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Communicating intergenerational justice and climate change: a study of youth-generated environmental discourses

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Abstract: Awareness of climate change as an intergenerational issue with inequitable risk burden for younger generations is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, youth activists have already managed to come to occupy a meaningful role in climate advocacy. Accepting the invitation to search for positive new discourses to live by, this paper applies a positive discourse analytical lens to the study of the online discourses produced by the youth climate activists of Generation Climate Europe (GCE), the largest coalition of youth-led networks on climate and environmental issues at the European level, examining how GCE newsletters and podcasts use discursive strategies and multimodal resources to communicate their message. The (corpus-assisted) positive discourse analysis of this GCE-produced content revealed that the youth activists designed a complex virtual space brimming with cross-references, intertextuality, and options for its audience that projected an identity for the coalition as a productive, solution-oriented, and agentive organization. The discourses produced by GCE were carefully tailored to a specific interpretive community and they aimed to both claim and impart authority and expertise. GCE's interactional practices strove to generate wiggle room to resist the status quo and advocate for critical issues such as intergenerational justice and institutional transparency. In disclosing these results, the authors hope to have contributed to understandings of how sustainable climate advocacy is currently being enacted by youth within digital communication across platforms.

Keywords: intergenerational justice; online advocacy; positive discourse analysis; sustainable climate advocacy; young climate activism

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1 Introduction

Awareness of climate change is a relatively recent phenomenon, but there is by now shared agreement that engendering public support in tackling it is crucial (e.g. Dessai et al. 2004; Hulme 2009; Liu and Huang 2022; Lorenzoni et al. 2005; Neil Adger et al. 2011; Spence and Pidgeon 2010). Moreover, there is a clear perception that public support must be garnered not merely through encouraging ever-growing understanding of science through improved scientific literacy, but also adopting a discursive model aimed at disclosing how such understanding is deeply intertwined with the ways we live and make sense of the world (Hanson-Easey et al. 2015). This essentially means embracing an ecolinguistic perspective, in view both of its description as "a form of critical discourse study [… which has] an impact on how humans treat each other, other organisms and the physical environment" (Stibbe 2014: 117–118) and viewing the ecological linguist's task as that of re-orientating linguistics towards its empirical call (Steffensen and Fill 2014: 7).

Focusing on the latter objective, it is crucial to foreground the importance of "raising awareness of the role of language in ecological destruction or protection" (Stibbe 2014: 119), or even, more broadly, of "the impact of language and discourse in describing, but also aggravating and perhaps alleviating, environmental problems" (Fill 2018: 3). Such types of investigation, which can help to understand how laypeople account for and contribute to the construction of meaning about climate change in our social worlds through a discursive model, can be carried out in essentially two ways: analysis of freely produced text/talk about climate change (unsolicited discourse) and analysis of text/talk about climate change invited by the researcher (solicited discourse, i.e. Focus Group, Qualitative Group Discussion, etc.). The present paper contributes to the first type of study – which provides an opportunity to investigate freely emerging opinions, rather than views invited by an external source and moulded by the latter's constraints, while at the same time specifically focusing on discourse produced by young individuals (young adults, but the authors recognize that the contribution of children is also crucial [e.g. Lee et al. 2020]), first of all in observance of the unwritten rule that ecolinguistics has the duty of representing the voice of those for whom the current changes will carry an inequitable risk burden, and thus addressing the issue of injustice in relation to those generations who are inheriting problems which they have had very little part in creating. The other reason at the basis of the choice of focusing on discourse produced by young people in this paper is due to the authors deliberately aiming to constitute, with this contribution, a counterpart to some existing representations of younger generations as disengaged and unable to cast "their minds beyond the 'now' to a time horizon that could encompass […] climate change impacts" (Hanson-Easey et al.

2015: 231), if not even deviant (Pickard 2019) or mere "apolitical personal testimonies" (von Zabern and Tulloch 2021: 28). Indeed, openly defying youth deficit models in all their subtle forms, which cast young individuals as in need of benevolent adult guidance, the paper aims to shift the perspective to the opposing view of "children and young people [as] the ones to determine the shape of [climate change education]" (Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell 2018: 90).

As regards the structure employed: after providing a literature review of youth climate change from the perspective of works focusing on it (Section 2), and after discussing the theoretical lens applied to the analysis of data through reference to the theories that have either opposed or contributed to shaping the type of ecolinguistic perspective adopted (Section 3), the paper delves into the description of the research methodology used (Section 4). It brings to the fore the action of the youth climate activists of Generation Climate Europe (GCE), the first and the largest coalition of youth-led networks on climate and environmental issues at the European level. While fully recognizing that young people's climate activism is a global phenomenon (e.g. Cocco-Klein and Mauger 2018; Hayward et al. 2020; Nakabuye et al. 2020; Singh 2015) and that the youth-led climate activism in the Global South should be more widely represented in research on the topic (Neas et al. 2022), the authors focus on realities they have direct access to, understand and can, as a result, account for better, while at the same time selecting, within such realities, an example of good practice. Indeed, despite being set in the Global North, GCE has made diversity and intersectionality two of its six guiding principles (GCE 2021) and chosen a more inclusive, less mainstream form of English as its variety: it is no surprise that the main European youth-led organizations, including Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE), CliMates, European Students Union, Fédération Internationale des Mouvements Catholiques d'Action Paroissiale (FIMCAP), International Young Naturefriends (IYNF), and Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), have joined the GCE coalition to unite forces on climate change issues (and thus have an active role in EU decision-making) and be heard on environmental issues. More precisely, the paper intends to examine the ways in which GCE newsletters and podcasts use discursive strategies to communicate their message. GCE has, at present, produced five newsletters and five podcasts, and they will all be analysed in the Analysis section of the paper (Section 5). The aim is to offer a representation of GCE which is as complete as possible, shedding some light on the linguistic dynamics of the collective action performed by such specific young segments of the public by means of newsletters and podcasts. These tools offer an alternative form of agency to GCE, through their ability to palpably voice these young people's advocacy (Section 6). The Conclusions pull the threads together, summarizing the main points argued in the paper and stating the significance of results (Section 7).

