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Anders Horsbøl

# Discourse and the Environment: Complexity, Conflicts, and Crises

**Abstract:** The environment has become a salient issue in many public arenas, articulating a sense of concern or worry for the degradation of our natural environment and living conditions, caused by human activity. Discursively speaking, the environment has emerged as an umbrella term for issues such as ›air and water pollution‹, ›biodiversity‹, ›waste management‹, ›nuclear energy‹, ›organic farming‹, ›wildlife protection‹, and ›climate change‹. This article presents some suggestions for approaching the environment from a discourse studies perspective, concentrating on three issues: The complexity of the environment as a discursive phenomenon, conflicts between diverging environmental concerns, and »polycrisis« as a societal condition for environmental crises.

Keywords: Discourse studies, environment, green conflicts, polycrisis, climate crisis, complexity

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Umwelt ist zu einem wichtigen Thema öffentlicher Diskussionen geworden, in denen Besorgnis über die menschliche Zerstörung von Natur und Lebensbedingungen artikuliert wird. Diskursiv betrachtet fungiert ›Umwelt‹ zunehmend als ein Sammelbegriff und Bezugspunkt für Themen wie ›Luft- und Wasserverschmutzung‹, ›Biodiversität‹, ›Umgang mit Müll‹, ›Atomkraft‹, ›biologische Landwirtschaft‹, ›Wildtierschutz‹ und ›Klimawandel‹. Dieser Artikel skizziert Möglichkeiten sich der Untersuchung von Umweltdiskursen und -thematiken aus einer diskursanalytischen Perspektive zu nähern. Drei begrifflich-konzeptionelle Schwerpunkte werden hierbei verfolgt: Die Komplexität von Umwelt als diskursives Phänomen, Konflikte zwischen konfligierenden Umweltsorgen und -interessen, sowie das Konzept der »Polykrise« als erweiterter Rahmen für Diskursanalysen von Umwelt- und Klimakrisen.

Schlagwörter: Diskursforschung, Umwelt, Umweltkonflikte, Polykrise, Umweltkrise, Komplexität

## 1 Introduction

In the »Handbook of Discourse Analysis« (Tannen et al., 2015), there is no chapter on »environmental discourse« or on »discourse and the environment«. In fact, ›environment‹ is not even a term in the subject index. Neither are ›nature‹, ›ecology‹, ›sustainability‹ or ›climate‹. The same goes for »The Cambridge Handbook of Discourse Studies« (De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2020). This may seem somewhat surprising, given the material importance and societal prominence of climate change and ecological degradation.

The following piece is not a substitute for such a chapter, but presents some suggestions for a discourse studies approach to the environment. I shall concentrate on three points: The *complexity* of the environment as a discursive phenomenon, *conflicts* between environmental concerns, and »*polycrisis*« as a societal condition for environmental crises.

## 2 Complexity

The environment has emerged as a discursive phenomenon in the public debate over, at least, the last 60 years. Not as ›the environment‹ per se, but as a range of different issues, for which the environment has come to be an umbrella term. An incomplete list of issues could include: insecticides in agriculture (cf. Rachel Carson's famous book »Silent Spring« Carson 1962 ); acid rain and the fear of ›Waldsterben‹; the ozone hole; nuclear energy, not least concerning the incidents of the Three Mile Island (USA, 1979), Chernobyl (The Soviet Union, 1986), and Fukushima (Japan, 2011); biodiversity and the loss of species; protection of wildlife; air and water pollution; organic food; waste and waste management; and, of course, climate change. Across these issues, societal movements such as the rise of ›green‹ political parties and NGOs fighting for aspects of the environment (from WWF to Fridays For Future), increasing media coverage and political attention, the formation of new scholarly fields, not least the interdisciplinary field of »environmental communication« (Comfort/Park 2018) have contributed to the discursive emergence of the environment and resulted in new nodal points such as ›sustainability‹ and ›green transition‹.

A common thread in these issues and notions seems to be a concern and sense of worry for the impact of human technologies and activities on ›nature‹ or our ›natural‹ environment. Thereby, nature or the environment is thematized as fragile, degraded, or at risk, due to human activity. In that sense, » [g]reen thinking is a creation of the industrial revolution«, as Giddens (2009, p. 50) succinctly puts it.

