

# Lethal climate destruction: Linguistics researcher makes the case for using medical language in climate discourse

July 23 2024

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"Global warming," "greenhouse effect," and "climate catastrophe" are all terms we are familiar with from international public discourse on the

looming effects of climate change. But these terms seem to be limited in their efficacy.

"One of the key problems with climate communication is that it does not adequately convey the severity of the issue. The language typically used represents an obstacle to not only open societal debate but also to the political and legal regulations that are urgently needed," says Dr. Bálint Forgács, a neurolinguist at Freie Universität Berlin.

In a recently published study, the researcher proposed the use of medical terminology in climate communication as a new approach to galvanize support for more productive political solutions in [public discourse](#) on the subject.

The study "[A Medical Language for Climate Discourse](#)," which recently appeared in the journal *Frontiers in Climate*, sheds a light on how academic and professional communication surrounding climate change frequently produces misunderstandings or does not sufficiently convey the urgency of the situation. This is often rooted in the euphemistic or overly technical language used by many climate researchers, resulting in part from the scientific norms of self-restraint and modesty. However, the current way of talking about it makes it difficult for non-experts to fully comprehend the severity of the collapse of Earth's life support systems.

Key takeaways from the study include:

- Metaphorical language and its impacts: Scientific metaphors can be highly open to interpretation while they may impact public and political discourses disproportionately because of their expressive power. Euphemistic and technical jargon can create confusion or misunderstandings about how people think about the [climate crisis](#), especially non-experts.

- Proposal to use medical terminology: By using medical terminology, climate issues could be framed in a way that emphasizes the necessity of live-saving measures. For example, climate tipping points could be described as "metastases," as this provokes a more serious and urgent reaction.
- More productive political debates: The move from terms used in technical research to those used in a medical context could foster a more honest evaluation of the required legal and regulatory steps to keep the planet habitable.
- Comparison to other high-risk areas: Compared to other high-risk domains such as aviation and medicine, [climate policy](#) is lagging behind in terms of how academic knowledge is implemented and regulated with regard to responsibility and safety in the context of life-threatening matters.

Forgács points out that current climate buzzwords often express [positive emotions](#) (e.g., "green," "eco-friendly") or are passive in tone (e.g., "catastrophe," "crisis"), which downplays the urgency of the situation. Using more negative (e.g., "global burning," "overheating"), active (e.g., "climate destruction," "climate suicide"), and direct language (e.g., "furnace effect") could push the wider public and political decision-makers to take more drastic action.

"By introducing a medical [language](#) to climate communication, we could achieve a real paradigm shift. This approach could make it possible to more effectively communicate the seriousness of the climate crisis and boost both the acceptance for the necessary measures among the wider public, and their political and legal implementation," says Forgács.

The findings from the study should motivate researchers, media professionals, and activists to develop and disseminate new, powerful, and evocative metaphors that succinctly and clearly convey the urgency and the consequences of climate destruction.

**More information:** Bálint Forgács, A medical language for climate discourse, *Frontiers in Climate* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/fclim.2024.1384753](https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2024.1384753)

Provided by Freie Universitaet Berlin

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