

# **Semester Project**

**Greta Thunberg:**

**The disarming case to act right now on climate change**

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# 1 Background

## Who is Greta Thunberg?

Greta Thunberg is a young Swedish climate activist. She became famous in 2018 when she skipped school and protested against the lack of action against the climate crisis in front of the Swedish parliament for three weeks. She was joined by many young people who regularly skipped classes to strike in front of the parliament and the movement soon gained international attention. The picture of Greta with her “Skolstrejk för Klimatet” (School Strike for Climate) sign went viral and inspired young people around the world to organize their own climate strikes, which led to the worldwide #FridaysforFuture movement (cf. Britannica, 2022).

Since then, Greta Thunberg has attended several meetings with politicians and spoken at climate rallies in Stockholm, Helsinki, Brussels and London. For example, she attended the United Nations COP24 in Katowice, Poland in 2018 and was invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019 (cf. Ted Conferences, 2022).

## Ted Talk: The disarming case to act right now on climate change

In her Ted Talk at TedxStockholm in November 2018, Greta explains how her own life is affected by climate change and how she realized that nobody does something against it. With the help of well-chosen examples and different rhetorical devices, she tries to appeal to her audience’s conscience and makes clear that it is high time to start acting now in order to keep the consequences of climate change on a relatively low level. In order to raise awareness of this topic, she uses a variety of language features that are worth being analyzed in more detail.



<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/12/opinion/sunday/california-power-outage-climate.html>

## 2 Text

When I was about eight years old, I first heard about something called **climate change** or **global warming**. Apparently, that was something humans had created by our way of living. I was told to **turn off the lights** to **save energy** and to **recycle paper** to **save resources**. I remember thinking that it was very strange that humans, who are an animal species among others, could be capable of changing the **Earth's climate**. Because if we were, and if it was really happening, we wouldn't be talking about anything else. As soon as you'd turn on the TV, everything would be about that. Headlines, radio, newspapers, you would never read or hear about anything else, as if there was a world war going on. But no one ever talked about it. If **burning fossil fuels** was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no **restrictions**? Why wasn't it made illegal?

01:18

To me, that did not add up. It was too unreal. So when I was 11, I became ill. I fell into depression, I stopped talking, and I stopped eating. In two months, I lost about 10 kilos of weight. Later on, I was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, OCD and selective mutism. That basically means I only speak when I think it's necessary - now is one of those moments.

01:53

(Applause)

02:03

For those of us who are on the spectrum, almost everything is black or white. We aren't very good at lying, and we usually don't enjoy participating in this social game that the rest of you seem so fond of.

02:17

(Laughter)

02:18

I think in many ways that we autistic are the normal ones, and the rest of the people are pretty strange,

02:24

(Laughter)

02:25

especially when it comes to the **sustainability crisis**, where everyone keeps saying **climate change** is an **existential threat** and the most important issue of all, and yet they just carry on like before. I don't understand that, because if the **emissions** have to stop, then we must stop the **emissions**. To me that is black or white. There are no gray areas when it comes to **survival**. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't. We have to change.

03:00

Rich countries like Sweden need to start **reducing emissions** by at least 15 percent every year. And that is so that we can stay below a **two-degree warming target**. Yet, as the IPCC have recently demonstrated, aiming instead for 1.5 degrees Celsius would significantly reduce the **climate impacts**. But we can only imagine what that means for **reducing emissions**. You would think the media and every one of our leaders would be talking about nothing else, but they never even mention it. Nor does anyone ever mention the **greenhouse gases** already locked in the system. Nor that **air pollution** is hiding a **warming** so that when we stop **burning fossil fuels**, we already have an extra **level of warming** perhaps as high as 0.5 to 1.1 degrees Celsius. Furthermore does hardly anyone speak about the fact that we are in the midst of the sixth **mass extinction**, with up to 200 species going extinct every single day, that the **extinction rate** today is between 1,000 and 10,000 times higher than what is seen as normal. Nor does hardly anyone ever speak about the aspect of equity or **climate justice**, clearly stated everywhere in the **Paris Agreement**, which is absolutely necessary to make it work on a **global scale**. That means that rich countries need to get down to **zero emissions** within 6 to 12 years, with today's **emission speed**. And that is so that people in poorer countries can have a chance to heighten their standard of living by building some of the infrastructure that we have already built, such as roads, schools, hospitals, clean drinking water, electricity, and so on. Because how can we expect countries like India or Nigeria to care about the **climate crisis** if we who already have everything don't care even a second about it or our actual commitments to the Paris Agreement?

05:20

So, why are we not **reducing our emissions**? Why are they in fact still increasing? Are we knowingly causing a mass extinction? Are we evil? No, of course not. People keep doing what they do because the vast majority doesn't have a clue about the actual **consequences** of our everyday life, and they don't know that rapid change is required. We all think we know, and we all think everybody knows, but we don't. Because how could we? If there really was a **crisis**, and if this **crisis** was caused by our **emissions**, you would at least see some signs. Not just flooded cities, tens of thousands of dead people, and whole nations leveled to piles of torn down buildings. You would see some **restrictions**. But no. And no one talks about it. There are no emergency meetings, no headlines, no breaking news. No one is acting as if we were in a **crisis**. Even most **climate scientists** or green politicians keep on flying around the world, eating meat and dairy. If I live to be 100, I will be alive in the year 2103. When you think about the future today, you don't think beyond the year 2050. By then, I will, in the best case, not even have lived half of my life.