However, the environmental issues each have their own historical trajectories and cannot simply be derived from one semantic core. They represent a plural and dispersed descent, a »Herkunft«, rather than a single origin, a »Ursprung«, to rephrase Foucault's genealogical interpretation of Nietzsche (Foucault 1977). Thus, the meaning of notions like environment or nature differs and evolves from context to context, and it is an idle project to try and fixate it.

This may seem annoying if one is looking for the true meaning of the environment, sustainability, or green transition. But that, in my view, is and should not be the approach of the discourse scholar. For discourse studies, the variations in meaning of the environment, ranging from wildlife protection to climate justice, the transformations from one context to another, and the tensions, struggles and negotiations in new situations, are not obstacles for identifying a true essence, but rich objects of study. Due to its fundamental interest in struggles over and negotiations meaning, discourse studies – including Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault 1969), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2010; Reisigl/Wodak 2009), Discourse Theory (Laclau/Mouffe 1985), Nexus Analysis (Scollon 2001), and the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (Keller 2011) – are well suited to explore the complexity of the environment as a societal phenomenon. ›Green‹ is a metaphor, and discourse studies can help us explore what the metaphor stands for, and how we live by it.

### 3 Conflicts

As indicated, thinking about the environment is born in opposition to industrial ways of production and consumption. Thus, conflicts between economic interests and environmental concerns have been pivotal in the history of environmental communication. This will probably continue, but at the same time, new forms of environmental conflicts are likely to increase. Over the last decade or so, conflicts between different environmental concerns seem to be on the rise. Often, these »green versus green« (Neri et al. 2019) or simply »green conflicts« (Horsbøl 2020; Eskjær/Horsbøl 2023) appear not least around sites planned for construction of renewable energy plants, such as wind turbines (Warren et al. 2005; Rudolph 2014), solar parks (Roddis et al. 2020), or hydroelectricity plants (Carvalho et al. 2019). In their study of wind turbine controversies, Warren et al. (2005, p. 853) identifies »a new kind of environmental controversy which divides environmentalists of different persuasions«, where »there are strong ›green‹ arguments on both sides of the debate« (ibid., p. 854). Similarly, in a study of controversies over a tidal power plant in South Korea, Ko et al. anticipate that »[t]his war over ›green‹ concepts will occur more and more around the world in the twenty-first century« (Ko et al. 2011, p. 15).

Climate change is a main driver for the green conflicts since concerns for climate mitigation or adaption are often juxtaposed with concerns for local landscape and natural habitats. Climate concerns also play a role in renewed discussions of nuclear energy, for instance reflected in the recent (2022) European Union decision to include nuclear power in its taxonomy of climate-friendly energy. Here, it is argued that the environmental risk of nuclear energy is outweighed by the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>-emission, at least for the current transition phase. But the discussion on nuclear energy also involves clashes between different climate concerns; for instance, the argument is made that new nuclear plants take too long to construct, for which reason they do not suffice to reduce CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions significantly within the next 10-20 years to meet the urgent reduction goals of the Paris Agreement. In this line of argument, the green conflict takes the form of a juxtaposition of two climate concerns at different timescales (CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in 20 years versus right now). Similarly, clashes between climate change mitigation and adaption measures represent green conflicts we may expect to see more of in the future. In the best of all worlds, we would do a maximum on both, but in the real world, priorities need to be made. But how? By which arguments, drawing on which concepts, and legitimated by which forms of knowledge? These are obvious questions for discourse studies to pursue.

However, the green conflicts are not limited to energy or climate change issues. Other areas are colliding understandings and valuations of nature and the ways in which human beings can protect and further nature. One such instance is rewilding, where ideas of restoring green areas to a former, more ›natural‹ state, less dependent on the intervention of human beings, clash with modern ideals of animal well-being, in particular for domesticated species like cattle and horses. These debates can be both emotionally charged and involve different forms of professional knowledge (e.g. from veterinarians and biologists), invested on each side of the conflict line. Here, as with the placement of renewable energy plants, different environmental concerns make out the crux of the conflict.

