

How Dare You? We'll Be Watching You:
Harnessing Temporality as a Means of Power

Jin Choi

Gordon College

Abstract

16-year-old climate and environmental activist Greta Thunberg's address to world leaders at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit drew international attention. This paper explores how Thunberg, in this address, utilizes temporality as a key variable in harnessing *powerless power* and *anticipated power* in persuading some of the world's most powerful people to act. The way that Thunberg constructs herself as both a now-powerless, but to-be-powerful agent also speaks to the power of temporality in environmental activism rhetoric, constructing climate action as something to do now in fear of tomorrow. Ultimately, this case study contributes to the larger question of how the powerless harness the power to persuade the powerful.

Keywords: power, temporality, environmental activism rhetoric, identity, social change

How Dare You? We'll Be Watching You:

Harnessing Temporality as a Means of Power

“We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Greta Thunberg, a Swedish 16-year-old climate and environmental activist, delivered a powerful speech to world leaders that reverberated throughout the world at the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit on September 23, 2019. In August 2018, Thunberg began the #FridaysforFuture and #ClimateStrike movement by sitting outside of the Swedish parliament in protest for climate action (Fridays for Future, n.d.). It currently stands as an ongoing movement joined by millions of schoolchildren and adults worldwide. Thunberg has risen to become one of the most prominent faces of today's environmental activism movement with 8.4 million followers on Instagram and 3.1 million followers on Twitter (Thunberg, n.d.).

The 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York was a gathering of world leaders to present their concrete plans to respond to the climate crisis; it was organized to “focus the attention of world leaders, from government, the private sector and civil society, on the urgency for action to address the climate emergency, and on increasing climate action” (United Nations, n.d.). The summit was attended by powerful leaders in the various international sectors of government, business, and civil society, including representatives from over 70 national governments, leaders from the European Union, representatives from over 100 banks, and leaders of international alliances such as the Powering Past Coal Alliance and International Labor Organization (United Nations, n.d.).

As a rhetor, Thunberg is worthy of critical study for multiple reasons. First, Thunberg clearly is an influential rhetor, central to the shaping of current climate and environmental activism rhetoric. Second, Thunberg has the unique position of speaking from the perspective of a child, a rhetorical position not commonly found among powerful shapers of public discourse. Furthermore, given the temporal qualities of environmental activism rhetoric, drawing from arguments about leaving a better future for the next generation, Thunberg's very position as one of the members of the next generation provides valuable insight.

This rhetorical criticism explores specifically the dimension of power found in this address. Holding the premise of viewing persuasion as a form of power, this analysis looks at how Thunberg uses power in speaking to persuade world leaders to take action. Temporality plays a large role in forming the two kinds of power that Thunberg uses: *powerless power* and *anticipated power*. Furthermore, power draws its existence from its contexts; power, in this context of climate and environmental activism, lies in the hands of those who have the ability to shape policy and affect structural change — least of all in the small hands of those who have yet to reach voting age. Thunberg's *powerless power* is constructed from how she frames herself as a child, powerless in this context; her *anticipated power* is constructed from how she frames herself as a to-be leader, a to-be adult, soon to hold the power that current leaders will eventually lose. The overarching question, then, is as follows: How does Thunberg harness the power to persuade her audience of world leaders? Ultimately, this case study contributes to the larger question: How do the powerless harness the power to persuade the powerful?

Artifact Introduction, Theoretical Assumptions, and Methods

As seen in Appendix 1, Thunberg's address is short at just under 500 words. The address is broken down and coded into an interwoven sequence of both *powerless power* and *anticipated power*, as the following analysis further illustrates.

This analysis is informed by theories that touch upon the dimension of power dynamics between groups and between the rhetor and audience. Communication theories such as Kramarae's Muted Group Theory (1981) and Foss and Griffin's (1992) work in Feminist Rhetorical Theory have informed my perspective. I also rely on sociological definitions of power, drawing from Max Weber's definition of power and domination (1968) and Marxist language of the haves and have-nots. While this paper is not strictly based in gender or class-based struggle, it draws upon these theoretical frameworks to deepen my understanding of the power dynamics that are present in any context — and, specifically, to apply it to this rhetorical framework of child-adult that Thunberg uses. Power, in this context of environmental activism, is the degree to which one has the agency to act and effect change. In the context of the UN Climate Action Summit, Thunberg's audience is among the most powerful, holding keys of access to enact the so-desired structural change. While Thunberg also wields a hefty weight of power and privilege in a number of contexts, this analysis is limited to the specific context of the artifact: Thunberg, as a child, is politically powerless. The analysis further explores this dynamic.

