

ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN GRETA THUNBERG'S 2019 CLIMATE ACTION SUMMIT SPEECH

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Abstract. The climate crisis is no longer a distant concern; it is a pressing and urgent reality. In 2023 alone, the world witnessed a series of catastrophic climate-related events, including the deadly wildfires on Maui, a devastating earthquake in Istanbul, and the relentless monsoons in Malaysia that wiped out thousands of homes in mere hours. These events are not isolated occurrences but rather indicative of a broader, escalating pattern driven by climate change. In recent years, youth activism has gained significant momentum, with young leaders advocating for a range of pressing global issues. Prominent youth activists such as Greta Thunberg have become a symbol of youth leadership. Despite her young age, she has garnered international attention due to her courage to speak out on environmental issues. Taking leadership from the perspective of interactional sociolinguistics, this study discusses the enactment of transformational leadership by Thunberg by analysing the speech delivered by Thunberg at 2019 Climate Action Summit, New York. The analysis reveals that Thunberg embodies the four characteristics of transformational leadership, including individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, idealised influence, and intellectual stimulation. She enacts these through reflecting on her public speaking strategy, suggesting means for implementation and utilising metaphor to showcase her intellectual stimulation in her speech. This research contributes to the growing discourse on youth-led activism and demonstrates that leadership is defined not by age, but by the impact one can make.

Keywords: youth activist, youth-led activism, leadership discourse, Greta Thunberg, climate change

Introduction

The climate crisis is no longer a distant concern; it is a pressing and urgent reality. The recent January 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles County, which devastated 37,000 acres across the Greater Los Angeles area and Southern California, serve as a stark reminder of the destructive power of climate change. These fires were fuelled by extreme winds, sweeping through dry vegetation that had been dried out by erratic rainfall patterns and prolonged drought conditions. In 2023 alone, the world witnessed a series of catastrophic climate-related events, including the deadly wildfires on Maui, a devastating earthquake in Istanbul, and the relentless monsoons in Malaysia that wiped out thousands of homes in mere hours. These events are not isolated occurrences but rather indicative of a broader, escalating pattern driven by climate change. The growing frequency and severity of these disasters highlight the planet's proximity to a critical tipping point. Despite these mounting crises, the global response to climate change remains insufficient. Awareness campaigns, even when funded with millions of dollars, continue to struggle to effectively communicating the urgency of the situation. The messages often fall flat, hence unable to reach the scale and depth necessary to drive meaningful action. The fundamental issue is not a lack of resources, but rather a failure

to craft compelling, persuasive narratives that resonate with broader audience. Without more impactful leadership from governments, corporations, and individuals, the world will continue to face escalating risks, with devastating consequences for future generations.

Acknowledging that both text and speech are integral to effective leadership, this paper examines the linguistic strategies employed by the renowned youth activist, Greta Thunberg, in her efforts to raise awareness and galvanize global action on climate change. At just 15 years of age, Thunberg emerged as a leading figure in the global youth climate movement. She holds political leaders accountable and persistently advocates for tangible measures to combat the climate crisis. Through the lens of discourse analysis, this study investigates the linguistic patterns Thunberg utilises in one of her public speech, particularly when calling out political leaders for their inaction and urging immediate policy changes. The analysis further explores how these rhetorical choices reflect her leadership style and contribute to her influence in shaping leadership discourse on environmental issues. This study focuses on natural disasters, using the terms "crisis," "disaster," and "hazards" interchangeably to describe sudden events attributed to natural, physical, or environmental phenomena (Windsor et al., 2014; Pelling, 2012). It seeks to answer the following question: How do the linguistic features in Greta Thunberg's 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit speech reflect her transformational leadership style? The paper begins with a review of relevant literature on discourse, followed by an outline of the methodology employed in this study. The subsequent section provides an analysis of the linguistic features in Thunberg's speech and explores how these features reflect her leadership style. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and reflections on the role of leadership language during times of crisis.

