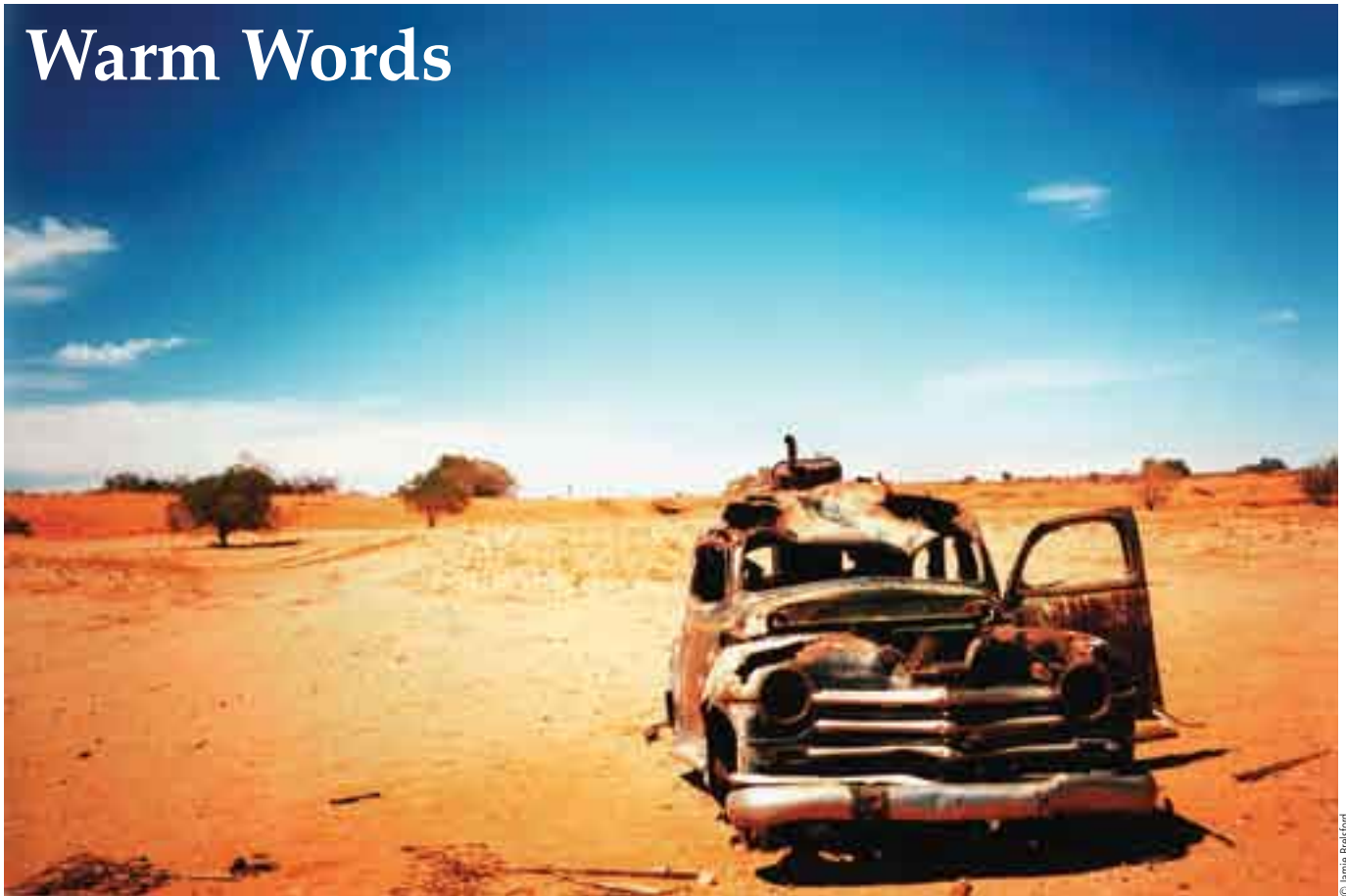


Warm Words



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In a recent report, the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) looked at the way the media presents climate change. Simon Hodgson argues that there's a bigger game afoot.

Are you a climate change optimist? Do you think it will all come out right in the end? Perhaps you trust in human ingenuity, or maybe you think the problem isn't as bad as it's painted.

Or are you a pessimist? Our grandchildren are doomed to pre-civilised conditions, reduced to hunter-gatherer groups in a feudal world. Or even greater catastrophe awaits with the planet ravaged by firestorms and no recognisable life remaining at all.

I was asked this question recently and it really made me think. Which am I? Optimist or pessimist? And as I chewed it over, I began to consider the tribalism that has entered climate change politics. You see, I realised that behind the question was another: to which tribe do I belong? Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Are we the same in our views?

