

SOCIOLINGUISTICS SYMPOSIUM 25

Curtin University
Perth, 24-27 June 2024



Language materialities, messy methods, and the sociolinguistics of waste

Whether it's called trash, garbage, junk, refuse, detritus, or just rubbish, waste is undoubtedly a matter of major concern: "With approximately 1.3 billion tonnes of municipal waste generated each year ... urgent action is needed to head off the threat to the environment and human health posed by this global waste crisis." (UNEP, 2012). We are proposing an interactive colloquium which explores the following question: *what is the role of language in this "crisis of waste"?*

Waste is clearly a matter of great ecological concern, but it is also a phenomenon which pushes at the edges of language in epistemologically and methodologically important ways. On the one hand, language plays a powerful role in naming and categorizing the stuff we throw away; as such, words not only define what waste is and isn't, but also help produce, maintain, and regulate everyday practices of waste-making (Thurlow, 2022; Thurlow, Pellanda & Wohlgemuth., 2022). On the other hand, waste exists beyond words as a fully material, spatial, and sensory practice; as such, it is also a non-representational experience. For these reasons, waste is a perfect site for exploring new sociolinguistic perspectives on language materiality (cf. Barad, 2003; Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2017) which, in turn, also demands new, more "messy" methodologies (cf. Law, 2004). These are the dual focus of our colloquium.

In proposing an interactive colloquium, we envisage a two-hour session divided into two parts. Part 1 will be organized around four short (10 minutes) presentations showcasing our own current research projects (see abstracts below) followed by 20 minutes for Q&A. These presentations exemplify new perspectives on innovative methodologies for studying language materiality. We expect this part of the workshop to use a hybrid offline and online format. Part 2, however, we envisage an offline-only, hands-on workshop. The focus here will be on exploring "messy methods" (e.g., mapping, object biographies, and performative writing) for studying waste as a language-material practice.

Waste is a quintessentially ordinary practice of everyday life. Its ordinariness is, however, precisely why waste is systematically – and conveniently – disregarded. Waste and waste practices are certainly something which, until relatively recently, sociolinguists have overlooked or ignored. Turning to waste as a thematic in our field is itself innovative; more than this, though, waste demands innovative ways of thinking and innovative ways of researching. Ultimately, we hope this colloquium will provide a space for participants to think reflexively and critically about the extent to which language makes waste but might also help to unmake it too.

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1. Crispin Thurlow – *Rubbish pedagogies: Mediatizing and moralizing discard*

In this short presentation, I introduce the sociolinguistics of waste by way of a four-part analytical framework and grounded in a methodological approach to language materiality. To exemplify this, I will draw on a social semiotic analysis of waste discourse in two different spaces of public pedagogy: (a) museum exhibitions, and (b) children's toys. Rather than the usual attention paid to news media, my focus is thus other influential sites of mediatization (cf. Androutopoulos, 2016) where we find waste being "schooled" in particular ways. I argue that, in both cases, the moral stance produced is rooted in the kinds of "disenchantment stories" (Hawkins, 2006) which do little to change either the lived or structural realities of waste.

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2. Charmaine Kong – *Cleaning up after global capitalism: A discourse ethnography*

This presentation considers the residues of global capitalism and the people literally left to pick up the pieces (cf. Herod and Aguiar, 2006). I will introduce my discourse-ethnographic study of three epitomic sites in Hong Kong: financial office blocks, shopping malls, and high-rise hotels. Here, I document the instrumental role of language/s in shaping and naturalizing waste systems masked behind the spectacular, seemingly glamorous spaces of globalization. By focusing on deep-backstage practices like paper shredding, toilet cleaning, and laundry services, my work unites sociolinguistic interest in center/periphery boundary-making (Pietikainen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013) with calls in discard studies (Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2023) to address economic externalities for “decentering” waste systems.

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3. Laura Wohlgemuth – *Show me your fridge! Food waste and/as indexicalities of value*

In this presentation, I demonstrate my “show me your fridge” method for generating two kinds of discourse data: (a) recordings of the ways people talk about household food waste, and (b) a photographic documentation of mediated practices and meanings (cf. Scollon, 2001). My analysis surfaces several language-material stances taken vis-à-vis food storage and the management of leftovers: emplacement and visibility; temporality and edibility; and styles of consumption. Ultimately, it is through their discursive evaluations of food/waste that people position themselves as certain kinds of people – all of which is key in understanding the “micropolitics” (Hawkins, 2006) of everyday domestic discarding.

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4. Alessandro Pellanda – *Garbage bags as semiotic entanglement and dispositif*

For many (in Switzerland), garbage day functions as a mundane performance of civic and even national selfhood; they are also material practices with complex “semiotic entanglements” (Reno, 2014). To demonstrate this, I draw on a visual ethnography of garbage day conducted across four Swiss cities. By reading garbage bags through the lens of Foucault’s (1980) *dispositif*, and following the lead of Androutsopoulos (2022), these banal practices also constitute scalar, biopolitical forms of control. Rather than approaching garbage bags as passive receptacles or neutral technologies, therefore, I understand them as a performative regime by which waste is displaced and public space is ordered.

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About the convenors: Crispin Thurlow is Professor of Language and Communication based in the Department of English at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Charmaine Kong (MA University of Hong Kong), Laura Wohlgemuth (MA University of Bern), and Alessandro Pellanda (MA University of Bern) are doctoral researchers on the Swiss National Science Foundation project *Articulating Rubbish: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the "Crisis of Waste"* (bit.ly/45ZjPx5).

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