

# Rubbish? Envisioning a sociolinguistics of waste

Crispin Thurlow 

University of Bern, Bern 3014, Switzerland

## Correspondence

Crispin Thurlow, University of Bern, Bern  
3014, Switzerland.

Email: [crispin.thurlow@unibe.ch](mailto:crispin.thurlow@unibe.ch)

## Abstract

(English) As the opening statement in a curated dialogue on *Language and Waste*, this paper considers what a sociolinguistics of waste might look like. In the first two parts, I provide some general rationale and academic context for starting to notice waste. By avoiding the dirty places and raw lives of waste, sociolinguists obscure two important relations: first, the social worlds of people who live and work with/in waste; second, the social connection between “us” (as makers of waste) and those left to pick up the pieces. I briefly review the isolated precedents in sociocultural linguistics for attending to waste. In the third and fourth parts, I propose at least two ways sociolinguistics can contribute usefully and distinctively to discard studies. I start by offering two empirical vignettes concerned with the discursive creation and destruction of value. In this vein, and orienting to economic sociology, I argue that scholarship on stancetaking can helpfully pinpoint the processes of (e)valuation and valuation by which things are declared unworthy or “waste-able.” Against the backdrop of these initial propositions, the dialogue continues with commentaries by Jillian Cavanaugh, Annabelle Mooney, and Joshua Reno who contribute their own ideas about approaching waste from a decidedly (socio)linguistic angle.

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discard studies, ecolinguistics, language, materiality, social semiotics, sociolinguistics, value, waste

**Abstract**

(Afrikaans) As die openingsverklaring in 'n saamgestelde dialoog oor *Language and Waste*, oorweeg hierdie referaat hoe 'n sosiolinguistiek van afval mag lyk. In die eerste twee dele van die referaat verskaf ek algemene rasionaal en akademiese konteks om vermorsing te begin raaksien. Deur die vuil plekke en rou lewens van afval te vermy, verdoesel sosiolinguïste twee belangrike verhoudings: eerstens, die sosiale wêreld van mense wat met/in afval leef en werk; en tweedens, die sosiale verbintenis tussen “ons” (as makers van afval) en diegene wat agterbly om die stukke op te tel. Ek hersien kortliks die paar geïsoleerde presedente in sosiokulturele linguistiek vir die aandag aan afval. In die derde en vierde dele stel ek ten minste twee maniere voor hoe sosiolinguistiek iets nuttigs en Kenmerkend tot *discard studies* kan bydra. Ek begin deur twee empiriese vignette aan te bied wat gemoeid is met die diskursiewe skepping en vernietiging van waarde. In hierdie trant, en met die oog op ekonomiese sosiologie, argumenteer ek dat vakkundigheid oor *stancetaking* die prosesse van (e)waardering en waardasie waardeur dinge onwaardig of “vermorsbaar” verklaar word, nuttig kan bepaal. Teen die agtergrond van hierdie aanvanklike voorstellings, gaan die dialoog voort met drie kommentare deur Jillian Cavanaugh, Annabelle Mooney en Joshua Reno. Elkeen van hierdie skrywers dra hul eie idees by oor hoe om afval vanuit 'n besliste (socio)linguïstiese hoek te benader.

... *since words were introduced here things have gone poorly for the planet: it's been between words and rivers, ...*

... *all this garbage! All these words ...*

Through the course of his magnificent poem *Garbage*, A. R. Ammons (1993; quoted above) presents language as being tightly bound up with waste. As such, he connects language to our pressing concerns with environmental collapse and our profound anxieties about death—the wasting of our own bodies. (I will be returning to death in my conclusion.) For Ammons, there is a quite literal sense in which we might connect words with garbage; it is to be found precisely in the weekly spectacle of Swiss



FIGURE 1 Weekly paper recycling, Switzerland (photo Andrea Cameron; used with permission)

life shown in Figure 1: newspapers and advertising brochures neatly bundled and placed for curbside pick-up and recycling. This is language—in its printed, written form—quite tangibly *materialized*. Words are thus *thingified* (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017) and, like so many things, must be disposed of.

In more poetic terms, Ammons' poem considers how we also waste words by producing an excess of words. In spite of all these words being produced and consumed, however, we appear no less in touch with ourselves or the world at large. Nonetheless, as profligate and unsatisfactory as words may be, they are often all we have for making sense of things and making sense of ourselves—for making some kind of headway. It is this tension between the simultaneous insufficiency and indispensability of words which sits at the heart of my paper. What I mostly want to do is offer a series of statements about waste, which I hope will signal some of the possibilities for a *sociolinguistics of waste*. Given our distinctive analytical approach and our conceptual toolkit, I believe sociolinguists have something useful to contribute to the transdisciplinary field of discard studies. By the same token, turning our attention to everyday practices—big and small—of “rubbishing” is a chance for us to better understand the processes of valuation/devaluation which have long concerned us. There are also other critical and cultural-political gains to be had too, as I mean to show.