2 Literature review

Even though vigorous global youth-led climate movements were already in force by 2018, and even previously (for example at the time of the 2006 Standing Rock protests and of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's 2014 performance address at the Opening Ceremony of the UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit), that year appears, in perspective, as the watershed year in environmental activism: in Sweden, Greta Thunberg started her school climate strike outside Parliament while in Britain RisingUp! activists launched the Extinction Rebellion environmental network. The demands of both movements were based on the Special Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Global Warming of 1.5 °C, which appeared that very year, involving young people around the world in gradually more collective, 'radical' forms of participation. As a result, attention to young environmental activism gained momentum (Pickard et al. 2020), producing an emerging body of literature which has been thoroughly explored in terms of methodological trends and key themes, identifying an initial wave of survey-based research and textual analysis of secondary data and a resurgence of emphasis on youth voice through qualitative research as pertains the former point, and a focus on the demographics (composition, practices and outcomes) of young climate activism and on the ways youth understand and act on climate change as regards the latter point (Neas et al. 2022). Attempting a description of young activism from this viewpoint, the demographics tell us that activists tend to be predominantly female from well-educated backgrounds, with the median age gradually increasing and protests becoming progressively de-radicalized over time since the start of the movement (de Moor et al. 2020; Fisher and Nasrin 2021a, 2021b; Lorenzini et al. 2021).

Over recent years, the concept of "subaltern environmentalism" (Pulido 1996), has emerged, which presents environmental activism as a tool used by marginalised communities in response to what they perceive as deliberate environmental discrimination by political and economic elites (Cayuela 2018; Egan 2002; Hassaniyan 2021). This perspective would appear to be more appropriate than the mainstream environmentalism approaches normally used to interpret youth climate activism (which judge it as capable of significantly impacting public discourse about climate change, but still unable to bring about systemic change – see Han and Ahn 2020; Kenis 2021). Viewed from this angle, environmental justice appears to be central to the demands of youth climate activism (Bowman 2020). Despite the wide diversity within it, youth climate activism would appear to favour collective, non-violent action (Gaborit 2020; Kenis 2021; Pickard et al. 2020) and to make use of social media to attract support and attachment to the movement (Brünker et al. 2019; Wielk and Standlee 2021), possibly also in response to the traditional media's mostly

delegitimizing (Bergmann and Ossewaarde 2020; von Zabern and Tulloch 2021) or unilateral (Hess 2021) attitude to youth action. While in good health and increasingly more widespread, such studies approaching young climate activism from an alternative, non mainstream perspective still represent a minority effort, and this study is going to contribute to fill the still existing gap by conducting, as anticipated above, a corpus-assisted positive discourse analysis of the online discourses produced by the youth climate activists of GCE.

3 Theoretical foundation

The authors have clarified in the Introduction (Section 1) that the ecolinguistic perspective adopted in this paper is discursive. In what follows they will better detail this standpoint, characterizing the linguistic investigation to be performed as an enquiry into the "clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews" (Stibbe 2014: 118) aimed not only at resisting ecologically destructive and ambivalent discourses but also at producing examples of good practice while at the same time exposing the possible internal contradictions or unintended side effects of such models (Ma and Stibbe 2022; Stibbe 2014).

The paper collocates itself within the strand of studies to which Martin and Rose (2003) refer as Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA), as also further developed by Macgilchrist (2007), Bartlett (2012), and Hughes (2018). The latter argues that Critical Discourse Studies are "overwhelmingly focused on deconstructing oppression, not reconstructing resistance" (Hughes 2018: 193). Although the issue is debatable, due to its implicit assessment of (critical) discourse analysis at large as negative evaluation while, instead, "proposing alternatives is also part of being critical" (Kendall 2007: 17), PDA should help to identify the existence of the conditions for the necessary room to manoeuvre (what Bartlett [2012: 10] calls "wiggle room"[1]) – focusing "on the ways in which underlying social changes in society and the local discourses associated with them bring to light the contradictions and tensions within the hegemonic order" (Bartlett 2012: 10) – to pursue alternative courses of action and ultimately bring about change. Secondly, it has the virtue of tangibly showing how discourses can be shaped in such a way as to actually promote change. Indeed, PDA highlights in a less abstract, less implicit, more practical way than more mainstream forms of discourse analysis "the specific clustering of linguistic features that convey the worldview" (Stibbe 2014: 124) of those discourses that should be promoted rather than resisted. It is progressive in the sense that it is "in some way concerned with progress toward a better