As a solely-authored rhetorical criticism, the limitations of this piece lie within the limitations of my worldview, my lived reality, and my positions as a researcher. I have drawn upon the resources available to me according to the spaces of both privilege and under-privilege

I occupy, affected by variables such as race, class, gender, and other social positions that have contributed to the shaping of my analysis.

Analysis

Thunberg primarily wields the variable of temporality as a tool and source of power, specifically within the context of how she constructs the identities of the two key actors in the address: Thunberg and her audience. The child-adult framework guides Thunberg's rhetoric, but she leverages it in two different ways that differ based on how she uses the variable of temporality: in crafting *powerless power* and *anticipated power*.

“How Dare You?”: Powerless Power

As an analysis of the subjects and objects in Thunberg's sentences shows, there are two main actors in this narrative: “you” and “us/we.” Both players are constructed in time-bound identities. In the context of the UN Climate Action Summit, “you” directly refers to Thunberg's audience, the world leaders in the room; however, “you” is also constructed as adults, the caretakers of children. “Us/we” directly refers to Thunberg herself and her generation, possibly the movement that she represents; more specifically, however, Thunberg places the child identity of her generation front and center. Thunberg stretches the “you” and “us/we” dynamic beyond “those able to take substantial climate action” vs. “those advocating for climate action,” translating this multilayered dynamic to a one marked by something as universal as age: a child-adult framework. The first few lines of the speech open up by centering Thunberg's youth identity, constructing Thunberg as primarily a child: “I should be *back in school* on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to *us young people* for hope... You have stolen my *dreams* and my *childhood* with your empty words” (emphasis added).

Thunberg characterizes “you” and “us/we” in contrasting ways, as seen in Figure 1a and 1b. The following figures show the phrases clustered around both subjects and the larger characteristics that implied for each.

Figure 1a. Characteristics of “You”	
irresponsible	deceptive
come to us young people for hope; stolen my dreams and my childhood; failing us; betrayal; still not mature enough to tell it like it is	empty words; talk about money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth; continue to look away; say that you’re doing enough; say you hear us and that you understand the urgency; pretend that this can be solved with just business as usual and some technical solutions

Figure 1b. Characteristics of “Us/we”	
cornered	vigilant
(I) shouldn’t be up here, should be back in school on the other side of the ocean; sucking...your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist; have to live with the consequences	will be watching you; (I am) sad and angry; understand your betrayal; will never forgive you; will not let you get away with this; draw the line; waking up

The theme of power is interwoven in multiple ways throughout the language and narrative shown in this section. First, “you” takes on center stage in this portion, serving as the main subject that utilizes a number of active verbs — indicating that “you” is indeed the one with power in this dynamic. Thunberg employs the existing power dynamic between adults and children to craft a narrative of the adults failing in one of their primary roles to care for the children; she paints herself and “us/we” as powerless in juxtaposition with her audience, the adults, “you” being the ones with the power to act in this context. This first section of *powerless power* specifically tackles the agency of “you” in being irresponsible and deceptive, rendering “us/we” cornered into realities that were constructed by “you.” Thunberg reinforces the

powerlessness of “us/we” by constructing “you” as the one with the power to act and “us/we” as the ones being acted upon.

I propose the term *powerless power* to describe power gained by harnessing one’s own position of powerlessness to appeal to the existing power of those of other positions. It, too, is time-bound because it focuses on the current state of things; it does not refer to whether or not the currently powerless will stay powerless in the future, nor does it question the existence of said power dynamic. Utilizing this *powerless power*, Thunberg chastises: She does not deny the current existing power dynamic of adult world leaders having all the power to shape the world that the youth will have no choice but to live in. Instead, she chastises “you” by associating with “you” the characteristics that are shameful for adults to exhibit.

In relation to temporality, this persuasive power of this section draws upon Thunberg affirming her own powerless position in this current dynamic. Currently, Thunberg is a child; currently, her audience are the adults. Currently, Thunberg occupies the position of the powerless; currently, her audience is the powerful. Thunberg draws attention to the vulnerability and lack of power of “us/we,” of Thunberg’s generation as children experiencing the consequences and impact of policies and decisions made by the adults in the room. She uses the fact that the identity of the adult is rooted in their ability to exercise power over the child as a parent or caretaker to say, “How dare you?”