This paper is published as the discussion article in a *Journal of Sociolinguistics* dialogue. As such, the paper is simply the first turn in an otherwise open-ended conversation, one which continues immediately with three commentaries written by Jillian Cavanaugh (2022), Annabelle Mooney (2022), and Joshua Reno (2022). The benefit of this format is precisely that we four contributors have indeed ended up in a lively discussion. Starting with Crispin's initial approach to Jillian, Annabelle, and Joshua, we proceeded through a series of online meetings to explore the format's opportunities and expectations, but also to bounce around early ideas. As it is, Jillian, Annabelle, and Joshua came with clear ideas about how they already wanted to respond to my opening gambit (this paper), and how they themselves

were keen to approach waste from a distinctively or decidedly sociolinguistic angle. We hope now that others will join the conversation.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: NOTICING WASTE (IN MY WORK)

In seeking to sketch a possible pathway for a sociolinguistics of waste, my paper is grounded in perspectives from across the humanities and social sciences. Much of this work nowadays falls within the transdisciplinary field of discard studies (see Liboiron & Lepawsky, 2022; also <https://discardstudies.com/>). Mary Douglas' (2002 [1966]) foundational ideas certainly feature prominently in discard studies, but I want to turn first to Gay Hawkins (2006), who speaks of the way waste situates us all:

When we notice waste, or when it touches the most visceral registers of being and unsettles us, we are reminded of the body's intensities and multiplicities. . . . It can allow us to see how we are in and of the world. (Hawkins, 2006: 121)

As sociolinguists, we are rather at odds with cultural studies, history, sociology, and anthropology where scholars like Hawkins have for some time being engaging productively with waste. Our disconnect or disinterest is all the more curious if we acknowledge how central waste is to people's sense of being in and of the world. Waste is as much a part of what makes us human as language is. And it is a "register of being" in more than just a metaphorical sense.

Any turn to waste by sociolinguists and other sociocultural linguists is partly a way for us to stay up to date, and to keep up with the rest of the humanities and social sciences. (In much the same way we have been playing catch-up with regards affect, materiality, embodiment, etc.) For most scholars, however, waste is more than just a trend. It certainly has inherent (and fashionable) value vis-à-vis the pressing politics of environmental collapse. No question. This paper and its three accompanying commentaries are surely in alliance with colleagues pressing for a sociolinguistic engagement around climate justice (see Fine & Love-Nichols, 2021). More than this, however, waste has proved itself to be a fertile topic for enriching existing theoretical and conceptual concerns in various academic fields. I think we will find the same is true for us too if we are willing to start paying more attention to waste.

One of the very few memorable moments where I have come across waste in sociolinguistics is Jeff Kallen's (2010: 43) orientation to what he calls "the detritus zone." Here, Kallen surfaces nicely the unintentional aspects and ephemeral dimensions of the linguistic landscape. There is also something inherently waste-related or waste-relevant in David Karlander's (2019) reflections on what he calls the "semiotics of nonexistence." Although Karlander does not himself make this link, the practices of graffiti erasure are undoubtedly implicated in the cultural politics of dirt (cf Newell & Green, 2018) and of value. As it happens, waste has also cropped up in my own work—somewhat isolated or tangential moments where I too have noticed waste.

Although we did not address it directly as waste, Adam Jaworski and I (2010) have touched on waste in writing about tourism discourse. One of our field sites was a tourist marketplace in Gambia where we were struck by stall signs made with torn off pieces of cardboard, recycled and rusting metal sheets, crudely assembled bolting devices, and so on. Among other things, we considered how these playful but highly strategic resemioticizations of "trash" functioned as a kind of culture jamming: in short, the stallholders were messing playfully but effectively with global corporate power. Our favorite example of this speaking back to power was one stall-holder's upcycling of a plastic John Lewis shopping bag as a tactic for branding his stall. This inexpensive, disposable item with only utilitarian value in the context of affluent consumer culture of the global core was thus transformed into a durable, aestheticizing

object of considerable symbolic value and marketing potential—which is to say, monetary value. These stories of semiotic invention and (re)valuation are nice instantiations of Igor Kopytoff's (1986) *object biographies*: the way stuff is valued, loses value, and may be revalued. In other words, things rubbished in one place can become prized commodities elsewhere.

There is another, more explicit way that waste has made an appearance in my own work. Published in this journal, Thurlow (2020) makes the case for a discourse-centered commodity chain analysis. This is also the basis for a funded project titled *Articulating Privilege*, which also makes the current paper possible (see Acknowledgments). I do not want to go into detail, but the core principle of the previous paper and the ongoing project is to expand the horizons of sociolinguistics with a better, more up-to-date kind of geographical thinking. Taking the Business Class airline meal as its empirical focus, the project maps a commodity (or value) chain around elite foodways. To this end, I find myself in tomato fields, in vast catering production facilities, and, eventually, in rubbish dumps and waste management plants. In developing this project what has struck me is that these are places—fields, factories, dumps—where sociolinguists have hardly ventured, if at all. I will say more about this in just a moment.