1 "Wiggle room" was also discussed by Erickson, in "Co-membership and wiggle room: Some implications of the study of talk for the development of social theory" (2001).

world" (Hughes 2018: 198), focused on the process of imagining and planning the construction of that world. Design is a crucial complement to critique; Kress (2000: 160) looks at it as "the essential textual principle and pedagogic/political goal" for times that are marked by rapid and profound change. It may prove an important aid in contributing to alleviate environmental problems through inspiring people to protect the natural world (Fill 2018). As for the framework within which PDA will be used in the present study, this is constituted by Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), which currently appears the most favourite model for examining language in use. Indeed, the fact that publications on CADS from eminent scholars keep popping up (Ancarno 2020; Fuster Márquez et al. 2021; Gillings et al. 2023) is evidence of the increasingly more widespread recourse to and, arguably, of the great value of this framework in the exploration of socially meaningful language material. Through the combination of PDA with CADS, the authors intend to integrate qualitative and quantitative language analysis techniques in order to benefit from their fruitful methodological synergy (Baker et al. 2008), which enables to harmonize detailed linguistic examinations with the broader analyses made feasible by the application of corpus linguistic tools to language data investigation, offering a good degree of objectivity (Baker and McEnery 2015). While handling of limited data can yield detailed analyses of a specific topic, illuminating subtle or nuanced discursive tactics and representations, they may not provide much insight into the more ubiquitous and extensive ways that language shapes reality. Indeed, since language in use has cumulative effects, looking for linguistic patterns in bigger amounts of data than manual use only could handle can prove to be crucial. Through the combination of PDA with CADS, large-scale scanning makes language patterns that are not immediately apparent easier to spot, and then quantitative outcomes generated by corpus tools are examined more thoroughly through the application of qualitative discourse-analysis methods.

More specifically, this paper aims at shedding light on the linguistic dynamics of GCE's collective action as "real-time, interbodily coordination that enables […] to achieve results that are unreachable for a single human body or person" (Steffensen and Fill 2014: 18). It also intends to show that newsletters and podcasts offer the specific young segments of the European population dealt with in this paper an alternative form of agency, through palpably voicing their political views and hence filling an institutional gap, since young citizens' views are currently not sufficiently represented in policy decisions. Indeed, newsletters and podcasts as a form of advocacy and recruitment to the cause of environmental protection generally come across as more authoritative to a variety of people in reason of their being mostly free from the attacks that other forms of advocacy which young citizens tend to favour – particularly those related to social media – are often subject to ("slacktivism", Dennis 2019). The authors will show how newsletters and podcasts are used by GCE both to

question and contest governmental organizations presently dealing with the climate crisis and to provide examples of how systemic change could be more fruitfully performed.

4 Research methodology

4.1 Research questions

The present study aims to investigate the discursive strategies utilized by GCE when communicating their environmentalist and activist messages tailored to an audience of youth activists. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

(1) How does GCE communicate its identity, impart its message and establish membership discursively in its podcasts and newsletters?
(2) What is the nature of the self/other positioning and the frames it enacts? What discursive strategies, multimodal resources and linguistic features does GCE-produced content use to these ends?

4.2 Data collection

GCE was selected as the object of study because of its size and influence. In the 'Who we are' section of their website (https://gceurope.org/who-we-are/), at the time of writing, the non-governmental organization declared that it comprised 381 national organizations across 46 European countries and it is therefore "guided by the voices of over 20 million young Europeans". "Youth-led" is in fact listed as the first of GCE's guiding principles, which also include: Democratic, Evidence-based, Diverse, Intersectional, and Human Rights-based. As of 1 April 2023, the official Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook GCE pages had over two thousand followers, and over five thousand followers on GCE's official LinkedIn page. Despite its noteworthy size, GCE can be interpreted as a grassroots climate justice movement. Schlosberg and Collins (2014: 359) describe that such grassroots climate justice movements focus on "local impacts and experience, inequitable vulnerabilities, the importance of community voice, and demands for community sovereignty and functioning". Through this lens, the priorities of GCE are the (communities within the) European Union, the burden of climate change on future generations, the effort to represent and channel youth perspectives, and the articulation of clear positions and demands of youth (primarily in terms of institutional and legislative change).

Of the wide-ranging content that the GCE develops and shares in its digital context, this study pivots on newsletters and podcasts.

(1) Newsletters. On 10 August 2021, GCE asked its followers across its social media pages "Want to stay in the loop about GCE's work and current climate affairs?" to advertise the launch of Think Green: The GCE Newsletter. The newsletter is sent to subscribers, but the organization also posts links to new newsletter issues on its social media pages when they are published. For this study, five editions of the newsletter were retrieved, released on August 2021 (Newsletter 1), April 2022 (Newsletter 2), July 2022 (Newsletter 3), October 2022 (Newsletter 4), and February 2023 (Newsletter 5). The newsletters are referred to by the number assigned above in chronological order. The visual and textual content of the newsletters was collected and saved in a single file.
(2) Podcasts. The second set of data consists of the five podcasts posted to the Generation Climate Spotify page, which were manually transcribed. In the About section, GCE describes the podcasts as covering "a range of topics relating to climate activism and policy-making" and invites listeners to "Hear from climate organisations and activists to further your knowledge on current climate affairs!" The titles, dates, and durations of the podcasts examined in this study follow:
    (1) Minisode: The Modernisation Process of the Energy Charter Treaty (August 2021), 12 minutes 6 seconds
    (2) The Value of Forests (September 2021), 52 minutes 55 seconds
    (3) Minisode: Year of youth 2022 (October 2021), 13 minutes 22 seconds
    (4) UN Declaration for the right to a healthy environment (November 2021), 18 minutes 1 second
    (5) The EU Taxonomy explained (November 2022), 38 minutes 13 seconds

