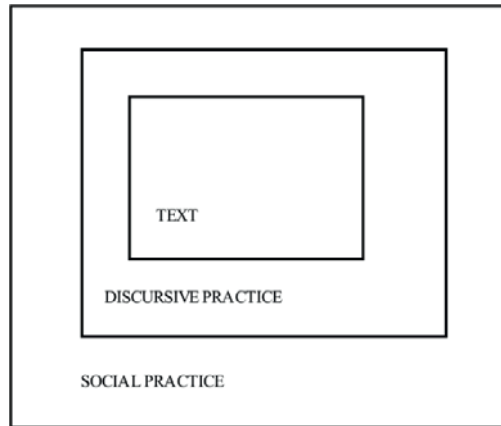

Figure 1. Reproduction of Fairclough's 3D model (1995)

The approach to CDA that is *the representation of social actors* investigates the naming strategies for social actors, their activation and/or passivation, and the verbs patterns in which they are linguistically situated (Van Leeuwen, 1996; 2004). Van Leeuwen's (ibid) theory of the representation of social actors posits that a social semiotic analysis of how individuals and groups are represented can tell an audience or reader more about their identities or ideological representations. Both affective representational portrayals of actors, as well as the ideological status that they are seated in, are seen in his theory as crossing over or overlapping to provide a highly nuanced linguistic means for expressing evaluation through the adherence to such ideologies. The framework provides a window into understanding more fully how inequalities can be constructed through linguistic means and on varying linguistic levels.

The categories used in the presented analysis include the nominal representations of social actors, including the categories of *functionalisation* and *classification identification*, as well as verb processes in which those actors are represented as partaking (Van Leeuwen, 1996). These categories further include the connotations and symbolism behind the discourse used to describe the actors (i.e., young climate activists as described in Polish discourse). The discourse in question in this paper belongs to the sphere of digital discourse (previously known as computer-mediated communication (or CMC), a moniker which has been modified with changes in technology and the use of online media beyond the sphere of just computers) (Bou-Franch & Blitvich, 2018).

2.0. Materials and methods

The discourse analysed was taken from a total of eight online news reports of climate activism from various contexts in the world, including Greta Thunberg's activism in Sweden, the activism of German youth climate strikers, and that of Polish youth climate strikers from all over the country representing the Youth Climate Strike movement. The articles were chosen based on their sources and within the window of a six-year period, around the time that climate activism among youth began to pick up speed. A table of the sources, including the year of their publication, the translated title of the article and the source from which they were taken (i.e., which online media sources) has been provided:

Table 1. Sources and their coding

SOURCE	Year of publication	Article title	CODE
Do Rzeczy	2018	15-year old Swedish girl on strike to draw the attention of politicians to climate change. One of her teachers joined her[1]	DR1
Fronda	2019	Jan Bodakowski: Youth Climate Strike. Sexist slogans and calls for suicide[2]	Fr1
Fronda	2019	Shocking protest signs at the Youth Climate Strike! 'Destroy my pussy, not the planet'[3]	Fr2
Do Rzeczy	2022	'Climacatastrophe!'. 'Climate activists' go crazy in the museum again[4]	DR3
Do Rzeczy	2022	Climate activist – as he calls himself – stuck his head to the glass covering the famous painting *Girl with the Pearl Earring*[5]	DR2

1   Translated from Polish: 15-letnia Szwedka strajkuje, aby zwrócić uwagę polityków na zmiany klimatu. Dołączył do niej jeden z jej nauczycieli.
2   Translated from Polish: Jan Bodakowski: Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny. Seksistowskie hasła i apel o samobójstwa
3   Translated from Polish: Szokujące transparenty na Młodzieżowym Strajku Klimatycznym!, „Zniszcz mi pusie, nie planetę"
4   Translated from Polish: „Klimakatastrophe!". „Aktywiści klimatyczni" znów szaleją w muzeum
5   Translated from Polish: Działacz na rzecz klimatu – jak sam siebie określa – przykleił głowę do szkła zakrywającego słynny obraz „Dziewczyna z perłą".

SOURCE	Year of publication	Article title	CODE
W Gospo-darstwie	2023	These are climate activists. 'Hypocritical double standards'[6]	wG1
Rp.pl	2023	Berlinale: Climate activists stuck themselves to the red carpet[7]	RP1

The study of right-wing representations of actors in the Polish press is not something that is new in the sphere of communication studies, however, as mentioned earlier, the representations of climate activists is a phenomenon that is understudied. In order to carry out such an analysis, with an allowance for systematic work, the framework known as the representations of social actors framework was used to locate the ideologies and power expression present in the discourse on the subject of climate activists.

