

Climate Debate... Carbon Dioxide is not 'Carbon'



By Tom Harris

University of Florida Linguist M.J. Hardman tells us ("Language and War", 2002) that "Language is inseparable from humanity and follows us in all our works. Language is the instrument with which we form thought and feeling, mood, aspiration, will and act[ion], the instrument by whose means we influence and are influenced..."

It is not surprising then that language has always been a crucially important weapon of war. Delivered with convincing rhetorical flare, language has driven ordinary citizens to heroic acts of self-sacrifice in defence of their countries, while pushing others to unspeakable acts of barbarism.

And now, language tricks are being used to justify the unjustifiable in the increasingly intensive war of words over global warming. 'Climate change is real', 'global warming pollution must be reduced', 'we must stop climate change', are phrases used by environmental alarmists, politicians and industrialists to scare the public into supporting multi-billion dollar schemes that enrich the few at the cost of the many.

But even non-scientists are starting to recognize that some of these assertions are meaningless. Climate change has been 'real' on Earth and other planets for billions of years, for example - so has sunrise and gravity, but that doesn't mean humans are causing them. And carbon dioxide, the 'infrared absorbing gas' blamed by climate campaigners for most of the past century's modest warming, is no more a pollutant than is the major 'greenhouse gas' in the atmosphere, water vapour.

Even the terms 'greenhouse gases' and the 'greenhouse effect' are misnomers since the Earth's atmosphere behaves very differently to a greenhouse. Greenhouses use a solid barrier (the glass roof) to prevent heat loss by convection yet, lacking such a barrier, convection accounts for about half of the heat loss from the surface of the Earth.

Even as the impact of these phrases gradually diminishes among educated people, other equally misleading phraseology is coming to dominate the debate. One in particular has become so entrenched that even those who oppose fashionable thinking on climate change use it without thinking twice.

We are told we must 'reduce carbon' or 'carbon emissions'. To do this, we need to engage in 'carbon trading' and 'carbon capture and storage' and even build up 'carbon credits' to offset our 'carbon liabilities'.

What on Earth is all that about? 'Carbon' is a solid, naturally occurring, non-toxic element found in all living things. Carbon forms thousands of compounds, much more than any other element. Everything from medicines to trees to oil to our own bodies and those of all other creatures are made of carbon compounds.

However, pure carbon occurs in nature mainly in only two forms: graphite and diamonds. So, are we supposed to trade in our high graphite pencils for lower graphite ones? Or are we to return our diamond jewellery to appease our guilty consciences for not having given more money to the poor? Perhaps we are speaking about soot emissions reduction since so-called 'amorphous carbon' (i.e. carbon without structure) is the main ingredient in soot and that is certainly a pollutant important to reduce.

Of course what is really being addressed is one specific compound of carbon, namely carbon dioxide (CO₂). It really should be 'CO₂ emissions', 'CO₂ capture and storage' (something that has yet to be demonstrated on a large scale and poses significant risks), 'CO₂ emissions trading', etc.

Ignoring the oxygen atoms and calling CO₂ merely 'carbon' makes about as much sense as ignoring the oxygen in water (H₂O) and calling it 'hydrogen'. That might be an effective PR tool for anti-hydro power campaigners but most of the public would regard such a communications trick as ridiculous. The 'CO₂ is carbon' mistake is no less farcical. Throwing a high graphite pencil up into the air could be considered as more a 'carbon emission' than is the CO₂ from coal stations.

This is not merely an academic point but is part of the way in which language has been distorted to bolster concerns about human-caused climate change. Calling the gas 'carbon' encourages people to think of the gas as 'pollution' or something 'dirty', like graphite or soot. Calling CO₂ by its proper name would help people remember that, regardless of whether its rise is causing climate problems (a point of strong debate in the climate science community), it is really an invisible gas essential to plant photosynthesis and so all life.

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