As seen above, podcast duration varied significantly, as did the format of the podcasts. While podcasts 1, 3, and 4 consisted of conversations among GCE members, longer podcasts were structured primarily as interviews of experts. The podcast 'The Value of Forests' features a conversation between GCE Member Michelle Stitz, Chair of Forest and Ecosystem Sciences at the University of Melbourne Professor Rod Keenan and climate activist Amos Amanubo about the importance of forests. Instead, 'The EU Taxonomy explained' first featured a highly specialized conversation with EthiFinance Consultant Mehdi Ferron and Sarah Lokman, Head of Sustainability at Greenomy, about the EU taxonomy, its structure and implications for the private sector, before moving on to a detailed interview with Emmanuel Katrakis, Member of the Platform on Sustainable Finance European Commission, that centred on how the circular economy relates to the EU taxonomy.

The textual content of the five GCE newsletters and the transcriptions of the five podcasts were combined to form a small, 23,539-token-word corpus, called the GCE Newsletter and podcast (GCENP) corpus.

4.3 Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, PDA was the primary analytical lens applied in the analysis of these data. PDA is "doubly resistant" in its opposition of injustice by "amplifying and investigating discourses that look to redress injustices" (Hughes 2018: 199). This study treats GCE-produced newsletters and podcasts as "texts we admire" (Martin 1999: 52), which contain discourses that resist the status quo and imagine progressive social change (particularly in terms of intergenerational justice). They also challenge and aim to dismantle the discursive mechanisms that have justified and even engendered climate change and climate change inaction. Guided by the overarching lens of PDA, this study incorporates multiple levels of analysis in the effort to identify the innovations in the discourse practices of GCE and the framing mechanisms that the association employed in its communication.

In his seminal work on design and transformation, Kress (2000: 156) called for text-makers to be seen as "the remakers, transformers, of sets of representational resources – rather than as users of stable systems, in a situation where a multiplicity of representational modes are brought into textual compositions". Kress's (2000) understanding of content creators and Erickson's (2001: 162) related notion of bricolage, originally used to describe the conduct of oral discourse and defined as "making novel use of pre-existing forms to accomplish uniquely local functions", informed our investigation of GCE's innovative practices. The first aspect we considered in this light was how language is used by GCE to communicate its identity and establish membership discursively. To this end, seeing as interlocutors use "a variety of communicative means in contextualisation cues" to denote their multiple social identities (Erickson 2001: 163), in our analysis of the GCENP corpus, we took heed of features including lexical choice, formulaic expressions, pronoun use and register choice (Gumperz 1992). We also analysed the novel ways in which GCE content-creators (re-)used interactional resources and linguistic features of the text, mainly in terms of markers of specialization and English as a lingua franca (ELF) to (re)frame the climate-related issues at the heart of their identity and aims.

Then, with a view to framing as "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman 1993: 52), we identified the frames used in GCE-produced content by drawing on different, albeit complementary, approaches: keyness analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis. The first approach involved discerning the keywords of the GCENP corpus via keyness analysis. Keywords, generated from the comparison the frequency lists of a larger, more general reference corpus and a smaller, more specialized target corpus, are terms that occur with unusual frequency that aid in "the understanding of the main concepts, topics or attitudes discussed in a text or corpus" (Gabrielatos

2018), so they can be used to identify the most salient aspects of a corpus. Two reference corpora available on the corpus manager and text analysis software tool Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.eu) were selected for this study: the English Web 2020 corpus (enTenTen20) and the EcoLexicon English Corpus (EEC). enTenTen20 is constituted by texts collected from the internet between 2019 and 2021 and amounts to 36 billion words (Jakubíček et al. 2013). Instead, the EEC, described as an English corpus of the Environment domain, is a text corpus that is constituted by just over 23 million words from texts in American, British, and Euro English from 1973 to 2016 whose (sub)domains include but are not limited to Ecology, Environmental Engineering, and Environmental Law (León-Araúz et al. 2018). While the enTenTen20 was deemed an appropriate reference corpus because it matched the GCENP corpus both temporally and in terms of the types of texts (online), the EEC was chosen because of the shared content domain. Thus, two lists of 15 multi-word terms were generated by means of quantitative comparative keyword analysis using Sketch Engine.