Against this empirical and topographical backdrop, the main objective of the current paper is simply to make visible a topic that is little studied in sociolinguistics. This is, as I say, my initial attempt to imagine or envision a *sociolinguistics of waste*. To this end, the rest of the paper is organized into four parts. The first two parts provide some general rationale and academic context for starting to notice waste. For this, I reconsider our sociolinguistic blind spots, especially when it comes to waste, and then I briefly review some isolated precedents in sociocultural linguistics for attending to waste. Then, in Parts 3 and 4, I offer up something a little more concrete by signaling at least two of the ways I can see sociocultural linguists contributing something useful and distinctive to discard studies. In these parts of the paper, I offer a few quickly sketched empirical *vignettes* drawn from various projects my students and I have been working on. Ultimately—and perhaps more importantly—I use these materials for showing how waste and wasting illuminate key sociolinguistic phenomena.

## 1.1 | Part 1: Sociolinguistic blind spots—dirty places, raw lives

Where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (Douglas, 2002 [1996]:, 36)

No self-respecting scholarship on waste seems complete without at least an initial orientation to Mary Douglas' (quoted above) foundational ideas on dirt as a way of getting at the cultural orderings of clean/unclean and pure/impure. To be sure, Douglas's ideas are not without their limitations or complications (see Liboiron, 2019; Reno, 2014); the social meanings and cultural practices of dirt are not so neatly transposed to those of waste. Nor is Douglas completely alone in her core interventions. Regardless, and together with someone like sociologist Michael Thompson (2017 [1979]), Douglas does establish how people's handling of dirt/waste—how they manage it and make sense of it—exposes their deeper systems of value and social order. It is Douglas who also helps show how waste, like dirt, is often simply “matter out of place.” Waste is thus not an inherent but rather a relative property of stuff. Stuff becomes waste when we believe it to be so or when we say it is so. Notwithstanding its spatial contingencies, wasting is also an inherently social and unavoidably relational practice. In short, it is discursive. And this is what makes sociolinguistic inattention to waste all the more surprising; at



FIGURE 2 Boys working on “the Dumps,” Boston, 1909 (photo by Lewis Hine; Library of Congress)

the very least, waste is a missed opportunity for our field. There is, though, a more troubling side to this oversight or neglect.

In her richly documented “social history of trash,” Susan Strasser (1999) describes the world of late C19th and early C20th waste management in the United States. Some of these worlds are those famously documented by the photographer Lewis Hine as in the example shown in Figure 2. (More examples may be found on the US Library of Congress website at <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/>). Both Strasser and Hine make it clear that, where there is rubbish, there is social life. And, for sociolinguists, where there is social life, there is surely language. Yet, our published geography is not only a very Northern one (cf Milani & Lazar, 2017), it is also a very urban and middle-class one.<sup>1</sup> If sociolinguists do consider other social classes, it is often done through a rather self-referential bourgeois lens (cf Lønsmann & Kraft, 2018). Our collective tendency has likewise been to prefer more familiar, accessible, “tidy” places. While remote communities in Papua New Guinea or the Upper Amazon appear endlessly worthy, the factory on the other side of town remains largely unknown. There are, of course, some notable exceptions. Here, for example, I would call attention to Judith Baxter and Kieran Wallace’s (2009) discourse-ethnographic work around construction sites, and especially to Leonie Cornips and Pieter Muysken’s (2019) special issue on “language in the mines.” This is work which takes sociocultural linguistics into more unusual, uncomfortable places and demonstrates the kinds of sociolinguistic insights to be garnered from going—sometimes quite literally—beneath the surface. A turn to waste likewise obliges us into “dirty” places. More than this, though, it also brings us into contact with the often “raw lives” (cf Ross, 2015; after Agamben, 1998) of people we have simply ignored or disregarded.

In overlooking or avoiding the dirty places and raw lives of waste, two types of important social relations are obscured: first, the social lives of people who live and work with/in waste; and second, the social relation between “us” (the makers of waste) and the people left to pick up the pieces. Needless to say, others outside of academia often do a much better job of engaging with the places and people

we academics otherwise avoid. In this regard, the social world of waste is the focus of the 2018 documentary film *Welcome to Sodom*, which actually contains some powerfully sociolinguistic moments.<sup>2</sup> To be fair, even within the wider field of discard studies, not all scholars go the distance in the way that anthropologists like Robin Nagle (2014, on New York garbage collectors), Joshua Reno (2016, on landfill sites), or David Giles (2015, on dumpster diving) do. Most scholarly engagements with waste are done from a distance: waste is treated as an object of abstract reflection rather than a matter of direct, active participation or fieldwork.

The simple fact is that sociolinguists have had nothing to say on the matter. To date, we know nothing of the lives of garbage collectors, landfill workers, or dumpster divers. We, therefore, have nothing to say about the language that inevitably takes place in these “wasted” spaces. There is still a lot of life we have yet to cover—a lot of people’s lives we have yet to recognize and dignify in the way we know how. By the same token, we have evidently not found anything to say about the language of waste either. Even, that is, in research which would otherwise seem primed for these possibilities. Herein lies another obvious analytical intervention for us to make: documenting and detailing the discursive production of waste.