07:10

What happens next? The year 2078, I will celebrate my 75th birthday. If I have children or grandchildren, maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you, the people who were around,

back in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act. What we do or don't do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. What we do or don't do right now, me and my generation can't undo in the future. So when school started in August of this year, I decided that this was enough. I set myself down on the ground outside the Swedish parliament. I school striked for the climate. Some people say that I should be in school instead. Some people say that I should study to become a climate scientist so that I can "solve the climate crisis." But the climate crisis has already been solved. We already have all the facts and solutions. All we have to do is to wake up and change. And why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future? And what is the point of learning facts in the school system when the most important facts given by the finest science of that same school system clearly means nothing to our politicians and our society. Some people say that Sweden is just a small country, and that it doesn't matter what we do, but I think that if a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not coming to school for a few weeks, imagine what we could all do together if you wanted to.

09:20

(Applause)

09:24

Now we're almost at the end of my talk, and this is where people usually start talking about hope, solar panels, wind power, circular economy, and so on, but I'm not going to do that. We've had 30 years of pep-talking and selling positive ideas. And I'm sorry, but it doesn't work. Because if it would have, the emissions would have gone down by now. They haven't. And yes, we do need hope, of course we do. But the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere.

10:11

So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come.

10:22

Today, we use 100 million barrels of oil every single day. There are no politics to change that. There are no rules to keep that oil in the ground. So we can't save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed.

10:44

Everything needs to change -- and it has to start today.

10:49

Thank you.

10:50

(Applause)