The second approach to framing was performed by using content analysis to categorize the content of GCE newsletters and podcasts in terms of how climate change is framed, drawing primarily on Nisbet's (2009) typology. Nisbet (2009: 18) identified eight frames of reference about climate change that advocates, politicians, and journalists tend to draw from, including: social progress, economic development/competitiveness, morality/ethics, scientific/technical uncertainty, Pandora's box/runaway science/fatalism, public accountability/governance, middle way/alternative path, and conflict/strategy. This analysis entailed identifying the frame devices – or "triggers of various interpretative packages" (Nisbet and Newman 2015: 329) – that GCE content included to evoke climate change-related frames. This approach was supported by the examination of the strategies applied in the discursive construction of events and phenomena (e.g. ecosystem protection), processes and actions (e.g. existing policies), and key social actors (i.e. GCE, youth audience, legislators), with the investigation of the characteristics attributed to the latter, drawing predominantly on the tools for this analysis delineated in the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

5 Results

5.1 Projecting productivity and dedication

GCE frequently interlinked its diverse web communication tools within newsletters and podcasts by advertising the different avenues through which the coalition provides content and resources. Its newsletters, for instance, included hyperlinks that led readers to register for Council Presidency Youth Dialogues, to access videos of European Parliament Youth Dialogues on YouTube and the Generation Climate

Podcast on Spotify, and to "find out more" about topics such as the circular economy and biodiversity within articles posted on its website. In podcasts, listeners were invited to visit GCE's website, to follow its Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn pages, and to subscribe to its newsletter.

This diverse content was anchored firmly to the organization's advocacy work. For instance, the 'UN Declaration for the right to a healthy environment' podcast referred to the GCE "joint letter published to the European heads of state expressing young voices on climate justice" and the 'Minisode: Year of youth' podcast referenced a letter that had been written "to the European Commission over their limited action concerning the EU Year of Rail". Likewise, newsletters contained mention not only of the advocacy that the organization had done, as we have seen, but also to their ongoing work (e.g. Example 1 below), and their future plans (e.g. "We will work to foster an intergenerational debate between farmers to create inclusive and sustainable agricultural systems" – Newsletter 2).

The following excerpt from Newsletter 3 includes a detailed account of GCE activity, with cross-links to provide access to member interventions:

> (1) Our team has been actively advocating for the importance of intergenerational justice and youth climate voices in the EU. […]
> Lorenzo, our Climate Justice Coordinator, who debated youth engagement in the implementation of the Just Transition Mechanism with Commissioner Ferreira and Commissioner Schmit here;
> Steph, our Communications Officer on Climate Justice, who presented proposals for communicating with and towards young people about climate transition here;
> Daniel, our Circular Economy Coordinator, who exchanged on the right to repair at the European Year of Youth Policy Dialogue with Commissioner Reynders here;
> Agata, our Board Member, who debated how to embed intergenerational justice in EU decision-making processes at the S&D Conference here and at the Renew Europe Conference here. (Newsletter 3)

At the start of this example, content-creators describe GCE as a "team" whose advocacy actions are ongoing and ceaseless, signalled by the present perfect progressive and the adverb "actively". A four-item list then ensues which details the debates, proposals, and exchanges that GCE actors presented and engaged in with policymakers and/or at official functions, which interested parties could learn more about by clicking on the hyperlinked line-final 'here'. This list, which has the repetitive structure first name + our + role within the coalition + accomplished communicative action, can be defined as a long list since it is constituted by more than three parts (Dori-Hacohen 2020), and, seeing as the order of information imparted in the list foregrounds the actors (agents), it delivers the point that members of the GCE "team" are not scant but numerous. The ways in which these actors

are named and identified shed some interesting insights. While the use of first names alone both conveys the informality expected of youth talk and establishes intimacy with the reader, each member's official role within GCE is specified with the effect of heightening their authorization in their vested organizational positions. Thus, they are positioned at once as approachable and authoritative. Importantly, the use of the first-person plural possessive pronoun "our" precedes each of the roles to underscore that these actors are a part of GCE and they belong to the coalition.

In these ways, the GCE-centred virtual space provides a multifaceted hub for environmental advocacy with a multiplicity of options for user participation, involvement, and information retrieval. Within this space, through the types of information it shared and the language that it used to describe its actions and members, the organization was presented as agentive, close-knit, and accessible.

5.2 Communicating the issues

5.2.1 Framing

GCE applied several frames in the communication of its message to its (potential) recruits, as evinced in the results of the comparative keyword analysis (Table 1) and

Table 1: Comparative keyword analysis: Multi-word terms – GCENP corpus (focus) v. enTenTen20 (ref.).

Number	Multi-word terms	Frequency (focus)	GCENP corpus (focus) v. EEC (ref.) Keyness score	GCENP corpus (focus) v. enTenTen20 (ref.) Keyness score
1	EU taxonomy	28	1,190.515	1,177.977
2	Young people	36	816.795	–
3	Circular economy	19	808.171	461.781
4	Sustainable finance	18	765.688	696.044
5	Generation climate	15	638.240	637.059
6	Financial actor	14	595.758	587.072
7	Climate justice	13	534.593	409.712
8	Green transition	11	468.310	454.790
9	Human right	30	431.351	–
10	Healthy environment	13	389.810	384.951
11	Taxonomy regulation	9	383.344	380.994
12	Intergenerational justice	9	383.344	378.110
13	Sustainable investment	9	383.344	339.830
14	Just transition	9	383.344	343.245
15	Modernization process	9	358.302	370.608

the content analysis. Even though the two reference corpora were distinct in nature, the key multi-word terms that resulted from the analysis performed using the general online text corpus enTenTen20 and the environmental domain corpus EEC were quite similar, as displayed in Table 1. Only 'young people' and 'human right' did not transpire as one of the top 100 multi-word key terms when the GCENP corpus was compared to the enTenTen20 reference corpus.