Leadership discourse

Leadership discourse is a dynamic and growing field of research, and its significance cannot be overstated. Within this body of scholarship, leadership is understood as a discursive performance, with particular attention paid to how it is enacted through linguistic styles. These include discourse markers, pronouns, lexico-grammatical devices, and other elements that perform critical functions in communication. For example, metaphors and proverbs are frequently used to strengthen solidarity and forge connections between the speaker and their audience. Studies by Omar and Habil (2023), Al-Maryani (2011) as well as Prahlad (2009) demonstrate how leaders, such as China's Xi Jinping, have strategically employed cultural metaphors and proverbs at international forums to build a sense of unity with audiences from similar cultural backgrounds. Similarly, former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's use of universally understood metaphors allowed her to connect with a broad, global audience during her leadership. Glonti (2020), analysed the use of national proverbs by French and Georgian leaders, noting that proverbs acted as a persuasive tool that evoked emotional responses from the audience, especially those familiar with the culture or context of the proverbs. This use of cultural references helps reinforce the political actor's position and influence public opinion. In addition to metaphors, another commonly studied linguistic device in leadership discourse is humour. Kasmani (2022) examined the use of political humor by Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Najib Razak, and found that his humorous tone unexpectedly resonated with the youth population. The study suggests that politicians who use humour or witty remarks can enhance their appeal, thereby strengthening their

public image and popularity among voters. While the study did not draw definitive conclusions about Razak's overall leadership style, it indicated that political humour can project a positive self-image and attract undecided or prospective voters.

In the corporate realm, Clifton et al. (2019) explored how Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, used storytelling to construct her leadership identity. Their analysis of anecdotes, framed within Labov and Waletzky (1997) story structure, reveals how Nooyi presented herself as a visionary and charismatic leader. By positioning herself as the central figure in stories of overcoming challenges and achieving success, Nooyi crafted an image of leadership that extended beyond traditional authoritative roles emphasises personal agency and resilience. In contrast, Debray et al. (2024) critically analyse the ways in which Heads of State are discursively and visually constructed in media. Their examination of 40 English-language media reports highlights the role of media discourse in shaping the public image and leadership identity of political leaders. These studies demonstrate the importance of language in leadership discourse and highlight how leaders use various linguistic strategies to construct their identities, influence audiences, and enact authority. While the studies above focus on global and corporate leaders, other research has shown that everyday practices in the workplace can also serve as indicators of leadership style. Studies by Schnurr and Omar (2021) as well as Holmes (2009) have explored the discursive practices of leaders in everyday work settings and demonstrated how these practices reflect leadership dynamics. Since leaders spend at least 70 percent of their time in the workplace (Holmes, 2009), it is logical to scrutinise their routine activities as they provide valuable insights into their leadership style. The body of research demonstrates leadership is not merely a function of title or position but is actively constructed through language. This paper, building on these insights, will analyse the linguistic features of Thunberg's 2019 U.N. speech and explore how her rhetorical choices reflect her leadership style.

The rise of youth leaders

In recent years, youth activism has gained significant momentum, with young leaders advocating for a range of pressing global issues. On a broader scale, research has increasingly focused on leadership among youth and acknowledging the powerful impact of youth voices and movements on public behavior and societal change. Prominent youth leaders such as Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, and Param Jaggi have become symbols of this emerging force. Despite their young age, these activists have garnered international attention due to their courage to speak out on issues they are passionate about, which resonate deeply with both their local and global audiences. A study highlights Thunberg's speech at the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit, where she addressed the hopes of children worldwide while confronting world leaders about their inaction on climate change. Thunberg's speech exemplified how youth leadership can challenge political and social power structures thus showcasing her ability to influence the discourse on climate change. An examination of Aristotle's rhetorical devices in Greta Thunberg's two speeches reveals that she employs these elements with increasing confidence. As her experience in public speaking grows, Thunberg demonstrates greater assurance in utilising scientific data and argumentative techniques hence reflecting the use of ethos and pathos in her delivery. Similarly, Malala Yousafzai's speech at the United Nations in 2013 on women's empowerment conveyed a strong message of protest and demand for change. Her discourse not only highlighted the importance of education for girls but also constructed power relations that call for the recognition of