Existing research at the intersection of environmental issues and discourse studies has identified a variety of discourses of the environment and provided conceptual overview across societal fields and practices. For example, in his seminal book on »The Politics of the Earth«, Dryzek (2005) presents a matrix combining reformist versus radical, and prosaic versus imaginative approaches to the environment. On that basis, Dryzek identifies four main discourses with several subcategories; discourses of problem solving, sustainability, survivalism and green radicalism. It is an open question how the emerging green conflicts relate to these discourses, but at a first glance, they do not seem to fit well into the existing boxes. For example, arguments on both sides in the green conflicts may pertain to a reformist discourse of green growth as well as to a discourse of radical change. Thus, to investigate whether the green conflicts usher in new discourses of the environment, structured around other main distinctions than +/- green growth, or whether they mainly represent statements within the existing map of discourses, is to be answered by future discourse studies. Studies of co-articulation between green conflicts and concerns for climate justice, which seem less integrated in Dryzek's overview of environmental discourses, would also be an interesting venture.

Discourse studies offers – within and across the various approaches – a wide range of analytical methods. Consequently, it is important in every specific discourse study to select relevant and promising analytical grips. But which grips – if any – are particularly suited for investigating green conflicts? This question can by no means be answered in an exhaustive manner yet, but some preliminary pathways can be suggested.

First, the notion of »*topoi*« is a suitable way for both mapping the main concerns and the argumentative repertoire in the controversies as well as for zooming in on the inner machinery of individual arguments (Horsbøl 2020). The scholarly tradition of studying *topoi* is rich and diverse, including rhetoric, argumentation theory, literary studies, and discourse analysis, for the latter not least the Discourse Historical Approach (Reisigl/Wodak 2009, see also criticism by Žagar 2010). Most promising seems to me an inductive approach, which does not start from an a-historical catalogue of *topoi*, but discovers *topoi* by way of a bottom-up reading of the analyzed texts. Such an approach could profit theoretically from the four *topos*-dimensions suggested by Bornscheuer (1976): »habituality«, »potentiality«, »intentionality« and »symbolicity« [German: »Habitualität«, »Potentialität«, »Intentionalität«, »Symbolizität«]. Empirically, a topical analysis may indicate that green conflicts, in practice, are not only about conflicting green issues, but tend to be overlaid with other concerns, including economy, job, health and so on. In such messy terrain, the topical analysis can help sort out both the connections and hierarchies between the occurring *topoi*.

Second, an appropriate analytical lens is the notion of *scalation in time and space*. Thus, central to the green controversies is the timescale (Lemke 2000) and the spatial scale into which the controversy is situated. This scalation is not to be understood as an immanent feature of the conflict, but as an effect of its discursive articulation. Thus, issues can be articulated as pertaining to a specific locality, as consequential for other areas as well, or as of global nature. And they can be articulated as processes at a relatively shorter timescale (for instance as a municipal decision process concerning energy plants), or coupled

to processes at longer timescale (i.e. climate change or loss of species). As indicated, this place- and time-scalation is a discursive action and decisive for the framing of green conflicts.

Third, the green controversies are not just about arguments and their warrants, but also about knowledge and representation of knowledge. In that sense, they are »*epistemic struggles*«; concerning what counts as evidence, how knowledge claims are presented, and which forms of knowledge are seen as legitimate. Key issues here are ways of measuring, visualizing and documenting the environment, including future effects of planned interventions. Equally central are (power) relations between academic knowledge stemming from the natural sciences, economy, history, law etc.; knowledge related to specific professions; and tacit or ›lay‹ knowledge. These epistemic struggles play out in different arenas, and the role of the news media and of social network sites in mediating the struggles, giving voice or not, and recontextualizing from one arena to another, is worthy of a discourse analysis or two.