## 1.2 | Part 2: Ecolinguistic alliances—discourses of waste

... the meaning of “waste” carries force because of the way in which it symbolizes an idea of improper use, and therefore operates within a more or less moral economy of the right, the good, the proper, their opposites and all values in between. (Scanlan, 2005: 22)

When it comes to the representational and/or cultural politics of waste, cultural studies scholars have already got nearer to the point. It is they who recognize how central language is to the social construction of waste—to the role it plays in determining how we ascribe value (or not) to things. This also concerns the way our sorting of stuff and our performative determinations of rubbish are so central to both our performances of self—our “styles of self” (Hawkins, 2006: 4)—and to our wider moral economies (see Scanlan, quoted above). Significantly, these social meanings and cultural values are produced in—and circulated by—discourse. Everyone must, for example, be taught the value of recycling but, before that, also the value of stuff and of waste. This schooling invariably happens through language in the contexts of everyday talk and writing, be it in the “documentary regimes” (Cavanaugh, 2016: 691) of public waste management or in family negotiations about food waste (see Thurlow, Pellanda, & Wohlgemuth, *in press*). It is in precisely this way that waste comes to be “textured” (Thomas et al., 2017: 7) or, in more sociolinguistic terms, *entextualized*.

Many of the social meanings of waste also come to us via the strategic, often disingenuous voices of commerce where waste may be commodified and incorporated into wider “greenwashing” agendas. In this regard, there are good precedents for addressing waste in the work of colleagues who have taken discourse-analytic approaches to issues of sustainability and environmental politics. Rom Harré and colleagues (Harré et al., 1999) got there first with their study of “greenspeak” and environmental discourse. More recently, Richard Alexander (2008) and Arran Stibbe (2015) have been developing a research agenda under the rubric of ecolinguistics. Somewhat disappointingly, none of this work explicitly or expressly considers waste. Meanwhile, beyond sociocultural linguistics, otherwise comprehensive volumes like the *Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage* (Zimring & Ratje, 2012) completely overlook language. Having said that, anthropologists Catherine Alexander and Patrick O’Hare (2020) have proposed a typology of approaches to waste

which does single out language (as “rhetoric”). Although mostly restricted to the naming or labeling of waste, Alexander and O’Hare refer to “registers of value” (p. 20) and the performative enactments (or concealments) of waste, and how the (re)naming of waste points to “a rich array of ecological, social and productive relations and activities.” This all points to some promising discourse-analytic opportunities.

In contemplating an ecolinguistic approach to the discourses of waste, I would like to highlight, as a neat example, some research done by one of my former students. In her nicely designed critical discourse analysis, Noëlle Haudenschild (2021) maps, parses, and ultimately debunks the major rhetorics at work in so-called zero-waste discourse. In this work, she follows the strongly Marxist critiques of scholars like Matt Huber (2019) and Marc Kalina (2020) who address the inherently class-based contradictions underpinning this kind of lifestyle environmentalism. In a nutshell, capitalism—companies’ desire to sell and ours to buy—makes waste unavoidable and inevitable. “Zero waste” is thus both fantasy and ideology, little more than a marketing tactic. Haudenschild’s project is certainly one way sociocultural linguistics stands to make a useful contribution to discard studies. I do, however, think there are other places we can and should go with our work—other analytic tools and moves we have to contribute.

### 1.3 | Part 3: Waste as a social semiotics—identity performances

... different creatures are drawn to waste because, once it has been left behind, it invites new material and semiotic entanglements. (Reno, 2014: 16)

Joshua Reno (2014) is one of the most prominent, new-generation scholars of waste. It is he who has sought to push beyond a simplistic over-reliance on Mary Douglas, for example. In doing so, Reno also takes up a posthumanist line, one which aligns nicely with some recent turns in sociolinguistics too (see Pennycook, 2017). While animal poop is not where I necessarily want to head myself, I am struck by Reno’s reference (quote above) to the cultural necessity and/or social importance of waste; specifically, to its “material and semiotic entanglements.” These entanglements are ones which artists know only too well, from Marcel Duchamp onward to, say, the contemporary work of Kimiyo Mishima and Damien Hirst.<sup>3</sup> Artworks like theirs are often both inventive exploitations of waste’s semiotic potentials and a source of new semiotic entanglements themselves. One spectacular manifestation of this is Sara Goldschmied and Eleonora Chiari’s 2015 installation piece *Dove andiamo a ballare questa sera?*, which inadvertently provoked a furious public discourse—about waste and art—when a gallery custodian mistook the piece as leftovers from a real party and then cleaned it all up. It was all a perfect manifestation of the socially constructed nature of rubbish—the proverbially blurred line between trash and treasure.

For now, I merely refer to works of art highlight how waste can—and does—function as a social semiotics. In other words, waste can be used as a meaning-making resource in its own right. This is something Annabelle Mooney (2020) demonstrates nicely in her study of so-called pimple popping videos shared online. In “disgusting” moments like these (bodily), waste evidently exceeds both its usual meanings and to some extent language itself (cf Thurlow, 2016). So, while there is much to be said for attending to its representational politics, waste is always inherently more-than-representational as well. In this regard, I also see strong alliances to be made with the kinds of sociomaterial (Orlikowski, 2007) interventions being made in sociocultural linguistics. There contexts for this move in mediated discourse analysis (see Jones & Norris, 2005) and in the precedent-setting work of language



materiality (see Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012). Along these lines, I offer just two quick examples—one from a student collaborator and one of my own—where waste “takes place” as a material/materializing resource for identity performances. In both cases, these semiotic actions emerge from, and help sustain, wider symbolic and political economies.