women's rights and equality. At just 18 years old, Malala became the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In her memoir *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, she uses figurative language to convey powerful messages of resistance and hope. Symbolism, in particular, is a dominant feature found in her writing. The feature enables her to evoke strong emotional responses from her readers and create vivid imagery that brings her narrative to life. Through this symbolic language, Malala engages her audience and fosters empathy in her cause, while inviting readers to visualise the struggles of her journey for education and women's rights. Based on the studies presented above, it is evident that the rise of youth leaders in the global arena offers a refreshing perspective on leadership. This study, therefore, aims to explore the construction of Greta Thunberg's leadership style through the analysis of her discursive linguistic features in one of her speeches delivered at the UN Action Summit in 2019.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership is understood as the concept of a leader guiding their followers toward a common goal (Burns, 1978), with leaders acting as agents of their followers to help achieve collective objectives. Transformational leaders know how to encourage, inspire and motivate employees to perform in ways that create meaningful change. In organisation, transformational leadership aims to driving innovation and fostering a culture where everyone feels valued and empowered. At its heart, transformational leadership is about creating a vision that motivates and inspires the team to achieve more than they ever thought possible. In organisational and leadership fields, transformational leadership often associates with leaders that communicate visions (Bennis and Nanus, 2003; Bass and Stogdill, 1990), challenging the status quo and fostering a culture where new ideas are welcomed and explored. Transformational leaders, therefore, are charismatic and use challenge to encourage followers to explore their abilities (Bennis and Nanus, 2003; Bass and Stogdill, 1990). Additionally, transformational leaders inspire followers by appealing to their own self-interest, which helps the team achieve objectives and realise their vision of success (AlAfnan and Dishari, 2024). According to Bass (1985), transformational leadership has four elements, which includes individualised consideration, inspirational motivation, idealised influence, and intellectual stimulation. A leader demonstrates idealised influence by setting a strong example and earning the respect of their followers. Inspirational motivation, on the other hand, involves presenting a compelling vision for the future and setting high expectations to encourage followers to surpass their own limitations to achieve that vision. Intellectual stimulation encourages followers to question assumptions, reframe challenges, take risks, explore new methods, and foster creativity. Finally, individualised consideration involves a leader who actively mentors and attends to the needs and development of each follower (AlAfnan and Dishari, 2024).

In discourse analytic studies, the focus is on how transformational leadership is enacted through language. Such studies typically examine aspects of speech, including vocabulary, grammar, structure, and genre, to identify how these linguistic resources reflect the key characteristics of transformational leadership. In their study on Mandela's leadership style, AlAfnan and Dishari (2024) found that Mandela used transformational leadership not only to transform values, goals, and lives but also to persuade and inspire others with his visions. Through an analysis of his "I Am Prepared to Die" speech, the

study discussed the findings on how he realised transformational leadership through vocabulary, grammar, structure, and genre. The analysis was conducted on both quantitative and qualitative levels. On the quantitative side, frequencies were reported based on the recurring use of specific vocabulary; meanwhile on the qualitative side, the analysis explained and interpreted these occurrences in their contexts. The most common words found in the speech were “Africa” and “South Africa”. Simultaneously, Mandela was found to predominantly use the first-person singular and plural pronouns “I” and “we”. Alongside a variety of speech structures and genres, Mandela’s leadership qualities reflect honesty, reliability, inclusion, and courage to speak the truth. These strategies contributed to his credibility as a transformational leader. Similarly, Martin (2011) applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Appraisal Theory to explore how the use of pronouns and naming in prominent visionary speeches, such as those by Lincoln, Churchill, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., helped create a strong sense of “us-ness.” The study demonstrated how language facilitated the expression of key leadership features and the communication of an effective vision in political discourse. The findings revealed that these leaders effectively communicated shared values using judgment, both positive and negative, and intertextuality. Additionally, imagery, commitment, and the elimination of alternative opinions through engagement resources enabled these leaders to bring their visions to life through language. As visions are integral to transformational leadership, this study highlights that leadership can be analysed through linguistic frameworks, thus offering valuable insights beyond the business and organisational contexts.

Materials and Methods

For the purpose of this study, the paper analyses the transcript of Greta Thunberg's speech delivered at the U.N. Climate Action Summit in 2019. The transcript was taken from a web portal, while the reference to her body language was based on the video from YouTube. The video, with a duration of 4 minutes and 34 seconds, had garnered 9.2 million views at the time of writing. In this emotionally charged speech, Thunberg accused political leaders of ignoring the climate crisis and expressed her deep disappointment with their inaction in addressing the issue. The speech is analysed using an Interactional Sociolinguistics approach, focusing on the linguistic features that characterise Thunberg's transformational leadership style. Interactional Sociolinguistics examines how social meaning is constructed within and beyond interactional contexts, paying particular attention to linguistic features and the contextual factors in which the interaction occurs (Omar and Habil, 2023; Schnurr and Omar, 2021; Vásquez, 2021). In the context of leadership analysis, this approach uncovers how leadership is linguistically constructed and how specific linguistic functions contribute to the enactment of leadership. This study aims to contribute to the growing field of leadership discourse by highlighting the linguistic features that underpin Thunberg’s leadership style. While Thunberg's speech has been analysed in previous studies, these works have not focused on the participant's leadership style.

