

A Qualitative Analysis of Discourse Markers in the Consultation Paper on Climate Change by the Liberal Democrats

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Abstract

The issue of climate change is one of the key foci of British politics and social activism. Whilst there are multiple studies on the climate change discourses by the major political actors in the United Kingdom (the UK), research on the climate change discourse by the Liberal Democrats seems to be under-represented. Acknowledging the gap in scholarship, this article presents a qualitative study that seeks to learn about the discourse on climate change by the Liberal Democrats. Specifically, the study focuses on identifying and discussing the pragmatic roles of DMs in the Consultation Paper on Climate Change by the Liberal Democrats. The results of the qualitative analysis show that the Consultation Paper on Climate Change is marked by such DMs as (i) *furthermore*, (ii) *although*, (iii) *but*, (iv) *however*, (v) *if*, (vi) *in particular*, (vii) *specifically*, and (viii) *more specifically*, which play a range of pragmatic roles that are further discussed in the article.

Keywords: *climate change, climate change discourse, discourse markers, the Liberal Democrats, the United Kingdom*

1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom (the UK), the issue of climate change has become one of the critical foci of the current political agenda (Kapranov, 2023, 2024a; Sloam, Pickard, & Henn, 2022). The issue of climate change, however, polarises British political and societal actors (Cole et al., 2025; Kapranov, 2025a). Particularly, the British political spectrum is characterised by a number of mutually exclusive approaches to tackling the climate crisis that range from climate denialism to climate activism (Berglund & Bailey, 2023; Hansson, 2018; Hornsey & Lewandowsky, 2022; Kapranov, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). For example, the UK's Green Party prioritises the issue of climate change as its specific political niche and demands the adoption of an intensive climate

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change-related agenda (Dennison, 2020), whilst the British mainstream parties, for instance the Conservative and Labour Parties, regard climate change as a long-term challenge that needs to be mitigated via political and economic mechanisms in order to meet the 2050 net-zero target (Carter, 2013, 2014; Kapranov, 2025b).

Whereas there is a plethora of scholarly studies on climate change policies and climate change discourses by the British mainstream actors (Boykoff, 2008; Lorenzoni & Benson, 2014; Kapranov, 2025a), relatively little is known about climate discourse by the UK's Liberal Democrats (Carter & Clements, 2015; Clements, 2014; Ford et al., 2025). Particularly, there is insufficient research on climate change-related discourse by the Liberal Democrats (Gillard, 2016). Taking into consideration the current gap in scholarly knowledge, the article presents a qualitative study that aims at learning about how metadiscursive means are used in the Consultation Paper on Climate Change (further — the Paper) published by the Liberal Democrats in 2024. Specifically, the study examines discourse markers (DMs) and their pragmatic roles in the Paper. Accordingly, the study answers the following

research question (RQ):

RQ: What are the pragmatic roles of DMs in the Paper?

Providing answers to the RQ seems relevant to the fields of (i) discourse studies, in particular, the Anglophone political discourse and the discourse on climate change, (ii) climate change education, and (iii) education for sustainable development (Kapranov, 2018a, 2025c, 2025d; Kapranov & Voloshyna, 2023).

Further, the article is structured as follows. First, the literature on DMs in the Anglophone climate change discourses is provided in section 2 of the article. Second, the present study is introduced and discussed in section 3. Finally, the study is concluded with the summary of the findings and an indication of prospective research.

2. The Literature on DMs in the Anglophone Climate Change Discourses

We should emphasise that DMs are researched in discourse studies, linguistics, applied linguistics, and studies on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Fraser, 1990, 1999, 2006, 2009; Kapranov, 2017, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2024e; Schiffrin, 2006; Schourup, 1999). Taking into consideration the fact that DMs are extensively studied in a range of scientific disciplines by different scholars (see comprehensive literature reviews in Kapranov (2021), Povolná (2012), and Schiffrin (2006)), it is only logical to expect that there are multiple definitions of DMs. For example, Aijmer (2002) posits that DMs are regarded as words or phrases that have connotative but not propositional meanings. Agreeing with Aijmer (2002), Furkó (2017), however, emphasises that DMs possess a pragmatic dimension, which he includes in his definition of DMs as



a set of syntactically diverse linguistic items (for example, of course, surely, I think, well and so on) that are used for a variety of attitudinal and meta-communicative functions, lack conceptual meaning, and whose distinctive properties include indexicality, context-dependence and multifunctionality. The term PrM will be used as an umbrella term whose extension includes items with a primarily textual, discourse-connecting function as well primarily non-connective, interpersonal attitude markers (Furkó, 2017, p. 2)

