

# Figurative framing of climate change mitigation in multimodal environmental campaigns

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Environmental campaigns have created a robust discourse of multimodal artifacts to persuade the public to engage in mitigative action to ameliorate climate change. They rely on patterns of meaning construction studied by cognitive linguists: frame evocation (Fillmore, 1985), metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metonymy (e.g. Pérez-Sobrino, 2017), and blending (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). In this paper, I analyze posters (available online) produced by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) that encourage viewers to save the planet. My analysis will discuss underlying frames and metonymic associations and their contribution to persuasive conceptual blends. The focus will be the relationship depicted between humans and the environment, how humanity's role is being framed, and what alternative framing could be more conducive to encouraging connection to ecological crisis. WWF posters often have representations of the Earth as an object that human hands engage with. The hand metonymically provides access to human action regarding the Earth, and can ostensibly serve to portray humanity's role as an active agent or caregiver. However, objectifying the Earth and foregrounding a hierarchical relationship, in which humanity handles the Earth as an object or resource, is inaccurate and unproductive framing. I argue that elements in WWF's posters work against their intended communicative goal of inciting greater engagement with conservation and climate change mitigation. Examples include: a poster of the Earth cradled as an object in two human hands (Figure 1); posters that portray a human hand holding the Earth as a coin (Figure 2); and posters in which a hand removes one piece from a precariously balanced Jenga ecosystem (Figure 3). The posters' framing impedes WWF's communicative goal in several ways: obfuscating the symbiotic and irrevocably codependent relationship between humans and the natural world, and not foregrounding that what poses mortal threat to nature likewise poses mortal threat to humans; presenting a distal viewpoint on the climate crisis, thus figuratively contributing to psychological distance (i.e. emotional and cognitive detachment) from climate change consequences (Keller, et. al., 2022); and instantiating an AGENT/OBJECT dynamic between humans and the natural world, representing the Earth as an item or commodity that can be manipulated by humans. Rather than using figuration that bifurcates humanity from nature, I suggest alternative framing, with examples. How communication can evince harmful ideological perspectives concerning the environment has begun to be addressed via ecolinguistic approaches to grammar (Goatly, 2007), as well as discourse (Stibbes, 2015). This analysis contributes to a greater understanding of how figurative framing suggests roles for humans in the climate crisis, and how framing can impede or encourage a more equitable relationship between humans and the natural world, and a more hopeful future.

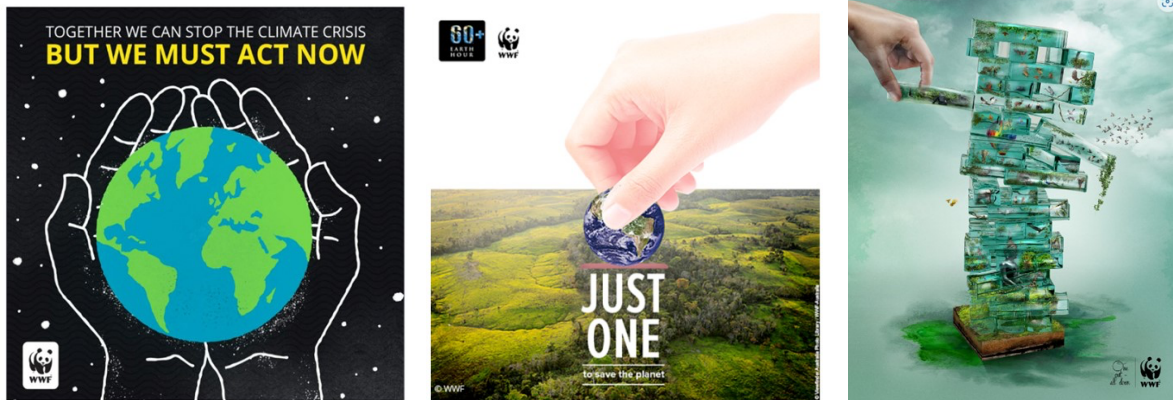


Figure 1: A poster of the Earth cradled as an object in two human hands.

Figure 2: A human hand holding the Earth as a coin.

Figure 3: A hand removes one piece from a precariously balanced Jenga ecosystem.

Image credits: World Wildlife Fund.

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