Results and Discussion

The 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, held in December 2019 in Madrid, was convened under the theme "Climate Action Summit 2019: A Race We Can Win. A Race

We Must Win." The summit aimed to address the pressing issue of climate change by bringing together leaders from various sectors to advance ambition and demonstrate tangible progress in global climate action. It also urged all stakeholders to strengthen the implementation of national climate and development initiatives (United Nations, 2019). During the summit, Thunberg continued to highlight the critical issues of global emissions and rising global temperatures. The study analyses three extracts from the speech, focusing on three linguistic strategies that reflect her transformational leadership style.

Example 1: Analytical reflection

The example for analytical reflection are include: (1) Hi. A year and a half ago, I didn't speak to anyone unless I really had to, but... (2) ...then I found a reason to speak. Since then, I've given many speeches andn... (3) ... learned that when you talk in public, you start with something personal or... (4) ... emotional to get everyone's attention. Say things like, our house is on fire, I... (5) ... wanted to panic or how dare you. But today I will not do that because then... (6) ... those phrases are all that people focus on. They don't remember the facts,... (7) ... the very reason why I say those things in the first place, we no longer have... (8) ... time to leave out the science.

Interestingly, Thunberg's speech opens with a brief, informal greeting "Hi" before she immediately delves into the pressing topic at hand. This abrupt transition from greeting to serious subject matter reflects her urgency and no-nonsense approach to the issue of climate change. In the early part of her speech, Thunberg draws upon emotionally charged phrases from her previous speeches, such as "How dare you," (lines 3-4) that gained significant attention after her September address earlier that same year. It becomes apparent that her introspective reflection has led her to revise her rhetorical approach. She acknowledges that while emotionally charged words like "How dare you" may have sparked public reaction, they did little to address the core issue of climate change. Through revisiting these phrases, Thunberg recognises the impact of her words, simultaneously prompting her to adjust her strategy to a more assertive and purposeful tone at the start of her speech. With the simple 'Hi' (line 1), she not only reinforces her strong stance but also hints at the strategic reflection she has undertaken.

This self-awareness and critical reflection on her previous rhetorical choices too, demonstrate a shift in her approach towards a more substantive and scientifically grounded message (line 8). As the speech progresses, Thunberg integrates scientific data to guide the audience toward ideal actions. By integrating scientific facts and data into her speech, Thunberg enhances the credibility and persuasive power of her argument. This revision not only makes her message more substantial but also shows her growth as a speaker. In this light, Thunberg exhibits a form of rhetorical maturity, illustrating an evolution in her public speaking style. Her willingness to reflect on past strategies, learn from them, and incorporate new approach into her speaking style demonstrates both personal and professional growth. This maturity in her approach suggests that Thunberg is not only a passionate activist but also an evolving leader who takes steps to improve her communication methods for greater impact. This is an example of an intellectual stimulation, where Thunberg implicitly encourages her followers to examines one's mistakes and improves as a better orator to drives for a change.

Example 2: Suggest means to implement vision

The example for suggest means to implement vision are: (1) Countries are finding clever ways around having to take real action. Like double... (2) ...counting emissions reductions and moving their emissions overseas and walking back... (3) ...on their promises to increase ambition or refusing to pay for solutions or loss of... (4) ...damage. This has to stop. What we need is real drastic emission cuts at the source... (5) ...but of course just reducing emissions is not enough. Our greenhouse gas emissions... (6) ...has to stop. To stay below 1.5 degrees. We need to keep the carbon in the ground. (7) Only setting up distant dates and saying things which give the impression of the action... (8) ...is underway will most likely do more harm than good because the changes required... (9) ...are still nowhere in site.

In this extract, Thunberg employs direct directive speech acts to assert her leadership and establish authority over the climate crisis. In line 4, she uses the statement "This has to stop," which is unequivocally direct and unapologetic. By issuing this command, Thunberg positions herself as a leader, urging the audience to take collective responsibility for addressing the issue at hand. Her tone here is authoritative. It conveys a practical response to the urgent nature of the climate crisis. This command is followed by more specific directives, such as calls for emission cuts (line 4) and the cessation of greenhouse gas emissions (line 5), which further demonstrate her proactive stance on solving the crisis. The extract above demonstrates her vision, which serves as a guide for implementation and helps navigate through crises, thus showcasing the qualities of a transformational leader. The use of the pronoun 'we' suggests togetherness and collective interest, inspiring commitment and enthusiasm while identifying a common goal. These are key features of a vision, as identified by Martin (2011). Vision is also recognised as a critical competency for transformational leadership (Bennis and Nanus, 2003; Bass and Stogdill, 1990).