Irrespective of the approaches to the classification of DMs, there is a nascent line of research that examines the occurrence and pragmatic functioning of DMs in climate change discourse, in particular in the Anglophone climate change discourse. For instance, Fløttum (2010) demonstrates that DMs are typically used in order to reflect polyphonic relationships in a climate change-related text. Furthermore, she notes that contrastive DMs are extensively employed in scientific texts on climate change. Analogously to Fløttum (2010), Kapranov (2024b, 2024e) shows that a number of contrastive DMs are frequently found in the discourse on climate change by King Charles III. Kapranov (2024e) illustrates the finding as follows:

In the present corpus, the DM **but** seems to be readily utilised by the King in (i) creating contrast, as shown in excerpt (5) as well as (ii) adding an alternative discursive voice or a point of view to his narrative, as illustrated by excerpt (6). Both (5) and (6) derive from a speech delivered by the King at the Energy and Climate Change Meeting in Campeche in Mexico on 4 November 2014. (5) I'm not an economist, **but** I do think I have a little bit of common sense! And, if I may, Ladies and Gentlemen, I fear that we will also miss a trick unless we embrace the concept of a circular economy - not a linear one - not least in the utilization of waste and sewage in energy production, something which I know the President is thinking about seriously and which I've been taking seriously for the past 25 years. (Kapranov, 2024e, p. 140)

In a fairly recent study, Kapranov (2025a) has established that the current British prime minister Keir Starmer uses a range of DMs in his speeches and oral statements on the issue of climate change. Particularly, a quantitative examination of Starmer's discourse on climate change reveals that

there is a group of DMs that occur very frequently in the corpus, namely (i) and, (ii) as, (iii) but, (iv) also, (v) so, and (vi) because. It should be briefly mentioned that the aforementioned six DMs could be classified, in accordance with Fraser (2015), into elaborative (e.g., and), implicative (also, as, because, so), and contrastive (e.g., but). Judging from the data presented in Table 2, the elaborative DM and is the most frequent DM in Keir Starmer's speeches on climate change, which is followed by the implicative DM as. (Kapranov, 2025a, p. 17).

In line with the prior studies that point to the use of contrastive and additive DMs in the Anglophone climate change discourses (Fløttum, 2010; Kapranov, 2024e, 2025a), a quantitative analysis of the climate change reports by the Greater London Authority (Kapranov, 2026) has yielded the following findings, which illustrate that the



reports communicate the issue of climate change by means of using a rather wide range of DMs (N of types of DMs = 48). The range of DMs in the corpus is in line with the literature [27-28], which indicates that the major corporate actors in the UK employ a vast array of metadiscursive means, inter alia DMs, in their corporate reporting that concerns the issue of climate change. However, our findings are in contrast to the prior studies, which show that the Anglophone legal discourse on climate change employs a modest range of DMs [29]. It follows from Table 1 that the most frequently occurring DMs in the corpus are (i) and, (ii) as, (iii) however, (iv) but, and (v) if. (Kapranov, 2026, p. 10)

It is evident from the literature overview that the British climate change discourse makes use, predominantly, of the elaborative and contrastive DMs. It also follows from the literature review that there is a scarcity of studies that focus on DM in the British climate change discourse. In this light, we introduce and discuss a qualitative study on DMs in the climate change discourse by the Liberal Democrats in the subsequent section of the article.

3. The Present Study

As previously mentioned, there is insufficient research on DMs in the Anglophone and, specifically, British climate change discourses. That is why, the present study aims at proving an additional insight into this under-researched area of scientific inquiry. Specifically, the study examines the Consultation Paper on Climate Change, which was published by the Liberal Democrats in 2024. In the study, we refer to the Consultation Paper on Climate Change as the Paper and analyse it qualitatively in order to identify DMs and discuss their pragmatic roles.

The Paper is available at <https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/papers/autumn-2024/157-climate-change>. The Paper consists of seven parts, which are titled (i) Background, (ii) Introduction, (iii) Our Starting Points and Recent Developments, (iv) Overall Framework, (v) Mitigation, (vi) Just Transition, and (vii) Adaptation. It should be noted that the Liberal Democrats regard the Paper as a platform for exchanging ideas and debating about their climate change-related policy, cf.

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of new Party policy in relation to Climate Change. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the response generated and on the deliberations of the working group, a full policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate. The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Duncan Brack. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 1)

In other words, the Paper represents a policy-shaping platform for an in-house debate that is taking place within the Liberal Democratic Party on the issue of climate change. The Paper, however, is written in the form of a programme, with occasional passages that invite the party



members to suggest ways of influencing the party's policies on the issue of climate change. Hence, the readers can encounter passages in the Paper that are presented as a series of questions to the party members.