The qualities of irresponsibility and deception found in “you,” the adults in the room, play a central role to this first part of Thunberg’s message. Thunberg works within the existing framework of what it means to be a good adult to call them, essentially, adults failing to be adults. She frames “you” as “still not mature enough to tell it like it is” and continuing to believe

in “fairy tales” of economic success (Figure 1a); Thunberg chastises the adults for acting like children. She likens “you” to children who cling onto the comfort of their dreams and false realities despite knowing better. She rhetorically strips her audience of their power as adults, stripping away the markers of what defines adulthood, calling them immature, irresponsible, short-sighted, selfish. “How dare you?” she asks over and over. How dare you, the adult, fail to care for the children under your power? The underlying assumption is that the existing order does not necessarily need to be overturned; the problem is that the powerful are not exercising their power in satisfactory ways. Based on the assumption that taking care of children is intrinsic to the identity of being an adult, Thunberg’s address utilizes the existing relationship of the child-adult roles to speak from a powerless position that she, too, acknowledges, to ultimately appeal to the existing power of adults.

“We’ll Be Watching You”: Anticipated Power

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

In the last few lines of the speech, a jarring transition comes into play. In the first section, Greta affirms the power dynamic between the adult and the child, between world leaders and schoolchildren. Her argument begins as an appeal; her chastising, no matter how vitriolic, is ultimately an appeal. It is an appeal from the bottom up, a toothless appeal (Memmi, 1999) as long as “you” remains the main agent acting upon “us/we.” However, as seen in the excerpt above, Thunberg takes a sharp turn and constructs a completely different dynamic in her closing sentences.

As the speech progresses, “we” replaces “you” as the subject and takes on the active voice. And just as the speech progresses, time also progresses. The variable of temporality enables Thunberg to paint a completely different narrative. By harnessing the passage of time, as shown by the introduction of verbs in the future tense, Thunberg is no longer today’s child, but tomorrow’s adult, standing in the position of the to-be-powerful. Her audience is no longer the current adults and current holders of power, but the to-be-usurped, to-be-ousted, to-be-powerless. If “we” was cornered for most of the first section of the speech, “we” is now vigilant (Figure 2b). “The young people are starting to understand your betrayal,” Thunberg says. Thunberg now constructs the “young people” as agents of change, as those soon to wield power.

If Thunberg’s initial *powerless power* was an appeal to the powerful from the position of the powerless, a toothless threat, Thunberg has now grown her teeth — or, rather, she reminds her audience that her generation will soon be the ones with the teeth and her audience the ones without. Thunberg alludes to the shifting, elusive nature of power — its time-bound transience and impermanence. In this portion of the address, Thunberg draws upon what I propose as *anticipated power*, harnessing the power of the future to make her case.

Wielding this *anticipated power*, Thunberg now threatens. She hints at a form of retaliation, an impending threat that includes a refusal to forgive and some form of direct ill will: “And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this.” Thunberg further speaks to her audience’s anticipated loss of agency, ending by stating that change will happen “whether you like it or not.” At this point, Thunberg abandons the need to appeal to the currently-powerful to use their power because “us/we” will eventually have the power and agency to act without asking for permission.

Furthermore, this anticipated generational threat holds greater meaning in the context of the anticipated environmental threat. Just as the fullness of the anticipated power of Thunberg and “us/we” cannot be realized until time passes, the fullness of the anticipated effects of climate change cannot be realized without the variable of time. Thunberg similarly frames climate action as a response to the anticipated effects of climate change, and her harnessing of the anticipated power of her own generation fits smoothly as a parallel framework.

Thunberg harnesses the power of tomorrow to persuade her audience to act today; the temporal element of anticipation, acting now in response to what may come, paints Thunberg as a voice from the future, drawing upon the gravity of future consequences to speak into the present.

Figure 3. Summary of Analysis		
	Powerless Power	Anticipated Power
<i>Temporal scene</i>	Current	Future
<i>Players</i>	Children and adults Powerless and powerful	To-be-adults and to-be-gone To-be-powerful and to-be-powerless
<i>Key action</i>	Chastise: appeal to existing power	Threaten: harness future power

Conclusions and Looking Beyond

In response to the question of how Thunberg harnesses the power to persuade an audience of world leaders, Thunberg demonstrates the strength that lies in the variable of temporality. Thunberg’s time-bound rhetorical power is two-fold: She first draws upon *powerless power*, speaking from the position of a current child, voiceless in the public sphere; she then shifts to utilizing *anticipated power*, harnessing the to-be power of the impending reality that she and her generation will eventually occupy the very seats of decision-making that

her audience currently occupies. *Powerless power* affirms the existing order, centering one's current powerlessness as one appeals to the powerful. The temporal scene is now. With this, Thunberg uses her position as a child to chastise the adults in the room for failing to live up to their identity as adults, calling them to act out of their role and duty as the ones in power to care for the powerless, their duty as adults to care for children. *Anticipated power* refers to a new order, a new dynamic to come, bringing in the future identity that one will eventually occupy to harness now the power that is to come. Here, Thunberg centers the agency of "we/us" rather than "you" to demonstrate the inevitable shift in the power dynamic due to the variable of time.

