

***ANALYSING THE DISCOURSE OF  
CLIMATE CHANGE DENIAL***

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## “Ecolinguistics” ?

- For me linguistics is about how human languages(s) work—i.e. Phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics
- Since language is a part of the human brain and behaviour, it is part of the ecosystem – i.e. only in the same way that a human arm, etc. is
- BUT there is no *direct* specific connection between the components and structures of language and the ecosystem

HOWEVER,

- human language enables human cooperation and planning of actions, and linguistically enabled behaviours impact the environment
- enables talk about the environment, benefiting it or not

SO,

This means we are really talking about *discourse* not language per se

**Discourse** can be about all sorts of topics: ecosystems are just one

## Denial in general

**denial:** basic logic: X is not Y, it is not the case that X is/does Y

presupposes: an existing assertion (possibly modalised) of a fact: 'you hurt Y', 'you probably/might have hurt Y', 'CO (probably, possibly, must have...) damaged the atmosphere'

**Denial as a speech act:** use of language viewed as part of social action (not just info)

- **assertions** commit speaker to others taking her to believe what she says.
- **denials:** speaker asserts that some background assertion is not true and commits himself to being taken as believing what he says in social action

## The psychological explanation of denial:

- a lot of work in psychoanalysis/therapy has been done and may be useful in thinking about cc denial, provided we extend beyond *individual* denier personalities and see them as in some reflecting more *collective* mindsets
- Why people do denial
  - to remove mental representation of facts/possibilities that are threatening to self (interests, esteem, identity, cognitive consistency, etc...)
  - to protect self from charges of destroying, injuring, abusing and manipulating other people or things such charges can come from others or from self

(Note: also to hide self harming self.)

## **Denial and language**

- Largely unconscious but communicated and enacted via language—choice of words, grammar, type of verbal interaction (speech acts, interventions, turns)
- This means we can analyse the actual words that constitute ‘denial’ in the sense we are using the term

## **Types of linguistically mediated denial**

- Grammatical structures of negation along with their verbs:  
e.g. No!, That’s not true, It is not the case that, X is not Y, Rubbish!, It is incorrect to say that...
- Epistemic modals – in all languages, they allow non-binary expressions (instead of black and white either true or false), lets you express degrees of possibility, lets you talk hypothetically, etc.

## **Connecting psychological denial types with linguistic expressions in discourse**

*The following are sifted from the psycho literature ...*

## AFFECTIVE, PSYCHOSOCIAL AND COGNITIVE MECHANISMS

- **Denial of existence , agency , causation and action**
- Lying: 'I did not do it' (knowing that I did)
- accuse the accuser of lying: 'You're lying', or lacking evidence: 'you've no proof', etc.
- Can be conscious lying, i.e. holding in mind one true proposition but expressing its negation
- Can be a proposition not in mind at utterance time—various complexities attached to fear and self-interests, etc.
  - leaving out unwanted details
  - falsely agree another's statement by changing it in some way
  - falsely agree to perform some action (with no intention of doing it)
  - Deny causation: deny X causes/can cause Y.... Close to denial of self-agency
- **Denial of responsibility**
- This form of denial involves avoiding personal (or collective) responsibility by:
  - **blaming**: shifting culpability from self to another person: 'I blame the boss myself'
  - The 'Nuremberg defence: 'I just followed orders', 'it's my job'
  - **minimizing**: an attempt to make the effects or results of an action appear to be less harmful than they may actually be, or
  - **justifying**: when someone takes a choice and attempts to make that choice look okay due to their perception of what is "right" in a situation.
  - shifting **attention** away from topic (element of it) or form (collective) self.

- **denial of effect**  
avoid attention to, or deny, harm caused by (collective) self to others by avoiding linguistic focus on an event or using linguistic mitigators
  - this of denial concerns *effect* (denial of responsibility and agency concerns *cause*), e.g. ‘It didn’t really hurt her’, ‘the damage is only slight’
  - benefit to denier: neutralises feelings of spontaneous empathy e.g. ‘it’s not something we need worry about’, ‘they’ll get over it’

## **DENIAL BY REFRAMING**

- **Assert alternative explanation of event**  
An explanation frame in which *cause* or *agent* slot is
  - not filled: ‘it just happened’, ‘these things happen’,
  - filled by some other person than self: ‘it was him that did it not me’
  - some non-human agency, e.g. ‘it’s a natural process’, ‘weather is caused by natural cycles’
- **Assert distracting frame**  
An alternative possible related frame that ‘frames’ the event in a different conceptual structure: could be almost anything...
- **Assert priority frame**  
The event or topic in question is not important, or is less important than some preferred frame. Includes asserting urgency of new frame: e.g. ‘That is irrelevant, what is important is...’