Moreover, Thunberg continues her authoritative tone in the subsequent lines, providing precise instructions that reflect her expertise on the subject. By referencing specific information like "1.5 degrees" (line 6) and the necessity to "keep the carbon in the ground," she presents herself not merely as an advocate but as an expert guiding the audience on the steps to mitigate climate change. These directives strengthen her authoritative presence and reinforces the urgency of the message. In this way, Thunberg's speech exemplifies a decisive, transformational leadership style, where she assumes control over both the message and the actions required to tackle the crisis. She communicates the vision by articulating the practice to achieve the visions. In this instance, Thunberg provides examples for the audience by providing the practical things to be done and future envision for the vision. Besides, the act of Thunberg sailing from Plymouth to arrive in New York After Sailing Across the Atlantic in 2019 to call attention to the need for quick action to save the planet demonstrated her excellent example of her call to action and serves as an inspirational motivation to others. Her bravery in this specific example shows her go beyond self-interest and provide above-and-beyond results (Bass, 1985). In this specific instance, Thunberg resonates with the quality of idealised influence (Bass, 1985).

Example 3: Metaphor

The example for metaphor are: (1) Our leaders are not behaving as if we were in an emergency. In an emergency you... (2) ...change your behavior. If there is a child standing in the middle of the road and cars... (3) ...are coming at full speed, you don't look away because it's too uncomfortable. You... (4) ... immediately run out and rescue

that child. In this example, Thunberg employs an analogy, comparing the climate crisis to an emergency. She personalises the analogy by likening the situation to a child on the verge of an accident. By drawing on a theme close to her own life-family and childhood-Thunberg's analogy feels both original and deeply relevant, especially given her age. What makes this analogy so effective is its authenticity and its ability to resonate with both her own experiences and the experiences of her audience, without being vague or overly generalised. According to Omar and Habil (2023), the use of figurative language, such as analogy, helps to establish a connection with the audience and conveys meaning on a deeper level. In this instance, we can conclude that Thunberg showcases intellectual stimulation through her creativity in public speaking.

Based on the extracts discussed above, it is evident how Thunberg effectively utilises the rich resources of language to communicate her vision in a compelling manner. This ability has inspired her listeners and followers to transcend their individual desires and embrace a collective vision for the common good (Martin, 2011). With her demeanour and straightforward speech, it is clear that her message is authentic, even though it remains unclear whether she receives advice beforehand. The strategic use of self-reflection, practical moves and scientific data, and analogy have made her speech persuasive and transformational. She embodies the three qualities of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) while communicating her personal commitment to her cause. The analysis of the examples illustrates how Thunberg exemplifies a transformational leadership style, characterised by informational, cohesive, and syntactically direct language that offers tangible steps for implementing her vision. Transformational leadership, as defined by Bass (1998), encourages individuals to consider their role in contributing to the greater good. Thunberg exemplifies this by urging people to unite in the effort to protect the world through active participation and collective responsibility. Furthermore, she demonstrates intellectual stimulation, particularly in Example 1 and 3, by the adjustments she needs to make to enhance the persuasiveness of her message. While intellectual stimulation is typically associated with innovation and creativity, here it refers to her self-reflection and adaptability of her speech strategies on the use of self-reflection and analogy, which help her connect with her audience and communicate more effectively.

Conclusion

To reiterate, Thunberg's use of analogy to incite action reflects intellectual stimulation, as she envisions the consequences of inaction. This analogy strengthens her call to action. By invoking the imagery of a child in need of help, she taps into the universal value of family and protection, hence evoking emotional responses from her audience and translates her creativity through the use of the figurative language. Additionally, in Example 2, Thunberg inspires by offering practical approaches to combat climate change, while her journey aboard an emission-free yacht to the summit exemplifies her role as a leader who leads by example and drives meaningful change. Transformational leadership, as defined by Hackman and Johnson (2013), Bennis and Nanus (2003) as well as Bass (1985) involves envisioning a desirable future, articulating strategies to achieve it, setting an example, maintaining high standards of performance, and demonstrating determination and confidence. Based on the analysis above, Thunberg effectively embodies all of these qualities in her speeches. Greta Thunberg is undoubtedly an extraordinary young leader who has dared to challenge

world leaders openly. Despite her age, she demonstrates that leadership is not determined by years but by the impact one can make. Her courage, both in action and in speech, reflects an extraordinary talent that serves as an inspiration for youth worldwide. It is our aspiration that many youth leaders will take inspiration from her and contribute to meaningful global transformation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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