Alessandro Pellanda’s (2021) innovative visual ethnography and geosemiotics project returns me to roadside paper recycling bundles in Switzerland, like the ones I mentioned at the start of the paper. As a central feature of his MA thesis, Pellanda presents a visual essay, which documents recycling pick-up day in five Swiss cities or towns (see also Thurlow, Pellanda, & Wohlgemuth, [in press](#)). In this way, and drawing on fieldwork and interview data, he thereby demonstrates the performative nature of these “spectacles of waste” (cf Straw, 2010). In this case, people produce themselves as certain kinds of people through the way they “do waste,” and these individual performances become outwardly projected, collective actions (cf Glucksberg, 2014). As such, waste becomes a resource for performing good Swiss and global citizenship. These everyday, banal performances are, however, also inherently normative forms of social control for policing newcomers and outsiders.

Everyone is schooled in the ways of waste from an early age. Just as we are taught the social meanings of eating (see Ochs et al., 1996) and the practices of dinner-table talk (see Blum-Kulka, 1997), waste too is a topic which frames and structures many mealtimes. I recall from my own childhood being taught by my grandmother (the posh one) to leave a small portion of food on the plate to prove that I was not starving. It was a perfectly classed schooling in bourgeois self-control. As it is, I now know that I was not alone; there are dozens of online discussions where people talk at length about being policed as children in similar ways—or, more often, in completely opposite ways. There is also plenty of talk online about “leftovers” as an exotic politeness behavior in certain countries. The micropolitics of the dinner plate is surely a prime site for sociolinguistic investigation; this is the kind of talk we are trained to examine.

In my own research on elite discourse, waste practices have also surfaced. In looking at the “classy stuff” of waste (cf Frow, 2001), I find waste functioning as a more silent or at least nonverbal semiotic resource for performing status. As someone concerned with the symbolic economies of distinction and privilege, I have obviously been indebted to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1984), but also to Thorstein Veblen’s (1994 [1899]) famous ideas about conspicuous consumption. Until only recently, however, I had not thought to also connect my work to Veblen’s less well-known ideas about *conspicuous waste* (see p. 60). As he notes, in order for consumption to be reputable, it must inevitably be also wasteful and noticeably so. This is why, in my commodity chain analysis of the Business Class meal, I have been documenting the performative “spoils of privilege” such as the food waste and other luxury throwaways entailed in the staging of so-called premium dining (cf Thurlow & Haudenschild, [in press](#)). These acts of wasting happen in the moment of eating and then continue long after the plane has landed.<sup>4</sup> The choice to leave something behind—to discard it—is a privilege, one which is always semiotically and politically entangled in the structural inequality of others. This same interest in connecting micro-level waste practices to macro-level structural processes brings me now to the fourth and final part of the paper.

## 1.4 | Part 4: The discursive production of value

... in order to study the social control of value, we have to study rubbish. (Thompson, 2017, [1979]: 27)

At this point, and as the empirical bedrock of my focus on waste, I present the kind of decidedly sociolinguistic contribution we might make to discard studies. This is also where a proper attention to waste might help sociolinguists better understand some of the social interactions and communicative practices which already concern us. The crux of the matter is value and (de)valuation. Waste is ineluctably a matter of value production, and, as Michael Thompson (quoted above) notes, vice-versa. More than this, though, value production is inherently discursive. (Culler, 1985, in fact reads Thompson's intervention as a semiotic one.) In this regard, I offer two more short case studies but want first to quickly establish a key conceptual-analytical link between sociolinguistics and the sociological field of valuation studies. The connection is expressed effectively by putting François Vatin into conversation with John Du Bois.

A grammar of valuations has to be developed ... [which] has the merit of highlighting the dynamics of valuation ... (Vatin, 2013: 47; emphasis mine)

As a sociologist of labor and economics, Vatin (see 2009, 2013) advocates the importance of redressing the monetary logics of the marketplace. To this end, he proposes that a distinction (arguably more readily available in French) is drawn between evaluating (*évaluer*) and valorizing (*valoriser*); this is to say, the interrelated acts of assessing and producing value. The difference is also that of appreciating something and putting a price on it. Although Vatin wants this distinction for different purposes, it is useful for sociolinguistics because it highlights the need to track what he calls the “grammar” and “dynamics” of valuations; in other words, how valuation actually happens in practice. There is an obvious but analytically promising connection here with our sociolinguistic work on stancetaking.

Value is what stance is all about - literally. [It] always invokes, explicitly or implicitly, presupposed systems of sociocultural value, while at the same time contributing to the enactment and reproduction of those systems. (Du Bois, 2007: 173)

In his well-known take on stance, Du Bois (quoted above) notes how it is all quite literally about value. As he continues, stance invokes, enacts, and reproduces systems of sociocultural value. Stance, then, holds a key for us when it comes to the “dynamics of valuations.” This might require that we start by recognizing Du Bois' stance object might often be an even more literal “thingy” object. Having said which, we will certainly still want to attend to the micro-level actions of self-positioning and relational alignment which are central to stancetaking. These are not just analytically interesting, they are also politically significant, as I will show presently.