- **Change epistemic frame**
  - Change epistemic status of proposition(s) at issue
  - All sentences are framed in a conventional **epistemic value** in a context...e.g. science mode, fictional stories, gossip, truth claim, highly probable on evidence, hypothesising, speculating, fantasy, irrational talk ('madness'), etc...
  - Often but not always signalled by **modal verbs and adverbs**: X does Y...X must be doing Y...X might do Y...X might do Y...X possibly does Y...X probably does Y, on the evidence it looks like X is doing Y
  - **Epistemic frame-change** is exactly what deniers do: (a) assert that others are using the wrong epistemic frame and/or (b) assert their own epistemic frame

I've so far focussed on psychological motivations -- but

Quite often cc denials could be simple ignorance or lack of education...

One such type would might call **narrow epistemic frame** – in which there is simply a mind that

- does not have a science hypothetico-deductive frame...
- But only a binary true-false epistemic frame
- or only activates the narrow frame for self-interest in certain contexts

# **BBC Radio 4 Today 13 Feb 14**

13/02/2014

Sir Brian Hoskins: Head of the Grantham Institute for Climate Change

Lord Lawson:

Justin Webb: Presenter, BBC Radio 4 Today programme



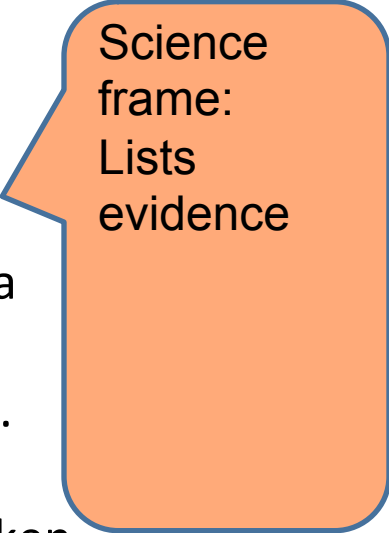
**Justin Webb:** Is there a link, er Sir Brian, between the rain that we have seen falling, in recent days, and global warming?

**Brian Hoskins:** There's no simple link - we **can't say "Yes" or "No"**, this is climate change". **However, there's a number of reasons to think that** such events are now ... **more likely**. And one of those is that a warmer atmosphere that we have can contain more water vapour, and so a storm can wring that water vapour out of the atmosphere. And we're seeing more heavy rainfall events around the world, and **certainly** we've seen those, here.

**Justin Webb:** So it's the heavy rainfall, it's the severity of the event that points us in this direction?

**Brian Hoskins:** Well, in this event, we've had severe rainfall but we've also had persistence, and that's where I say: **we just don't know** whether the persistence of this event is due to climate change **or not**. But the oth...another aspect is sea-level rise, that the em sea level has risen about 20 centimetres, over the 20th century, and is continuing to rise, as (a)s the system warms, and that of course makes damage in the coastal region that much greater, when we get to some event there.

Science  
frame:  
Modals,  
evidence  
Scientific  
scepticism



Science  
frame:  
Lists  
evidence

- **Justin Webb:** But can a **reasonable person**, possessed of the evidence, as it is known to us at the moment, say "Look at the rain that we've had recently", and say "Look, I do *not* believe that the evidence exists, that links that rain to global warming"?
- **Brian Hoskins:** I think ... the **reasonable person** should look at this event, they should look at extremes around the world, the general rise in temperature that's well recorded, the reduction in Arctic sea ice, the rise in sea level, the number of extreme rainfall events around the world, the number of extreme events that we've had ... we've had persistent droughts, we've had floods ... and we've had cold spells and very warm spells. The number of records being broken is just that much greater.
- **Justin Webb:** Lord Lawson, it's joining the dots, isn't it?

• **Nigel Lawson:** Now I think that Sir Brian is right on a number of points. He's right, first of all, that nobody knows. Err... certainly it is not the case, of course, that this rainfall is due to to .... t global warming, the question is whether it is marginally... global warming is marginally exace pated. He's righ(t), and nobody knows that. Though, the he's right, too, to say that you have to look at the global picture. And, contrary to what he may have implied, in fact, people who have done studies show that there has been no ... globally, there has been no increase in extreme weather events. For example, tropical storms, which are:...er praps the most dramatic er form of weather events there's been, er in the past year there has been an unusually quiet year for tropical storms. And again, going back to the "nobody knows", only a couple of months ago the Met Office were recasting that this would be an unusly dry winter ... so

• **Justin Webb:** Do you accept that, Sir Brian? Just on that point that important point about the global picture. Do you accept, Sir Brian, we have actually seen the kind of extreme weather that we might have expected?