One of the most predominant frames that GCE applied to their climate advocacy is the 'social progress' frame to the environment; that is, the protection and wellbeing of the natural environment is perceived as a means to improve people's quality of life (Nisbet 2009). For instance, in 'The Value of Forests' podcast, the need for forests is anchored to their impact on people's quality of life, both in terms of physical wellbeing (e.g. "clean air, clean water for drinking") and mental/emotional health (e.g. "there's strong scientific evidence that spending time in the forest makes you feel happier"; "I occasionally move to the countryside to experience my longstanding connection to forest and feed my 'econostalgia'"). GCE-produced content engages in 'social progress' also in more nuanced ways, particularly by joining environmental protection to combatting or even undoing the inequitable risk burden for underrepresented and/or underprivileged segments of the global population. This was a salient and frequently cited issue, which is supported by the presence of such multiword terms as 'climate justice', 'human right(s)', and 'intergenerational justice' in Table 1.

GCE also affixed environmental issues to economic concerns. Their climate change advocacy was often presented in terms of necessary changes to the economic system. As shown in Table 1, a salient topic discussed in GCE-produced content was the 'EU taxonomy', a system for establishing a list of environmentally sustainable economic activities to which a podcast was dedicated. This was also articulated, for instance, in terms of support of the 'circular economy' and of 'sustainable finance', which were mentioned 19 and 18 times across podcasts and newsletters, respectively.

The content produced by GCE was also characterized by a positive, even hopeful, outlook on climate action. Surely, GCE repeatedly stressed that more should be done (as discussed in Section 5.2.2), it deemed issues such the protection of ecosystems and sustainable transport as "vital" and "essential", respectively, (Newsletter 2), and it acknowledged the extreme adverse consequences of climate inaction (e.g. "not respecting [our planetary boundaries] would lead to unacceptably deleterious consequences for humanity and the planet as a whole" 'Minisode: Year of youth' Podcast). However, as a whole, the language used in podcasts and newsletters presented a departure from the apocalyptic rhetoric that has often characterized climate change discourses. Two examples of this tendency follow:

(2) Did you know that transport represents 25 % of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions? Without adequate legislation, this figure will further increase over the next years. (Newsletter 3)
Poor air quality, noise pollution, crowded streets and high traffic don't have to be part of our daily life. Not only cities are responsible for 50 % of global CO_2 emissions, but these numbers are bound to increase if we don't take action. (Newsletter 3)

The examples in (2) cite grave problems that are bound to worsen if the course is not changed but these concepts are expressed in a manner that is devoid of highly-charged lexicon or other markers of doomsday language. Instead, these examples include numerical figures in the form percentages that evoke expertise and emphasize objectivity, and, even though they lack specificity and are presented here only in terms of "adequate legislation" and "action", they present viable courses of action to thwart these threats.

Moreover, in the podcast 'UN Declaration for the right to a healthy environment', the GCE hosts celebrated the adoption of the UN resolution listed in the title. Albeit cautious (i.e. "there's still a lot that needs to be done"), they declared: "it's great to see that heads of states are finally starting to recognize that human rights need to be put at the centre of policies addressing the climate emergency". Furthermore, they expressed optimism by directly linking GCE advocacy work with this aforementioned positive outcome: "youth can contribute to influencing international climate policies and make our voice heard", before adding: "It goes without saying that these efforts do pay off so don't be discouraged". The suggestion within the final affirmation that advocacy enacts change seems to speak directly in response to – and contrary to – an 'alarmist' view of climate change, which views the problem "as out of control or inevitable" (Risbey 2008: 34).

Another frame that GCE frequently applied was the public accountability frame (Nisbet 2009), with particular emphasis on the need for both institutional transparency and corporate transparency. With respect to the former, this emerged saliently in the description of the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) in the podcast 'Minisode: The Modernisation Process of the Energy Charter Treaty'. During the podcast, the GCE hosts declared, "the way the arbitration proceedings under the ECT are currently defined renders them untransparent and by definition undemocratic" and later added: "If the EU and its member states are to reaffirm their political leadership, they need to give a clearer idea on what they're aiming for and when they want these goals to be achieved". In so doing, ECT signatories are positioned as undemocratic, and doubt is cast on the political legitimacy of EU member states. With respect to the latter, the podcast dedicated to the value of forests referenced the "need to see more corporate transparency and where companies are disclosing their impacts on forests" and the podcast on the EU taxonomy acknowledged an expert who praised the taxonomy because "it will certainly create transparency and clarity on the sustainability of investments".

GCE did not only chastise institutions for their opacity. As discussed in the following section, the critique of institutional (in)action also underpinned how the organization defined itself and, consequently, its members.