To recap, a central tenet of waste theory is that objects are “wasted” not because of their inherent physical properties, but rather through social/relational processes of *valuation*. Just as things (commodities or otherwise) are given a value, so too can they be devalued (cf Kopytoff, 1986; also above). Sometimes, this is a matter of price, other times one of worth. And this inevitably entails the *evaluation* of the object—an assessment of its being not simply worth something but also of its being worthy. Or not. These judgments are made on the basis of perceived goodness or badness, desirability or undesirability. All of which are the essential sociolinguistic accomplishments of stancetaking (see also Jaffe, 2009). Let me quickly take this to the ground with my two case studies.

For my *Language & Waste* seminar, Kalina Pleil and Elizaveta Sartaniia designed a project around the lesser-known practice of so-called *luxury dumpster diving* (see Pleil, 2020). In a nutshell, this entails people trawling through trash in search of designer labels, all of which is filmed and then remediated onto an online platform like YouTube.<sup>5</sup> What makes the practice unusual is that this particular kind of dumpster-diving simultaneously disrupts the market (i.e., rummaging through its rubbish) and

reinscribes its core logics of, say, fashion and branding. This contradiction or tension is what makes luxury dumpster diving such an ideal site for observing the discursive creation and destruction of value (cf Thompson 2017, [1979]; Hawkins & Muecke, 2003). Following Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen (2020), Pleil's (2020) MA thesis shows nicely how luxury dumpster diving makes transparent the performative as opposed to essential nature of value. Value is thus contingent, dynamic, and emergent; it is also interactionally accomplished. Somewhat hurriedly, this is exemplified in Extracts 1–3, which are drawn from three different YouTube videos with five different speakers (A, B, C, D and E).

*Extract 1*

A: holy crap guys I'm at TJ Maxx  
a freaking Michael Kors purse  
holy crap oh wow

*Extract 2*

B: oh my god it says it's Versace  
C: no way

*Extract 3*

D: oh oh my gosh  
E: oh my gosh  
D: holy crap look at those Steve  
E: oh my gosh  
D: oh my gosh  
E: I'm gonna keep looking

The (re)production of value in each of these extracts is accomplished as an embodied action (e.g., rummaging, retrieving, and displaying the items), but also a discursive action: in the running commentary (for viewers) and social talk (between represented participants) which frame and organize the actions. These are the discursive moments where we see value being “resuscitated” both phatically and emotively (cf Jakobson, 1971). The seemingly frivolous (inter)actions remind us how wasted matter is not only “vibrant” (Bennett, 2010) but also passionate and romantic. As Daniel Miller (2006) argues, deep relationships are formed with things and accrued through our consumption of stuff, however frivolous or “trashy.” In the above extracts, we see how the thrill of transgressing fundamental norms of consumption is evidently matched by people's delight in unearthing (for free) the quintessential markers of arch consumption. (Similar affective dimensions occur in Extract 7 below.)

The same dynamics of valuation—giving and taking value, evaluating and valorizing—sit at the heart of my ongoing project with another MA student Laura Wohlgemuth (see also Thurlow, Pellanda, & Wohlgemuth, *in press*). For this work, we have been interviewing the managers of Brockenhäuser in Bern—second-hand shops known locally as *Brockis*. With many of them run like department stores, *Brockis* are a core part of local life for many people and are also central to many people's domestic economies. More to the point, these are sites which hinge on constant value exchange/production: the creation, recreation, and destruction of value. It is here that stuff is patently—but often mysteriously—transformed through a complex series of discursively underwritten performative actions. Donors start by declaring items “discardable” but potentially redeemable. The *Brocki* must then determine the items' redemption-worthiness by sorting them, evaluating them, and then deciding whether to sell them, divert them, or destroy them. This is the process which interests Laura and me: the simultaneous evaluation and valuation of one person's “trash” and another's potential “treasure.” We are specifically keen to

see how this process is discursively organized. To this end, we have started to identify some revealing acts of stancetaking at work; these are illustrated in Extracts 4–7 drawn from our interviews with two different *Brocki* managers (Man1 and Man2).

*Extracts 4a and 4b: Anything but IKEA – learning to value/valorize*

- 1 Man1: Antiques are dead. Really, for the last two years they have  
 2 become quite dead. ... We also have a big cupboard here,  
 3 also antique, big, no one wants that. Perhaps a couple of  
 4 years ago this should have been worth 5,000 to 6,000  
 5 Francs, now 50 Francs is expensive. Therefore antique  
 6 furniture is no longer in demand, not good. [...] ... people  
 7 have to learn such things are also of little use. ... This  
 8 cupboard, you can't break it, 100 times hitting on floor it  
 9 doesn't break. But then IKEA you just make *brbrblt* and it  
 10 falls apart. That's why people also have to learn to see that  
 11 something like this [the cupboard] is valuable.  
 [...]
   
 12 Man1: ... most teenagers, mostly, with teenagers I mean like under  
 13 40, like generally, they mostly look for "zack zack zack"  
 14 fast and dismountable, mountable, modern things, from the  
 15 outside it looks good, beautiful but in two months it's  
 16 broken. [...] Such a gorgeous cupboard here costs 400  
 17 Francs, IKEA stupid cupboard costs also 400 to 500 Francs.