Denial by false agreement  
Black-white thinking  
right/wrong,  
asserts right to  
epistemically judge

Distorts the scientific sceptic frame, obscures evidence-based, probability-based rationality

Deny effect: minimisation

Denial by false agreement and leaving out unwanted details:  
Distorts science frame, evidence, citing only one example and not giving sources

- **Brian Hoskins:** I think we've we have seen these heavy rainfall events around the world. We've seen a number of places breaking records - Australia, with the temperatures in Australia going to new levels, erm.
- **Justin Webb:** Trouble is, we report those, and we're interested in them. There is an effect, isn't there, that is possibly an obfuscatory effect, actually, on the real picture, and you accept that that might be the case.
- **Brian Hoskins:** Absolutely, and we have to be very careful to not say "Oh, there's records everywhere, therefore climate is changing". But we're very sure that the temperature's risen by about 0.8 degrees, the Arctic sea ice has reached a minimum level in the summer, which hasn't been seen for a very very long time, the Greenland ice sheet and the West Antarctic ice sheet have been measured to be decreasing. There's all the signs that we are changing this climate system. Now as we do this, as the system warms, it doesn't just warm uniformly. The temperature changes by different amounts in different regions. And that means the weather that feeds off those temperature contrasts is changing and will change it's not just a nnn smooth change, it's a change in the weather, it's a change in regional climate we can expect.

• **Justin Webb:** Lord Lawson?

• **Nigel Lawson:** Yeah er / think we want to focus, not on er this *extremely speculative and uncertain area* I don't blame the climate scientists for not knowing. It is climate and weather is quite extraordinarily complex, and this is a very new form of science (and) all I blame them for is pretending they know when they don't. But w anyhow, what we want to focus on is what we're going to do. And I think this is a warning-up call. We need to abandon this *crazy and costly* policy of spending untold millions on ... littering the countryside with *useless* wind turbines and solar panels, and moving from a sensible energy policy of of having cheap and reliable forms of energy to a ... policy of having unreliable and costly energy [inaud intervention for JW] we up that what we want to focus on ... it's very important ... is making sure this country is really *robust* and *robust* to whatever nature throws at us, whether there's a climate change or not

Change frame:  
distract, substitute

Shift epistemic frame, distort science frame

Shift epistemic frame, distort science frame

Insert blame frame...  
Accuses other of 'pretend' (denial by accusation of lying), brings in black/white, binary mode

whether there's a climate element or not heh er water storage, when it's there's calmness

**Justin Webb:** surely the wise thing though can I can I just put this to you...

**NL** flood defences, sea defences that's what we want to focus on.

**JW** ... can I just put this to you though: if there is a chance - and some people would say there is a strong chance - that global warming, man-made global warming, exists and is having an impact on us, doesn't it make sense, whether or not you believe that that is a 95% chance or a 50% chance or whatever, does it not make sense to take care to try to avoid the kind of emissions that may be contributing to it? er I mean ddd ... what could be wrong with doing that?

**Nigel Lawson:** ... Look ... er...everything er heh ...the ... first of all ... er er even if there is warming - and there's been no recorded warming over the past er [audible breath]15, 16, 17 years ...but even if there

**Justin Webb:** Well, that that's ... yeah, there is a lot of controversy about that

**Nigel Lawson:** no, there's not that's a fact that is accepted even by the IPCC.

**Justin Webb:** no, no n... well no measured warming, but... well, all right -

**Nigel Lawson:** No measured warming No measured warming, exactly, well, that's ...

**Justin Webb:** We'll get back to that.

**Nigel Lawson:** well that measurement's actually not unimportant.

[m...voice in background, JW?] The ... but ... what - even if there is some problem, it is not able to affect any of the dangers, except marginally. What we want to do is to focus on dealing with the problems that there *are*, with climate ... which there are of drought and floods, and so on. These have happened in the past - they're not new. And as for emissions, this country is responsible for less than 2% of global emissions. Even if we cut our emissions to zero - which would put us back to the, sort of, pre-Industrial Revolution, and the poverty that that [inaudible] - even if we reduced and did that, it would be outweighed by the amount of the Chinese, China's emissions increase, in a single year. So it is absolutely *crazy*, this policy,

it cannot make sense at all

**Justin Webb:** Sir Brian?

Sir Brian?

**Brian Hoskins:** I think we have to do - to learn two lessons from this. The first one is that by increasing the greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide, to levels we've not seen for millions of years on this planet, we're performing a very risky experiment ... and we're pretty confident that that means - if we go on like we are - that temperatures are going to rise somewhere 3 to 5 degrees by the end of this century, sea levels up to half to one metre rise

**Justin Webb:** Lord Lawson was saying there, there has been a pause, which you hear a lot about - a pause in what, 10, 15 years, in measured rising of temperature. That is the case, isn't it?

**Brian Hoskins:** It hasn't risen much, over the last 10 to 15 years, if you measure the climate from the globally averaged surface temperature. But during that time, the excess energy has still been absorbed by the climate system, and being absorbed by the oceans, which are warming up.

**Justin Webb:** so it's there, somewhere.

**Brian Hoskins:** Oh yes, it's there in the oceans and that is and the oceans