When taking a step back from this particular case study within its specific contexts of environmental activism and the rhetor of Greta Thunberg, this rhetorical criticism ultimately contributes to a larger question of rhetorical power: Where do the powerless find rhetorical power? What rhetorical devices do the marginalized and the powerless have access to in order to persuade the powerful? While this particular child-adult framework may not translate directly to other dynamics of power in areas such as race, class, and gender I argue that this is a valuable rhetorical criticism of a rhetor who harnesses the device of temporality to use both her group's current powerlessness and future power-to-come to create a powerful message of persuasion. I call for a deeper look into how the groups that are rendered powerless in contexts of public discourse around topics of social change play with various rhetorical devices from which to harness the necessary power needed to speak into the realities of the powerful.

Some sub-questions are as follows: In what contexts is it actually a powerful move to center one's current lack of power? When and how does a group's lack of power actually become power with which to speak into the powerful? When is it an effective method to

acknowledge the current existing power dynamic and adopt a message of appealing to the powerful? And with that, the larger question is: How do the powerless profess their lack of power, humiliate themselves, and ask the powerful for help while keeping their humanity intact? Perhaps Thunberg accomplishes this with her two-fold approach — by showing that the powerless in her address actually do have power — drawing from the future to show the power that is to come. The *anticipated power* that she creates works to communicate a real, impending threat: There are real consequences to your actions, she says — real power that we will one day hold over you based on how you act now. I would be interested in taking a closer look at some of Thunberg's addresses with this framework of powerless and anticipated power in mind, taking the time to conduct extensive research into the existing frameworks of environmental activism rhetoric.

If we are to be truly committed to equity, the study of how marginalized voices are to be effectively heard in dominant circles is a necessary and worthy topic of study. Thunberg's audience laughs when she begins with, "We will be watching you." They applaud. The response seems out of place. Thunberg pauses to make room for the noise, but she presses forward without a smile; she is here to deliver an uncomfortable message meant to unsettle, not to elicit laughter or applause. When the powerless speak, may we have the ears to hear.

References

- Foss, Sonja K., & Cindy L. Griffin (1992) A feminist perspective on rhetorical theory: Toward a clarification of boundaries. *Western Journal of Communication*, 56(4), 330-349. DOI: 10.1080/10570319209374422.
- Fridays for Future. (n.d.). "About." Retrieved from <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about>.
- Kramarae, Cherie. (1981). *Women and men speaking: Frameworks for analysis*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Memmi, Albert. (1999). *Racism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- NPR Staff (2019, September 23). "Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech At The U.N. Climate Action Summit." Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>.
- Thunberg, Greta [gretathunberg]. (n.d.). Instagram [Instagram page]. Retrieved on December 7, 2019, from <https://www.instagram.com/gretathunberg/>.
- Thunberg, Greta [gretathunberg]. (n.d.). Tweets [Twitter page]. Retrieved on December 7, 2019, from <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg>.
- United Nations. (n.d.). "UN Climate Action Summit 2019." Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/un-climate-summit-2019.shtml>.
- Weber, Max. (1968). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. New York: Bedminster Press.

Appendix A

Transcript provided by NPR (NPR Staff, 2019).

Section titles and emphasis added for coding purposes.

Anticipated Power

My message is that **we'll be watching you**.

Powerless Power

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be **back in school** on the other side of the ocean. Yet **you all come** to us **young people** for hope. **How dare you!**

You have stolen my **dreams** and my **childhood** with your **empty words**. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is **money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth**. **How dare you!**

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. **How dare you continue to look away** and come here **saying that you're doing enough**, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still **kept on failing to act**, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees [Celsius], and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control. Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not

include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also **rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist.**

So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us — **we who have to live with the consequences.**

To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise – the best odds given by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] – the world had 420 gigatons of CO2 left to emit back on Jan. 1st, 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons.

How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? With today's emissions levels, that remaining CO2 budget will be entirely gone within less than 8 1/2 years.

There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are **too uncomfortable**. And **you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.**

Anticipated Power

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: **We will never forgive you.**

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where **we draw the line.** The world is waking up. And change is coming, **whether you like it or not.**

Thank you.