*Extracts 5 and 6: Fussy Swiss, grateful Romanians – hierarchies of taste/need*

- 1 Man1: ... with fashion it's also goods where the Swiss are just  
 2 overly fussy but they are still good. Or there's a lot of  
 3 stuff, especially in clothing, which is simply not trendy  
 4 anymore, but it is still super good ('top zwäg') and then  
 5 we donate it directly on because in Romania they're  
 6 grateful for those things and in Switzerland, pardon my  
 7 expression ('luegts uf guet Dütsch'), not even a pig will  
 look at it, right?
   
 1 Man2: When things aren't moving well then we donate leftover  
 2 clothes to Africa or Cuba. And if they both reject them,  
 3 both groups, then we give it to the clothing drive. [...] Or  
 4 repairing bicycles, if not repairable *ssst* send to Africa.

*Extract 7: Old people's tears – generational value-divides*

- 1 Man2: ... the younger generation like yours but also the slightly  
 2 older ones have a lot of interest in such furniture if they're  
 3 particularly white or *shabby chic*. [...] If we go to the old  
 4 people and say, "hey they have no value", they're almost  
 5 crying. Then they say, "uuuh, at the time we invested so  
 6 much in them, now nothing. But they're so robust, really  
 7 good, stable". But *phhh*, it doesn't matter, but nobody  
 8 wants that. *Shhht*. Gone.

In Extracts 4a and 4b, an apparent toggling between valuing and valorizing is evident: donations are simultaneously assessed as good/bad or (un)desirable for the purposes of pricing them (i.e., in Swiss Francs). Antiques are declared “dead” (line 1), “no longer in demand” (6) and, therefore, not “good” (line 6). Worth or value hinges here on determinations of unbreakability (line 8) and robustness (lines 9 and 10). In this regard, an old cupboard is “beautiful” and “gorgeous” (lines 15 and 16), while an IKEA cupboard is “stupid” (line 17). The value of something is thus simultaneously material-cum-economic and immaterial-cum-affective/aesthetic.

In the evaluation of their stance objects (i.e., donated things), *Brockis* inevitably position themselves and others; this is one of the defining identificational and ideological accomplishments of stancetaking (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009). In this regard, we see how the manager positions the *Brocki* as instructor (“learn” in lines 7 and 10), effectively needing to teach both donors and customers how to recognize and/or determine value. Certain social categories are also invoked and produced: notably, young people (aka “teenagers”/people “under 40”; lines 12 and 13) who are all about “zack zack zack” convenience and outward appearances (lines 13–15), with no sensible regard for value or price (lines 16 and 17). In other words, we have here evaluations of (e)valuations.

In Extracts 5 and 6, these same kinds of relational alignments (or disalignments) evidently invoke even wider sociocultural fields—indeed, political economies. As stances are taken up vis-à-vis objects, we find the production of explicit hierarchies of taste as well as hierarchies of (presumed) need: from “overly fussy” Swiss people (Extract 5, line 2) to apparently “grateful” Romanians (line 5). In Extract 6, meanwhile, we are told how Africans will accept even the unrepairable (line 4); it is they who, along with the Cubans, are positioned as representing the afterlife of Swiss trash. These foreigners find value—and offer redemption—to rubbish which, in Switzerland, “not even a pig will look at” (Extract 5, line 7).

With reference to Extract 7, I note just one other discursive dimension surfaced in our *Brocki* interviews: instances where managers were again evaluating the evaluations of others. First, there is “the younger generation” (line 1; vis-à-vis interviewer Laura), which strongly values “white or *shabby chic*” (line 3; the English term indexing a global aesthetic or fashion). But it is the old people’s tears (“almost crying,” lines 4 and 5) which interests me most. It seems a kind of emotional labor is needed as *Brocki* staff find themselves relationally and affectively entangled with donors, who are sometimes confronted with the worthlessness of things which they themselves have valued, and for which they once paid dearly (lines 5–7). While younger people are positioned as the motivators of fickle (see *phhh*, line 7 and *Shhht*, line 8) value systems, older people are its hapless or naïve victims.

## 2 | CONCLUSION: RUBBISH?

... what people have owned – and thrown away – can speak more eloquently, informatively, and truthfully about the lives they lead than they themselves ever may. (Rathje & Murphy, 1992: 9)

Known internationally for their archeological approach to contemporary waste, William Rathje and Cullen Murphy (quoted above) famously observe how people’s practices of wasting are inherently connected to their identities, their relationships (to things and other people), and, of course, their systems of value. Once again, we find scholars outside sociocultural linguistics invoking the notion of talk and speech, albeit in somewhat more metaphorical ways. The primary goal for sociolinguists would, of course, be to approach language altogether more literally.