Fourth, studies of »*subject positions*« or »*social identities*« could yield interesting results. A good starting point is the observation that subject positions in the controversies cannot simply be derived from actor categories. On the contrary, academic experts and NGO-representatives appear on both sides of the green conflicts, for instance in debates about nuclear power or about placement of wind turbines (Eskjær/Horsbøl 2023). This calls for a nuanced discourse analysis to identify subject positions from within the statements of the debate and to draw a positional map, which may differ from existing political conflict lines. Moreover, such a study would profit from paying attention to the »*dialogicity*« (Linell 2009) of the controversies, i.e. the ways in which the opponents respond to and discursively position each other. An example from the wind turbine debate is the positioning – by some pro-voices – of opposing citizens as driven by a NIMBY-logic (not-in-my-backyard), i.e. as selfish and hypocritical, and the positioning – by some con-voices – of the wind turbine providers as a multinational industry, absorbed in making money with zero respect for local communities.

## 4 Crises

As mentioned in the introduction, to articulate the environment has been synonymous to voicing concerns and worries for the degradation of nature and the living conditions of humans and other species. Therefore, it is no surprise that notions of crisis are common in the articulation of the environment, not least references to the ›climate crisis‹ or the ›biodiversity crisis‹. A discourse approach to environmental crises would fundamentally imply to study how the crises are discursively constructed, i.e. how they come to mean something by means of language, images, music, and other signs. Importantly, this does not imply that environmental crises have no material basis and are simply discursively invented, but that they must enter language and other sign systems to achieve a recognizable form in the social realm. How this happens, by articulations from scientists, politicians, activists, ›ordinary‹ citizens, journalists, technicians, businesses, and others, is an object of study for discourse studies.

In addressing these issues, discourse scholars may of course find inspiration in theories of crisis construction, management, and communication (see also the anthology by De Rycker/Modh (2013) on discourse and crisis). They may study how the climate or biodiversity crisis emerges discursively »due to the fact that different groups, interested parties, and institutions perceive and experience it as a crisis« (Falkheimer/Heide 2010, p. 514). Or they may study the climate or biodiversity crisis as »dislocations«, which »disrupt and destabilize orders of meaning« (Hajer 2009, p. 73) with the effect that »political or institutional authority becomes unhinged« (ibid., p. 5). An analytical framework for investigating such dislocation responses could include the following set of questions: a) how is the nature of the crisis understood (causes, effects, severity, ramifications); b) how is action to address the crisis articulated and argued (alternatives, consequences, actors, agency); c) how are different voices represented (inclusion, exclusion, positioning); and d) how is the crisis response staged (media, genres, places, material artefacts).

However, it is important to acknowledge that the climate crisis, or the biodiversity crisis, is one among a larger list of recent crises that have found their way into the public debate. Among these are the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy supply crisis, the refugee or migration crisis, and perhaps a crisis of democracy, to mention some examples from a European perspective. The notion of »*polycrisis*« (Janzwood/Homer-Dixon 2022), emphasizing the co-existence of multiple and partly overlapping *crises*, is a fitting term to characterize this societal and discursive situation. Whereas studies of crisis communication tend to be exactly about a *crisis*, i.e. focusing on articulation of, and responses to, one particular crisis, there is a need for studies of crises communication, i.e. for addressing the simultaneous representation and handling of multiple crises, competing for our limited attention. This implies that discourse studies of environmental crises are well advised to take into consideration how these environmental crises are *co-articulated* with other crises (of democracy, poverty, or security and so on), including how causal relations between crises are represented, and how the crises are ranked in terms of importance. In addition, it would be fruitful to include comparative studies (as common among scholars of SKAD) of how the co-articulation of crises differs between countries, arenas, actors, and societal fields. Overall, this polycrisis perspective does not require a completely new framework, but adds a new layer – and yet more complexity – to the discursive study of environmental crises.

## 5 Closing remarks

The above suggestions for a discourse studies approach to the environment are of course not exhaustive. To mention just one omission, I thought about including »collaboration« in the list of issues, but decided against it, since it would break the tricolon of the subtitle. However, there will be no effective action on environmental crises without collaboration, and discourse studies can contribute by exploring how ideas for collaboration are envisioned, discussed, and practiced. In that sense, a counterpoint to this article could be titled »Discourse and the environment: collaboration, creativity, and care«. Maybe for another issue of »*Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung*«.

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