The analytical CAQDAS (i.e., Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) program MaxQDA was used to look at a total of 10 articles taken from far-right sources in Polish online media. The data was then coded for the representations of social actors that were found in the texts and then underwent a qualitative analysis for what categorisations of linguistic constituents could render. It is important to note that the analysis is a qualitative analysis, and thus investigates the main themes which run through right-wing online news discourses about these activists.

3.0. Discussion

The representations of social actors' approach to discourse is not new; however the investigation of climate activists from this perspective has not yet been undertaken in critical linguistic analyses. This study shows that there are two main categories for the representations of climate activists in media, as described in more conservative media, the first of which is the image of the activist as dangerous, and therefore immoral, and the second of which is the activist as perverse. Both of these images of the activists contribute to the process of their othering, placing them into a frame which defines them against what is categorised as civil disobedience and thus reflective of acting outside of the ramifications of normative behaviour.

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6   Translated from Polish: Oto aktywiści klimatyczni. „Obłudne podwójne standardy"

7   Translated from Polish: Berlinale: Aktywiści klimatyczni przykleili się do czerwonego dywanu

3.1. Representations of the activist

In the articles analysed, the activists are presented as dangerous and irresponsible individuals, harmful to their surroundings, the environment, as well as to cultural values. This is done through the construction of the actors through naming processes, as well as through their description via means of predicatives in clauses. The actor is named in ways that are connotative of radical action or irresponsibility and activated through being agentive in processes that are seen as harmful to society or social values. By activating the actor in juxtaposition with evaluative verbs (i.e., those which have negative connotations) that highlight the deviant nature of their activity, the discourse of the news reports analysed, which are reflective of conservative or right-wing ideologies, places doubt in the goals of the actors and shapes them as dangerous or malicious.

3.1.1. Functionalisation and classification representation of actors

Studies have pointed to an interesting fact regarding the influence of stereotypes of activists on bringing about actual social change, which has an effect on the way that they are discursively represented. As Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 77) note, there is no neutral way to represent a person and that any linguistic choice for their representation draws attention to aspects of their identity. In Van Leeuwen's framework for the analysis of the representations of social actors in discourse, he names, among other categories, classification and functionalisation.

The way that actors are named (i.e., the use of nominal expressions in discursive representations of their persons) not only reveals much regarding the social perception of them from a socio-political perspective, but also about right-wing ideologies on the subject of climate change. In this sense, the negative evaluation of climate change activists is amplified, as their direct association with the destruction of social stability is highlighted.

The following examples show that the negative evaluation of climate activists in such right-wing discourses as the ones analysed is not always direct.

1) Skoro ikona tego ruchu Greta Thunberg słynie z pełnych hipokryzji podróży, to czego się można spodziewać po **młodzieży szukającej rozrywki**?
[*If the icon of the movement, Greta Thunberg, is known for the hypocrisy of her travelling, what can we expect from young people looking for fun?*]

2) **Działacz na rzecz klimatu – jak sam siebie określa** – przykleił głowę do szkła zakrywającego słynny obraz „Dziewczyna z perłą".
[*The climate activist – as he calls himself – glued his head to the glass covering the famous painting 'Girl with the Pearl Earring'*]

3) Histeria **„aktywistów klimatycznych".** Obsypali dzieło sztuki mąką (Do Rzeczy)
[*The histeria of 'climate activists'. They poured flour over a work of art.*]

By referring to them as *young people looking for fun*, they are endowed with the image of not being serious about their overall activist goals, and that it is an excuse, even. Example 2 begins in a seemingly neutral manner, but subsequently places the status of the activist in doubt by undermining the credibility of a young person referring to themselves as an *activist*. By using inverted commas around the term *climate activists* (cf. example 3), the seriousness is taken away from their activism and once again placed in doubt. Among the naming representations for the activists, there were also references to the age of the actors, falling under van Leeuwen's categorisation of classification identification.

4) Demonstracje były złożone z **dzieci**, które po to zwolniono z lekcji, by mogły uczestniczyć w manifestacjach. (Fronda)
[*The demonstrations were made up of children who had been excused from school so that they could participate in the demonstrations.*]

5) Wiele z **dziewczynek**, albo **chłopców** (mających niezdrowe pragnienie seksualne), trzymających plakaty wywiązało pragnienie „posiadania gorącego chłopaka, a nie gorącej planety". (Fronda)
[*Many of the girls, or boys (with unhealthy sexual desires), holding posters exuded a desire to 'have a hot boyfriend, not a hot planet'.*]

The juxtaposition of young people, presented in the discourse of *Fronda* as children rather than teenagers, against acts that portray them as irresponsible or perverse creates an image of dissonance that goes in line with the assumption that left-wing discourses and ideologies have a negative impact on the minds and well-being of young people. The same is true of comments regarding the protest slogans that were criticised by the same media.