The Paper is analysed qualitatively in order to identify DMs in line with the definition of DMs provided by Fraser (1997, 1999, 2009, 2011, 2013), who defines them as lexical expressions, which “signal a relationship between the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1” (Fraser, 1999, p. 950). Modifying Fraser's definition of DMs, the identification of DMs in the study also includes those instances, in which they occur on the clausal boundaries between two clauses within one sentence, as well as on the sentential boundaries, as indicated by Fraser (2009, 2011, 2013).

The study's aim to determine the pragmatic roles of DMs in the Paper does not follow a predetermined set of roles found in the prior studies (see, for instance, Furkó (2017)). Instead, the assignment of pragmatic roles to DMs in the Paper is data-driven and specific to the context of the Paper. The results of the qualitative analysis are summarised and discussed in subsection 3.1. of the article.

3.1. Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis reveal that the Paper involves several qualitatively different types of DMs. In the order of their appearance in the Paper, these DMs are as follows: (i) *furthermore*, (ii) *although*, (iii) *but*, (iv) *however*, (v) *if*, (vi) *in particular*, (vii) *specifically*, and (viii) *more specifically*. The aforementioned types of DMs in the Paper can be grouped into (i) elaborative DMs, (ii) contrastive DMs, and (iii) conditional DMs. These three groups of DMs are further discussed in the present subsection of the article.

The elaborative DMs in the Paper are represented by *furthermore*, *in particular*, *specifically*, and *more specifically*. Whereas the DM *furthermore* is found in the initial parts of the Paper, the DMs *in particular*, *specifically*, and *more specifically* are located in the mid-section and the concluding parts of the Paper, as illustrated by excerpts (1) — (4) below.

(1) Human activities, mainly the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, are causing global temperatures to rise, which in turn is driving the most rapid change in the climate in Earth's history. July 2024 was Earth's warmest July on record, extending the series of record high monthly global temperatures to 14 successive months. The year to date (January – July 2024) has seen average global surface temperature reach 1.28°C above the 20th-century average. **Furthermore**, the rate of change is accelerating: the warming rate of 0.18°C per decade seen between 1970 and 2008 almost doubled to roughly 0.3°C per decade over the past 15 years. On present trends,



the 1.5°C target set in the Paris Agreement will be breached by 2040. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 3)

(2) Are the policies set out above still fit for purpose, particularly given the accelerating rate of global warming? What needs to be changed or added? **In particular**, what should our policy be in relation to when ending sales of new petrol and diesel cars, and of gas boilers? (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 17)

(3) **Specifically**, we proposed to create an independent Just Transition Commission to report to Parliament on the costs and benefits of net zero policies and provide advice on how to ensure that the transition delivers high-value employment opportunities and that disadvantaged groups are protected, with the benefits shared fairly between income groups, industries and regions. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 19)

(4) **More specifically**, what needs to be done in the priority areas? The UN's Global Goal on Adaptation framework includes seven global thematic targets, covering water, food and agriculture, health, nature and biodiversity, infrastructure and buildings, livelihoods and cultural heritage. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 22)

As evident from excerpts (1) — (4), the elaborative role of the DMs *further*, *in particular*, *specifically*, and *more specifically* consists in providing more specific information concerning the main points associated with the issue of climate change in the Paper. Additionally, we argue that the elaborative role of these DMs pertains to providing exemplification to the main argument, which is especially seen in (3) and (4), respectively. In case of the DM *furthermore*, we may assume that in addition to conveying a fine-tuned dimension to the exemplification of the point in (1), the pragmatic role of *furthermore* seems to render importance, or, perhaps, salience to the argument as a supplementary layer of its pragmatic function. So far, we contend that the elaborative DMs constitute a prominent feature of the Paper, since we have identified four types of elaborative DMs in it. This finding is rather novel, given that the prior studies on DMs in climate change discourse do not report a qualitatively rich presence of elaborative DMs (see Fløttum (2010), Kapranov (2024e, 2025a, 2026)).