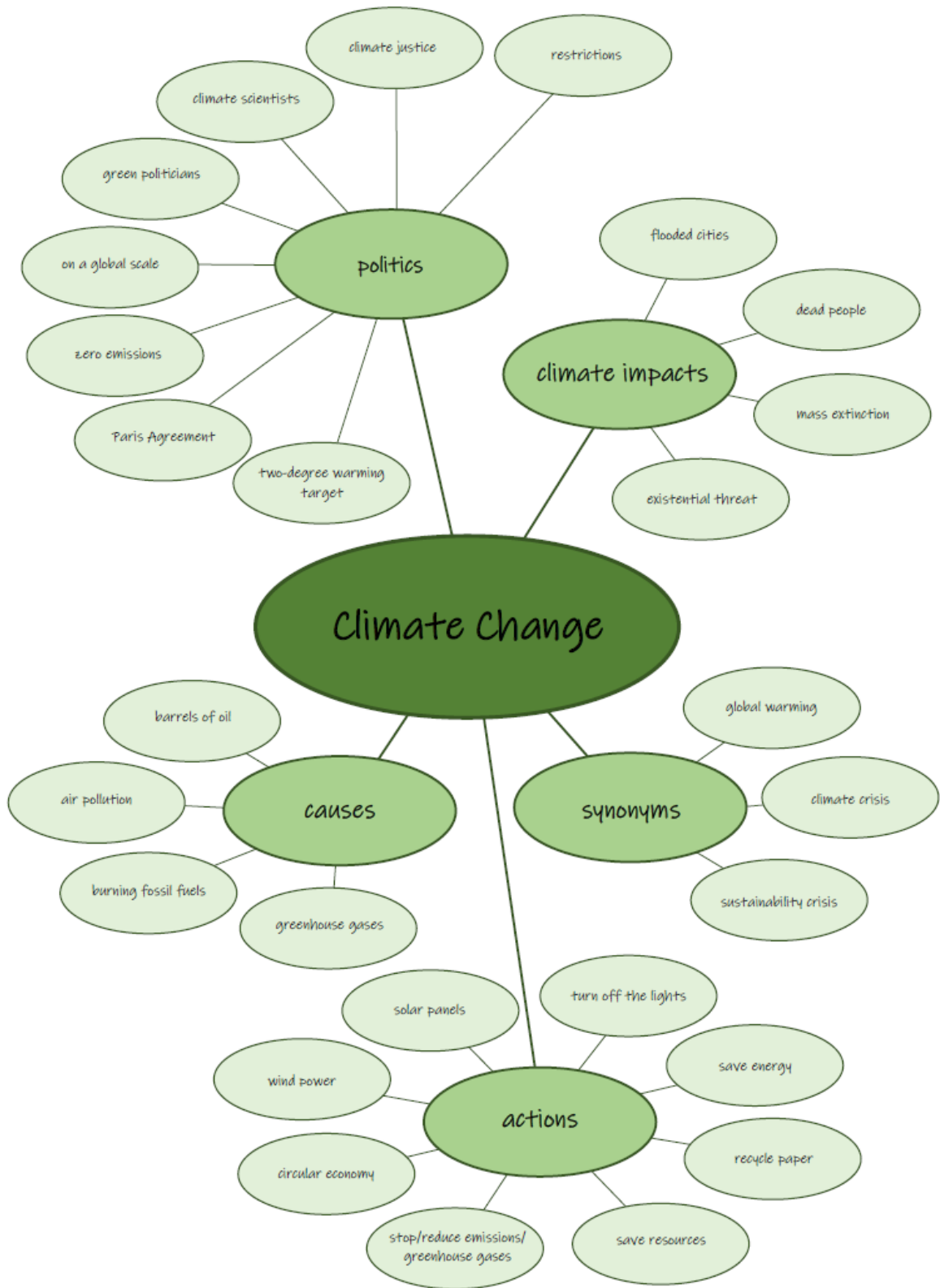
## **3 Language Analysis**

### **3.2 Topic-related vocabulary**

Greta Thunberg's speech is full of vocabulary which can be useful to talk about the topic of climate change in class. David Crystal (1992, p. 346) makes clear that "the vocabulary of a language is a system of interrelated lexical networks, and not an inventory of independent items". Therefore, it makes sense to teach topic-related vocabulary in order to help learners understand the conceptual meaning and the relationships between individual words and phrases. Additionally, according to Tanner and Green (1998, p.29), "words that are related are joined together in our brains; if a new word can be hooked to words which are already stored, it might be easier to remember it. It would seem logical therefore that we should teach words in lexical sets to our learners, so that it is easier for them to retain and store the words in their memory."

#### **3.2.1 Climate change: words in context**

According to Sridharan (2017), mindmaps are "a data visualization technique to graphically establish connections between several ideas or pieces of information". It helps learners to understand the relationships between the individual words and phrases and makes it easier for them to remember the vocabulary because they have a visual representation of how the different words and phrases are connected to each other. Thus, several channels of perception, namely the visual, the motoric and the auditory channel, are addressed. The following mindmap provides an overview of how the topic-related vocabulary from Thunberg's speech could be visualized:



### 3.2.2 Vocabulary deep dive

The noun “sustainability” is one of the keywords in the current climate change discourse, which is why it makes sense to take a closer look on its forms and uses. The following table provides an overview of the different word forms and their definitions.

Vocabulary	Word class	Definition
<b>sustainability</b>	noun	“the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)
<b>to sustain</b>	verb	“to cause or allow something to continue for a period of time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)
<b>sustainable</b>	adjective	“causing, or made in a way that causes, little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)
<b>sustained</b>	adjective	“continuing for a long time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)
<b>sustainably</b>	adverb	“in a way that can continue over a period of time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)

It is particularly useful to work on word families in English Language Teaching in Austria, as there is a task type called *word formation* that the learners have to deal with in their final exams. According to Nordquist (2019b), “a word family is a group of words with a common base to which different prefixes and suffixes are added”. For example, as can be seen in the table above, several different suffixes are added to the root word **sustain**, which leads to new word forms. The British Council (2020) describes the task type *word formation* as follows: “In a sentence or text you have to change the form of a word, e.g. from a noun to an adjective, or from a verb to a noun.” Doing vocabulary deep dives like the one exemplified helps to broaden the learners’ range of vocabulary and therefore prepares them for standardized tests.



## 4 Teaching Potential

Authentic texts like Greta Thunberg’s speech can be exploited for several purposes in the language classroom. In the following, some ideas for using this text in order to foster learners’ language skills are described.

### 4.1 Working with the language in the text

#### 4.1.2 Vocabulary work

In order to practice topic-related vocabulary, the learners will be instructed to create a mindmap containing words and phrases related to climate change, similar to the one in 3.2.1. First, they will have to read the transcript of the speech very carefully and underline the topic-related words and phrases. Then, in order to structure their graphic organizer, they have to define categories to which the underlined words belong. As a scaffold, the categories or one example from each category could be provided. The complete mindmap can then serve as a scaffold itself as it provides relevant vocabulary to write or talk about climate change during the further engagement with the topic.

To practice word formation, the learners could do a deep dive into the word *sustainability* as exemplified in 3.2.2 or they could choose another word from the speech that is relevant to the topic of climate change and share their deep dives with their colleagues, for example, by designing posters or handouts.

### 4.2 Going beyond the text

In order to engage further with the topic of climate change, which is the main topic of Greta Thunberg’s speech, a “Climate Action Day” could be organized. This would provide an ideal setting for project-based and cross-curricular learning and teaching, and it would give learners the opportunity to bring together what they have learnt about climate change so far. For example, the learners could do some more research on topics related to climate change they are interested in (Paris Agreement, climate justice, SDGs, consequences for the environment, mass extinctions in earth history, tips for a climate-friendly behaviour, carbon footprint, ...) and put together a class magazine. They could also organize their own climate rally, preparing persuasive speeches and signs to convey their message. Additionally, they could use their knowledge about climate change to suggest to EU leaders how they should deal with the pressing topic climate change by writing an open letter to the Parliament of the European Union

in which they demand immediate action against climate change. Of course, there are many more opportunities what else could be included in such a “Climate Action Day” and maybe the learners even have their own ideas about what they want to work on. This is what meaningful learning looks like.

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