3.2. The activist as perverse

Other constructions of the activist include the image of the activist as a perverse figure, and one who is hypersexualised, thus adhering to the idea of the actor as a deviant being. To expand on the previous example, homophobic discourses which present homosexuality as sinful, deviant, or immoral is juxtaposed against the climate sceptical tone of the negative evaluation of youth climate activists (cf. examples 6 and 7).

6) Wiele z **dziewczynek**, albo **chłopców** (**mających niezdrowe pragnienie seksualne**), trzymających plakaty wywiązało pragnienie „posiadania gorącego chłopaka, a nie gorącej planety". (Fronda)
[*Many of the girls, or boys (with unhealthy sexual desires), holding posters exuded a desire to 'have a hot boyfriend, not a hot planet'.*]

7) **Szokujące** transparenty na Młodzieżowym Strajku Klimatycznym!, „Zniszcz mi pusie, nie planetę" (Fronda)
[*Shocking protest signs at the Youth Climate Strike! 'Destroy my pussy, not the planet.'*]

This, as Machin & Mayr (2012, p. 3) have argued, contributes to the conservative discourses on sexuality that 'point to assumptions that a text makes yet which remain implicit,' due to the fact that the ideas communicated in a text are not made directly present. Here, the sexualisation of children, an idea long-critiqued by Poland's Law and Justice party, comes to light in the discourse and is additionally highlighted in connection with youth activism.

The analysis of the representations of social actors has also revealed a category of right-wind discourses about activists as taking the position of viewing activists as criminal, villainous, and malicious in their intent and action (cf. examples 8 and 9).

8) **Wandale** ochoczo zamieszczają nagrania ze swoich **przestępstw** w mediach społecznościowych. Mnóstwo tego typu akcji można zobaczyć m.in. na Twitterze.
[*The vandals eagerly post footage of their crimes on social media.*] (Do Rzeczy)

9) **Eko ekstremiści** od dawna głoszą, że ludzie są zagrożeniem dla planety i by ratować środowisko, trzeba likwidować ludzi. (Do Rzeczy)
[*Eco extremists have long been saying that human beings are a threat to the planet and that in order to save the planet, we should get rid of people.*]

Other negative evaluation in the discourse is presented in *Do Rzeczy*'s representation of the actions undertaken by the climate activists, including vandalism, crime (cf. examples 10 and 11), and the overexaggerated nature of the reactions of activists to climate change, which inadvertently constructs them as mentally unstable (cf. example 12).

10) W ostatnich kilkunastu tygodniach do **aktów wandalizmu** ze strony samozwańczych „aktywistów" dochodzi coraz częściej. (Do Rzeczy)
[*Acts of vandalism by self-proclaimed 'activists' have become increasingly frequent in the past several weeks.*]

11) Wandale ochoczo zamieszczają nagrania ze swoich przestępstw w mediach społecznościowych. (Do Rzeczy)
[*Vandals eagerly post footage of their crimes on social media.*]

12) **Histeria „aktywistów klimatycznych".** Obsypali dzieło sztuki mąką (Do Rzeczy)
[*The histeria of 'climate activists'. They poured flour over a work of art.*]

By representing the activists as vandals, or criminals, rather than risk-takers with a goal in mind (Medoń, 2020), such discourses reproduce the stereotype of the activist as youth that does nothing but create havoc, waste time, and adhere to the stereotypes of youth as lazy, rebellious, and unproductive to society (Telzer et al., 2022). This type of discourse may be viewed through the dichotomy of *us vs. them*, creating structural oppositions that are not explicitly named in the articles themselves, as explained by Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 39). Such discourse carried out a series of actions in consequence, including that it creates a divide between the reader and those criticised by expressing a tone of animosity towards the actor(s) described. This discourse additionally portrays their behaviour as abnormal, which displaces them even further from a normalised culture or what can be seen as acceptable behaviour for youth.

3.2.1. Verb processes in which the actor is involved

Youth climate activists are not only evaluated through naming processes, but also through the verb processes (predicates) they are described in relation to. This takes from MAK Halliday's (1985) framework known as *systemic functional linguistics,* to which the analysis of transitivity belongs, an approach which is widely used

and underlines many critical linguistic analyses (Halliday, ibid; Graham, 2004). In the transitivity system, clauses are analysed based on three main elements: the process, the participants, and the circumstances, similarly to what is described in Van Leeuwen's social actors approach (2004). The process refers to the action or event that is being described, the participants are the entities involved in the action, and the circumstances provide additional information about the action.

