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We need to talk about how we talk about climate change

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Abstract
How we talk about climate change has a lot to do with how we feel about it, and what we’re willing to do to act on it. Recent research from the US found that the terms “global warming” and “climate change” evoke different reactions: global warming is perceived as far more threatening.

While there is no similar research in Australia, over the past 25 years we’ve seen debate shift from the greenhouse effect to climate change to climate variability — with a corresponding decrease in action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Global warming, the US research found, is more likely to be associated with melting glaciers, world catastrophe, flooding and extreme weather than climate change. It is also perceived to be scientifically more certain.

Climate change, on the other hand, is perceived as less threatening, particularly among liberal and moderate voters in the US. Conservative voters on average don’t distinguish between the two, but, to some, global warming is perceived as the greater threat.

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Whatever you call it - climate change, global warming, or the greenhouse effect - it’s increasing the frequency and severity of heatwaves. AAP Image/Dean Lewins

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**The man behind “climate change”**

Frank Luntz, a pollster and political advisor for the US Republicans, realised this phenomena several years ago. In a 2002 memo to Republicans Luntz advised:
“Climate change” is less frightening than “global warming” … While global warming has catastrophic connotations attached to it, climate change suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge.

Luntz also urged Republican politicians to encourage the public to believe there was no consensus on global warming:

The scientific debate is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science… Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate…

Subsequently President George Bush dropped the term global warming from his speeches on the environment and the White House took up use of the term climate change. Climate change began to be used increasingly often in US documents.

**What the science says**

In scientific terms global warming refers to the increase in the earth’s average surface temperature.

Climate change refers to the consequent range of changes in climate including changed rainfall patterns, increasing droughts and heat waves, and more extreme weather such as flooding, storms and cyclones.

Many scientists actually prefer to use the term climate change because they are concerned that global warming gives the misleading impression that there will be warmer weather everywhere. The use of the term climate change had in fact started to overtake global warming in other parts of the world even before the Luntz memo.

An even earlier term that gained popular currency in the 1980s was the “greenhouse effect”. The greenhouse effect had merit in that it was educational: it explained the mechanism for global warming and gave it a physical reality for laypeople. But the greenhouse effect is also a natural and benign effect that protects the earth’s atmosphere. There was a short-lived effort to change the name to enhanced greenhouse effect or anthropocentric greenhouse effect.

Around 1990 the term greenhouse effect began to be replaced by global warming and climate change. A search of the millions of English language books catalogued by Google demonstrates the changing preference for the new euphemisms.
Climate change is the most commonly used word, but not the one that conveys the greatest threat. Google

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**From climate change to climate variability**

The upswing and downturn of the term greenhouse effect seems to coincide with the willingness of the Australian government to introduce measures to reduce greenhouse gases.

In 1988, when the National Greenhouse 88 Conference was held in Australia, there was unprecedented public interest in the issue. At the time, Australia was acclaimed as one of the most progressive governments on the issue. Now it is a climate change pariah.

Even the term climate change is too much for some present day governments. Earlier this year Professor Kate Auty, the Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, told *The Age* newspaper that public servants in Victoria have been instructed to use the term climate variability rather than climate change. Because the climate is naturally variable, climate variability is a more soothing term than climate change and therefore less likely to incite calls for government action.

This squeamishness about the term climate change is apparently not confined to government circles. Gabrielle Chan reported in the Guardian:

> There is a term that is not generally used in polite company in the bush. That term is climate change … In most cases, though, the community tends to prefer the term “climate variability” than “climate change”.

Names do matter. The US research quotes scholars who point out that “the terms we use to describe the world determine the ways we see it, those who control the argument, and those who control the argument are more likely to successfully translate belief into policy”.

The evolution of names from greenhouse effect to global warming to climate change reflects the ongoing battle over the public perception of this phenomenon. This latest iteration into climate variability may indeed bury public concern. Perhaps in Australia it’s time to resurrect the greenhouse effect.