5.2.2 Discursive and linguistic positionings

While GCE did praise some policy reforms such as the EU Taxonomy and EU President Ursula von der Leyen's announcement declaring 2022 the European Year of Youth, the organization's general approach to current EU policy work and institutional advocacy was to index them as insufficient in scope and ambition. For instance, in Newsletter 4, GCE declared that "while the EU strengthened its ambition to reach net-zero by 2050 in its Fit for 55 Package, more needs to be done", and in the Podcast entitled "Minisode: Year of youth", the hosts agreed that "the EU Year of Rail was less concrete policy action and more of like a communications campaign alone". Based on past experience, GCE hosts revealed scepticism and low expectations for the European Year of Youth: "I think it's easy to have doubts as to how successful this could actually be especially given previous projects to do with the same topic". They also labelled the policies implemented and/or sustained by institutions as misinformed (e.g. "The Agenda 2030 of the United Nations aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth through the achievement of SDG 8. However, 'sustainable' growth is not actually sustainable". Newsletter 1), and misdirected (e.g. "Many of the current decisions are locking youth and future generations into a growth-oriented and destructive fossil fuel economy. Instead, they should consider our interest to live on a healthy planet where both people and nature can thrive". Newsletter 2).

As suggested in this last example, much of the critique was grounded in the exclusion of youth voices in institutional decision-making. In its first newsletter, GCE claims: "We strongly believe that EU climate decision-making processes are lacking youth voices" (Newsletter 1). This message undergirded its action plan, defined in the same newsletter under the "what we do" section as, in part, "We […] advocate for stronger action in the EU on environment and climate that proactively and structurally includes the voices of young people". This idea reverberated across all of GCE content, seeing as its very existence meets many of these gaps in advocacy. Indeed, GCE defined itself explicitly in their first Newsletter in terms of who its members are (i.e. "the largest coalition of youth-led networks at the European level on climate and environmental issues"), its mission to create "a platform for the youth to advocate for a just and green transition in Europe," and its aim to "equip young people with various skills to become effective advocates for a green and just transition in Europe." It is unsurprising, therefore, that 'young people' emerged as a salient multiple keyword compared to the EEC which is constituted by other texts in the environmental domain (Table 1).

In contrast to the systemic exclusion of youth in institutional discourses, GCE presented itself as actively seeking new members, and their newsletters included the call to "Join our team!" Newsletter readers were addressed as actors in the opening salutation "Dear Climate Changemakers," and as possessing specialized knowledge, as seen in the following examples, all from the first newsletter:

(3) The EU aims for a net 55 % reduction of CO_2 by 2030 in their Fit for 55 policy package. However, include carbon sinks and 55 % might actually be 53 %. (Newsletter 1)
Is 'Fit for 55' fit for 1.5? (Newsletter 1)
The Agenda 2030 of the United Nations aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth through the achievement of SDG 8. (Newsletter 1)

The examples in (3) contain instances of specialized lexis such as "carbon sinks", "1.5", and "SDG 8", which may be unknown or at least unfamiliar to laypeople. Similarly, while the podcasts were designed to clarify specialized concepts and policy, and therefore explicated major concepts, there were many instances[2] in which more specialized language was used without explanation. This usage both establishes GCE's credibility as a source of scientific and institutional knowledge related to specialized climate change discourses and it also creates a sense that the intended audience of the newsletters are 'in the know'.

Lastly, there is evidence across GCE-content of forms that are in line with English as a lingua franca (ELF) uses of the language that do not necessarily adhere to standard 'Inner Circle' varieties of English. Some examples from the Newsletters follow:

(4) The relevance for the youth is threefold. (Newsletter 1)
Legislations are needed to promote reuse and encourage young people to make lifestyle changes to support degrowth. (Newsletter 2)
You did not find an opening that matched your interest and experience? (Newsletter 3)

While it is unclear whether these choices are intentional, the examples presented in (4) do exhibit lexico-grammatical elements of ELF including article addition (e.g. "the youth"), regularization of countable/uncountable noun forms (e.g. "Legislations"), and simplification of question formation (e.g. "You did not"). The use of these flexible language forms creates more inclusive discourses that better capture the ways in which English is used today globally but also within the EU, the specific context in which GCE operates.

2 For instance, in the Minisode dedicated to 'The Modernisation Process of the Energy Charter Treaty', one host declared, "There have also been other suggestions such as including a strong right to regulate" and the other asked "Sorry Alex would you mind telling us what 'a strong right to regulate' actually means?", which prompted an explanation of the concept. However, the same podcast mentioned, for example, the phrase "first mover advantage", with which a lay audience may be unacquainted, without clarification.

6 Discussion

The analysis of GCE-produced content unveiled that the youth activists who constitute GCE were assiduous and nimble bricoleurs who designed a complex interactive virtual space brimming with cross-references, intertextuality, and options for its audience. GCE orchestrated this online context to reshape and reframe existing resources (including climate science, knowledge about institutional measures and initiatives) to reach and cater to its audience and (potential) recruits and to advance its interests in climate advocacy and intergenerational justice most efficaciously. Within this realm, GCE fashions an identity that exists in contrast with institutions whose actions are too often limited to lip service alone. It projects itself as a productive, solution-oriented and agentive organization constituted by hard-working doers dedicated to their environmentalist mission. GCE-created content often ran counter to and at times even contested institutional policies and wider beliefs and this, along with its unique, even innovative, discourse practices, generated wiggle room to resist the status quo and advocate for important issues such as intergenerational justice and institutional transparency, and for youth voices to be heard.