So it was with a sense of something clicking into place that I read the fascinating Warm Words II – a summary of research commissioned by the IPPR and the Energy Saving Trust. Using the techniques of 'discourse analysis and semiotics' (no, I didn't either) the researchers have forensically dissected the coverage of climate change in the popular media during the first half of 2007. And in doing so, they have been able to identify a number of 'repertoires' which they describe as "routinely used systems of language ... [with] distinctive lexicons, sets of grammatical or stylistic features, particular images, metaphors, idioms, stories and categories".

With me so far? Well, the whole thing makes much more

sense in practical terms. Take for instance one of the dominant repertoires that they find: 'Alarmism'. "We should be scared stiff," says this repertoire, going on to pepper its prose with the language of catastrophe and often borrowing heavily from cinematic, apocalyptic imagery. For example, alarmist articles talk about "hurricanes and floods" not changing weather patterns, scientists are "concerned" or "worried" not discoverers after sober fact. And so on.

Or consider another: the 'Small Actions' repertoire. In this mode we are all exhorted to "do our bit for the planet". "Just turning down the thermostat by a single degree," says the Small Actions article, "can help defeat climate change." Such suggestions are often accompanied by little dolls' house graphics, pointing out where we can put a hippo in our upstairs loo, or site the compost bin.

These are just two of many. Warm Words goes on to highlight 'Establishment techno-optimism' (think George W Bush), 'Settlerdom' (an appeal to basic homely style and common sense – Kelvin MacKenzie asking "How do our green chums explain going from global warming to global pi**ing in six months? Could it just be something called the weather?") and my personal favourite 'British Comic Nihilism' which the authors précis to "oh bugger it and open another bottle". It really is worth a read if only for its dry humour. You can get a copy at www.ippr.org

But – says the scientist in me – what kind of categorisation system is this, with no defined boundaries and all kinds of overlaps? Well, argues the report, this is precisely the point. This is a 'discourse in tension'. The repertoires contradict each other.

Hodgson's Choice

"Relax," says one, "it'll all be fine." "Panic!" says another. It's no wonder the public is confused. This is mixed messaging on a grand scale, and not just in its content. It's not so much that the press is full of articles denying the existence of anthropogenic climate change – they seem to have gone away (more of that later). It's more that the tone of voice is so inconsistent that readers are lost at an emotional rather than a factual level.

Take, for instance, the clash between the two repertoires above. The Alarmist portrays the planet as poised on the brink of catastrophe, about to plunge imminently into disaster. Yet the Small Actions answer is to don an extra woolly and tweak the thermostat. There's a mismatch of scale here: if the problem's that big, how will this help? At an even deeper level there's an attack on our agency. Being told of crisis on an unimaginable scale makes us feel small, hopeless and powerless – and the Small Actions repertoire just reinforces that. Let me quote directly from Warm Words II: "For example, on the publication of Mark Lynas's *Six Degrees*, the cover of the Sunday Times Magazine featured a photorealistic graphic of the UK reduced to a desert archipelago. Inside, a further graphic, illustrating the likely effects of the eponymous six-degree rise in global temperatures, promised 'apocalyptic storms, flash floods, hydrogen sulphide gas and methane fireballs racing across the globe with the power of atomic bombs'. 'Only fungi,' it concluded, 'survive' (Girling 2007). It is hard to follow that with the recommendation to change to low-energy light bulbs." Precisely.

Now, without getting too recursive on you (I am, after all, writing about writing about writing) I could be in danger of falling into one of these repertoires myself. "What chance," I could say, "does the woman on the street have to chart a course through this, if they are being so thoroughly confused?" I'm sure it's only a small step from that to British Comic Nihilism. But there is hope. The research is a repeat of a similar exercise done a year ago, and the report finds two very interesting changes.

Gone are the deniers, or at least, pushed into the margins as most of the repertoires are beginning to pool into a loose consensus around the existence of a problem and a need to act. The differences are all about how bad, how fast, and how. This emergent consensus has happened reassuringly quickly.

Secondly, the report's authors are clearly excited by a rise in the number of articles strengthening our agency by banding us together. Addressed as communities, they argue, we can feel powerful in a way that as individuals we can't. We can see the local hydro plant, and understand how it powers the council offices next door. The problem and the solution are on the same scale. We feel encouraged, and we act. Even more powerfully – for the Facebook, Wiki- and blogging generation at least – we open up peer networks: the problem might be global, the national media might be focused on the headlines, but the solution is local and my mates and I are the co-conspirators who are going to do something about it.

So, which am I in, the optimist tribe or the pessimist? Neither: I'm a fatalist. Problems come (and this is a big one) and people and societies respond, reorganise and re-invent themselves. Not without pain, and accompanied by major change, I admit. But we live today in a world unrecognisable to people even one hundred years ago. And no global government masterminded the transition – it just happened as billions of ordinary people took trillions of decisions in a system of unimaginable complexity. And here's the paradox: most environmental campaigns push for orthodoxy. "Believe this!" they say, "Think and act like me. Know what I know and you'll do what I do." Wrong. Tackling climate change is going to need all the magnificent diversity of human nature. Even Jeremy Clarkson has a part to play. Long live the tribes.

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