The discourse in question poses the actions of the activists by means of activating them in verb processes that contain negative connotation, thus negatively evaluating them. In the collectivised reference to the activists as school children, they are portrayed as irresponsible and wild children who simply do not want to attend school and therefore do not partake (cf. example 13).

13) Uczniowie oczywiście poświęcają się dla klimatu w godzinach nauki, de facto **robiąc sobie wagary**. (Fronda)
[*Of course, school children are sacrificing their time for the climate when they should be in school, they are basically playing hooky*]

14) Para aktywistów klimatycznych, która **przyklejała się** do drogi, **blokując** ruch w obronie środowiska, **poleciała na wakacje** na Bali samolotem. (wGospodarce)
[*The two climate activists who stuck themselves to the road, blocking traffic in the name of saving the environment, have gone to Bali on vacation by plane.*]

The discourse in such media presenting the processes or actions in which the activists partake also construct an image of civil disobedience which goes against acting like a good law-abiding citizen might.

15) Działacz na rzecz klimatu – jak sam siebie określa – **przykleił głowę do szkła** zakrywającego słynny obraz „Dziewczyna z perłą".
[*The climate activist – as he calls himself – glued his head to the glass covering the famous painting 'Girl with the Pearl Earring'*]

16) Zwłaszcza ci, którzy wynoszą się tak wysoko moralnie i **tyranizują blokadami innych z powodu ich prywatnego stylu życia**, powinni w prawdziwym życiu trzymać się ziemi.
[*Especially those who exalt themselves so morally high and bully others with blockades because of their private lifestyles should in real life keep their feet on the ground*] (wGospodarce)

It is worth noting that the presented analysis has shown that there are two main categories of negative evaluation of climate activists as a social group, the first being as young people juxtaposed against sexual impurity. The discourse on the subject of climate activists in the online periodical *Fronda* especially denotes them as perverse individuals, impure and unhealthy in their expression of their perceptions of sexuality.

17) **Dzieci nie zgadzały się z tym, że „grzechem jest oglądać porno, a nie jest grzechem** patrzeć jak planeta jest ruch..a". **Proponowałyby „się ruch.ć nawzajem, a nie ruch.ć planety".** (Fronda)
[*The children disagreed that 'it is a sin to watch porn and it is not a sin to watch the planet fucked over'. They would suggest 'fucking each other, not fucking the planet'.*]

As mentioned earlier, the tone of articles presenting a discourse that consists of structural opposites through the choice of actor representation, and by constructing the activist 'other' as an actor that does not have their own best interests in mind, nor the best interests of the people. Such representations draw on stereotypes of youth activists as adhering to stereotypical rebellious youth behaviour and feeds into the belief that climate activism is part of a leftist agenda and is focused not only on degenerating youth, but also degenerating society and traditionalist values.

3.3. Discourse of climate scepticism hand-in-hand with activist criticism

The discourse analysed does not only display evaluative stances towards the social actors, but also towards climate change as a phenomenon, including climate scepticism. It is important to note that such discourse is not bereft of overt climate scepticism.

18) Przez stolicę oraz inne miasta, w kraju i na świecie, przeszły demonstracje przeciwko **rzekomym zmianom klimatu rzekomo wywołanym przez ludzi**.
[*Demonstrations against alleged human-induced climate change have marched through the capital and other cities, nationally and internationally.*]

Right-wing discourse is known to display attitudes of climate scepticism and is indicative of climate scepticism, as such discourses have been described as adhering to the idea that climate change and activism to raise awareness on the subject is a leftist agenda. This also plays into the indirect framing of the climate activist as an actor who does not contribute productively to society, but rather acts destructively.

4.0. Conclusions

The analysis presented draws attention to the fact that the discursive construction of youth climate strikers and climate strike action reveals more about the ideological construction of climate change action. Not only is climate change discourse problematic on the level of the subject itself, but also the discourses on those acting against climate change and a lack of climate change action.

In line with Halliday's (1985) theory of social semiotics, that words do not take on meaning only by themselves, but also 'as a part of a network of meanings' and that 'vocabulary also makes distinctions between classes of concepts' (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 39), the structural oppositions presented in right-wing discourses reveal attitudes of negative evaluation in news media discourses online by sites such as *Fronda*, *wGospodarce*, *Do Rzeczy*, and *Rp.pl*. This in turn is important to note, as it skews and distort the image of climate activists and their goal in such a way that it takes away from the reason behind their activism and the overall goal, and places emphasis on harmful and destructive action.

The overall representations of the social actors in the discourses analysed represents climate activists negatively, contributing to their negative evaluation both in the way that they are represented as subjects of clauses, as well as in their predicative representations. This takes place through the process of relating them to the extremist actions, negatively connotative verb processes and indirectly speaking of them through the nominalisation of their actions as vandalism or criminal.

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