Aside from its tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation, I have titled my paper as “rubbish” and with a question mark for two reasons. First, I want to highlight the relativity and performativity of waste and, thus, of its socially constructed—which is to say discursive—nature. Rubbish, as Thompson (2017 [1979]) so famously argued, is not an inherent property of things. What is rubbish or *when* is rubbish is something culturally, socially, and relationally determined. It is this which makes waste/wasting such a prime site for sociolinguistic analysis. The other reason for the question mark is simply to ask, to what extent might we be interested in taking on waste as a topic for proper investigation. The challenge here lies in taking on a phenomenon that, while intensely linguistic, is patently also *besides* words (but not beyond them; see Thurlow, 2016). Taking on waste clearly requires that we go places that we have been, to put it nicely, reluctant to go—both topographical and epistemological places. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, the answer to this question is also a matter of life and death, as the poet A. R. Ammons reminds us. With this in mind, I choose to finish with something autobiographical and quite personal.

In October 2016, my brother and I found ourselves with the daunting and slightly depressing task of clearing out my father’s study in Durban, South Africa. He had died suddenly of a heart attack in late 2012, and we had been putting this task off for as long as possible. Mostly, I have to say, we kept putting it off because we knew there would be a lot of rubbish to sort through and throw out, but also because we knew it would be emotionally tough: in effect, rubbishing our father’s life and work. Having once upon time been a high-school drop-out, my dad spent the larger part of his working life as a professor of educational sociology. Well, at the end of 2 or 3 days, my brother and I found ourselves at a municipal drop-off site on the outskirts of Durban, one that is reached only by passing Cato Manor, the city’s oldest informal settlement.

From the back of a car, we had to offload years and years of academic papers, research notes, and government reports into one of three large sacks. All those words—all the hours of crafting those words—coming to an end. In this moment—in these bags—I encountered something simultaneously ordinary and profound: the wasting of words, a career, a life. As academics ourselves—as devoted writers and text-producers—my brother and I were inevitably confronted with the afterlife of our own work, just as we were forced also to contemplate our own demise. This personal encounter was not all metaphysical, however. As we two White men “dumped our dad,” three or four older Zulu women sat on ramshackle sofas and chairs witnessing it all. These were the staff employed to monitor the sorting of people’s rubbish and then to take it to the next stage. Under their gaze, and set against their working circumstances, my own sentimental journey seemed unavoidably self-indulgent. With my best attempt at a stoic face, I hurriedly took some photos like the one shown in Figure 3. It was this which prompted one of the women to rise from her chair and approach me, to ask why I was photographing rubbish. Why would garbage, she wondered, be worth recording, worth remembering? I fumbled my way through an explanation; she seemed bemused but satisfied enough.

The resonances of this fleeting encounter have really stuck with me; however anecdotal, it offers up some essential truths about waste. Most notably, I sense the variability, relativity, and politics of waste: (1) waste takes many forms and takes place in different ways: a human body, a lifespan, a career, written papers, and so on; (2) one man’s years of carefully crafted output is taken out as trash by another man; and (3) all of which is facilitated and structured by and through the inequalities of others. These, then, are some of the psychic, semiotic, and relational entanglements of waste—with the rubbish itself, with those to whom we are intimately connected through rubbish, and with those often unseen or hidden-away people made responsible for handling our rubbish. These are also the relationships which surface when we start to notice waste. And with this surfacing language rises too: categories and



FIGURE 3 Solid Waste Drop-Off Centre, Durban, October 2016 (author photo)

conversations break through. At the very least, this is why sociolinguists might want to start noticing waste too.

To be blind to waste and its materiality is to be blind to death and the fact of loss. The refusal to notice waste is also the refusal to notice the finality of life. ... Waste is inevitable. (Hawkins, 2006: 122)

## ORCID

Crispin Thurlow  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3203-9255>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In an endnote for Thurlow (2020), I included a simple indicator of our field's restricted geographical imagination: a potted survey of the 522 *Journal of Sociolinguistics and Language in Society* papers published since 2009. This revealed that nearly two thirds addressed sociolinguistic life in Europe and North America; just under a fifth, South, Southeast, Central, and East Asia; leaving less than a fifth for all of Latin America (including Mexico), Australasia, the Middle East and North Africa, and the rest of Africa. These restricted horizons obviously have implications for the social worlds overlooked; at which point, see also Note 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Welcome to Sodom* documents the lives of people living and working in the world's largest electronic waste dump: the Agbogbloshie site in Accra, Ghana. One memorable scene shows two young men laughing together while flicking through photos from a discarded phone. This rubbished item offers the men a sneak-peek into the far-flung, charmed life of the phone's original owner.

<sup>3</sup> As examples of their "waste art," I think specifically about Kimiyo Mishima's 2021 *Charcoal Box* (<http://www.aipht.artosaka.jp/2016/en/artwork/a-kimiyo-mishima>) and Damien Hirst's 1994 piece *Waste* (<https://www.damienhirst.com/waste>).

<sup>4</sup> In his gloomy treatise on waste, Kennedy (2007: 11), turns specifically to feasting and the kind or scale of eating which far exceeds ordinary, basic survival. He writes, "The feast ... [offers] not mere excessive consumption, but rather the physical incorporation of abundance itself."

<sup>5</sup> Two typical examples of luxury dumpster diving videos can be found at <https://youtu.be/iMipwXrit9I> and [https://youtu.be/Tbtg0LLU\\_cg](https://youtu.be/Tbtg0LLU_cg).

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