Whilst the DM *although* can be regarded as contrastive in (5) and (6), we should, however, point to its pragmatic role that appears to be associated with concession in the Paper, as exemplified below:

(5) Wildfires will become more common and more extensive, water supplies will come under pressure and habitats and wildlife will suffer. **Although** the UK is better placed to adapt to climate change than many other countries, it will not escape global impacts such as rising food prices, the spread of diseases and the rise in numbers of refugees. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 4)



(6) The record of the Conservative government on these issues has not been impressive, to put it mildly. **Although** the UK became the first major economy to adopt a target of net zero (in 2019), the Conservatives failed to put in place the measures necessary to achieve it. They continued to support road building and airport expansion, approved new oil and gas exploration licences in the North Sea, delayed the targets for phasing out sales of petrol and diesel vehicles and gas boilers, and provided insufficient support for renewable electricity generation and low-carbon heat and insulation upgrades in buildings — together costing energy bill-payers an estimated £2.5 billion by 2024. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 7)

From a pragmatic perspective, we may also argue that the DM *although* in both (5) and (6) conveys a mild form contrast. Presumably, the DM *although* in (5) and (6) combines the pragmatic property of concession that can be, hypothetically, interchanged with the DM *whereas*, its pragmatic role gravitates towards a suggestion to reconsider the argument that is manifested in the preceding sentence. Accordingly, we posit that the DM *although* is associated in (5) as well as in (6) with the undertones of contrast, concession, and even contradiction.

Whilst the DM *although* can be seen as a pragmatic marker of mild contrast, a stronger form of contrast in the Paper is rendered by the contrastive DMs *but* and *however*, respectively. The contrastive DMs *but* and *however* are illustrated by excerpts (7) and (8) below.

(7) Comparing actual UK emissions with the trajectory we set out in 2019, in fact emissions dropped sharply in 2020, to a slightly lower figure than we had projected, because of the pandemic and lockdown. They rebounded strongly in 2021, **however**, and by 2023 were at 425 MtCO₂e (including emissions from peatlands and the UK's share of international aviation and shipping), a 50 per cent fall from the base year of 1990. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 8)

(8) The Labour government elected in July 2024 came to power with a more ambitious climate agenda than its predecessor, **but** it remains to be seen whether this will survive contact with the government's other approaches, such as its strict fiscal rules and its excessive caution in approaching closer links with the EU. In developing the party's climate policy for the next electoral cycle, we will need to take into account a range of new factors. (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 8)

As illustrated by (7) and (8), the contrastive DMs *but* and *however* signal the contradictory and antonymic relationships between the clauses. They join the two clauses by means of foregrounding the fact that the idea in Clause 1 is in opposition to the idea in Clause 2. This finding is in alignment with the literature (Fløttum, 2010; Kapranov, 2024e, 2025a, 2026), which shows that contrastive DMs form an inalienable part of climate change discourses.



Finally, the Paper employs the conditional DM *if*, which plays a prototypical role of establishing dependency on the current condition. The use of the conditional DM *if* is exemplified by excerpt (9).

(9) **If** local authorities are given the responsibility, powers and resources to implement their own zero-carbon strategy, how can this be made consistent with the need to meet national targets? (The Consultation Paper, 2024, p. 13)

In (9), the conditional DM *if* plays a pragmatic role of a discussion-starter, i.e. by foregrounding contingencies between the ideas in (9), it is used as an invitation to the party members to discuss them and offer their vision of the net-zero strategy. It should be observed that the pragmatic use of the conditional DM *if* as an invitation to the discussion in (9) has not been reported in the studies on DMs in climate change discourses (Fløttum, 2010; Kaplanov, 2024e, 2025a, 2026).

4. Conclusions

The present qualitative study examined the Consultation Paper on Climate Change published by the Liberal Democrats in 2024. The aim of the examination was to identify DMs in the Paper and establish their pragmatic roles. The novelty of the study consisted in the fact that the climate change discourse by the Liberal Democrats was rarely analysed in the literature on the Anglophone climate change discourses.

Whereas the study was only one of the first attempts to shine light onto the climate change discourse by the Liberal Democrats, the results of the investigation revealed that the Paper involved the following DMs: (i) *furthermore*, (ii) *although*, (iii) *but*, (iv) *however*, (v) *if*, (vi) *in particular*, (vii) *specifically*, and (viii) *more specifically*. The analysis of their pragmatic roles demonstrated that they were associated with (i) elaboration and rendering salience to the supplementary layer of information; (ii) concession and mild contrast, which verged on combining contrast with concession and contradiction; and (iii) conditionality, which was exacerbated by the pragmatic undertone of a discussion-starter.

Based upon the aforementioned findings, the article could provide suggestions for future research investigations. In particular, it would be relevant to collect a corpus of climate change documents by the Liberal Democrats and analyse them quantitatively. In addition, it would be pertinent to contrast the climate change discourse by the Liberal Democrats with the respective discourses by other political actors in the UK and in the Anglophone world.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



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Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the References section.

Primary Sources

The Consultation Paper. (2024). Consultation Paper on Climate Change by the Liberal Democrats. <https://www.libdems.org.uk/conference/papers/autumn-2024/157-climate-change>

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