GCE adhered to Leiserowitz's (2007: 57) recommendation for communication that effectively inspires climate advocates because its messages were tailored to a particular interpretive community. This customization was achieved in several ways. First, unlike the alarmist language often used in communication with climate sceptics, the discourse produced by GCE was solution-oriented, action-based, and, consequently, fostered hope. Second, while it is unknown whether this attempt was intentional, GCE achieved inclusivity and manifested a European identity by using language that deviated in form from standard varieties of English and instead contained features of English as a lingua franca. Third, the different types of content it produced were characterized by varying degrees of specialization: in newsletters GCE content-creators deployed specialized, technical terms related to the fields of climate science and advocacy as resources to establish themselves as experts of those fields, while podcasts presented opportunities to define this specialized language. The effect of these different degrees of specialization was to provide a set of tools designed to impart knowledge and expertise that were accessible and readily available to all of its members and, ultimately, to create a community of experts. By repeatedly inviting its audience to access different GCE-produced content that presented the same topics with different levels of specialization, GCE created a communication system about climate that transformed the traditional unilateral transmission of climate-based information from experts to laypeople into a dynamic, dialogic process (Fine and Love-Nichols 2021).

GCE content-makers endeavoured to make their voice(s) heard. They did so by producing copious amounts of tailored content for their youth audience. But this effort also took the form of striving to accumulate symbolic capital, or recognition in the form of prestige, honour or attention (Bourdieu 1991), deemed a valuable resource in policy change advocacy (Yang and Liu 2022). One way in which this mechanism was enacted by GCE was by laying bare and negotiating the symbolic power relations between the coalition and other stakeholders. It unmasked unfair power-based mechanisms that characterize climate advocacy – such as institutional and corporate opacity – and that moderate GCE's ability to have a voice in meaningful conversations about climate change – such as the systemic exclusion of youth in institutional discourses. GCE sought to shape the symbolic power relations that underpin official conversations about climate action by demanding a seat at the table.

GCE also accrued symbolic capital by producing content that aimed to establish the organization's expertise and authority on environmental protection and climate change. First, its productivity legitimated its leading role in climate advocacy by constructing an image of the organization and its members as dedicated and hard-working. Then, it displayed its expertise and credibility by occasioning specialized terms and concepts and, in line with its aim to "equip young people with various skills to become effective advocates for a green and just transition in Europe", publishing content expressly created to inform its (lay) audience and empower them with this knowledge. In addition, GCE's numerous and frequently cited conversations with scientific, corporate, institutional and political experts external to its organization and participation with key political and institutional stakeholders positioned the organization as legitimate and authoritative. These conversations further served to accumulate GCE's political capital which, as maintained by Yang and Liu (2022), is in part accrued by means of organizational participation in political activities. Thus, GCE content-makers actively forged an identity for GCE as a reliable leader in environmental issues.

7 Conclusions

Public support in tackling climate change is currently perceived as crucial for a successful transition and deemed to be achievable not merely through improving the degree and level of scientific literacy, but also by disclosing how discourse is deeply intertwined with all the ways we live and make sense of the world, climate change included. This paper has embraced such an ecolinguistic perspective, specifically focusing on the discourse produced by the young adults animating GCE, the first and

largest coalition of youth-led networks on climate and environmental issues at the European level.

Ecolinguistics has a responsibility to speak for those for whom the current changes will bear an inequitable risk load and who are inheriting difficulties that they have played very little part in creating. Even more so since these very subjects are often represented as disengaged, if not apolitical or even deviant. Far from appearing to be in need of adult guidance, the young individuals who stimulate the actions of GCE seem to be capable of discursively shaping the frame of mind needed to gradually adjust to the transformations brought about by climate change. Newsletters and podcasts provide them with an alternative type of agency, by tangibly voicing their political opinions as a form of advocacy and recruitment to the cause of environmental protection which is currently perceived to be more authoritative than those related to social media, which young activists generally appear to prefer. In this way, newsletters and podcasts come to bridge an institutional vacuum since young people's opinions are presently still insufficiently represented in policy decisions.

Through recourse to corpus-assisted PDA of the five newsletters and five podcasts produced by GCE so far, the authors of this paper have demonstrated that the animators of the coalition use such tools to both challenge and critique governmental agencies currently addressing the climate catastrophe, and offer illustrations of how systemic change may be more effectively carried out. The specific clustering of linguistic features that conveys GCE's worldview in the discourses analysed appears to be conducive to change because it offers itself as a possible model for imagining and planning the construction of a better world. It remains to be seen whether there is indeed wiggle room for its uptake in the real world through tangible actions. In the meanwhile, the GCE newsletters and the Generation Climate Podcast on Spotify made available on the GCE website palpably embody the voices, reasons and energies of those for whom climate change is most impactful, and this may prove an important aid in accelerating awareness and adaptation to the environmental transformations through gradually inspiring more people to understand and protect the natural world.

The authors have chosen to present this model of good practice following Stibbe's (2018: 165) increasingly more desirable (in their opinion) invitation to "search for positive new discourses to live by that work better in the conditions of the world we face than the dominant discourses of an unsustainable civilization", that is applying a positive discourse analytical lens to the study of the above online discourses. In so doing, this paper has hopefully contributed to understandings of how sustainable climate advocacy is currently enacted within digital communication across platforms, achieving, in the specific case at hand, a balance between economic

progress, environmental protection, and social well-being while ensuring that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising those of the future.

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