

## Abstract and conclusion FNE-Project

### Responsible for the project

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### Critical Linguistics as a Pedagogy of Waste Abstract

#### Abstract

Whether we call it trash, garbage, junk, refuse, detritus or just rubbish, waste is undeniably a matter of national identity for Switzerland as we try to make sense of the following newspaper headlines:

Schweizer gehören zu den grössten Abfallsündern in Europa (Tages Anzeiger, Jan 2019)

La Suisse sur le podium des producteurs de déchets européens (Le Temps, Jun 2019)

While many scholars in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences are increasingly turning their attention to these pressing issues of sustainability, there exists virtually no such scholarship in sociolinguistics and discourse studies. It is for this reason that this “Language and Waste” seminar will explore and collaboratively develop a novel critical-linguistic perspective on the

crisis-level topic of waste. You will be asked to investigate how everyday language shapes the social meanings of waste and, as such, how it helps structure the wider political and symbolic economies of environmental collapse. Examples of the kinds of empirical questions to be asked include: What does “waste” mean to people – what are its social or collective meanings in different contexts? How is waste defined and represented in everyday and/or official talk and texts? How is waste mediatized (e.g. in newspapers, advertisements, etc.)? How is the label “waste” deployed metaphorically against certain peoples or activities? To what extent do people understand – and talk about – their own role in the production and/or management of waste? How, for example, are children socialized and/or schooled to understand waste? This seminar is being taught partly under the auspices of the UniBe’s Promotion of Sustainable Development in Teaching scheme. It is designed as a “laboratory course” which means that it organized around student-driven, project-based learning experiences where you will be actively engaged in producing new knowledge for the field.

## Conclusion

This project was first and foremost a chance to create a learning space for students studying Language & Linguistics in the Department of English. To this end, a new seminar on “Language and Waste” was designed and taught twice in 2020. The development of the course was both experimental and collaborative. There exists no scholarship in sociocultural linguistics on waste per se; what modest literature there is on environmental discourse studies or so-called ecolinguistics consistently overlooks waste. For this reason, the students and I were, together, breaking new ground and co-producing knowledge: a sociolinguistics of waste.

As it turns out – and drawing from literatures in anthropology, history, cultural studies, sociology and economics – we established some of the important ways we can learn from waste studies but also start to make a valid contribution. Language is, first and foremost, central to the way meaning – and therefore value – is given to things, and, therefore, how things come to lose value and declared “rubbish”. Besides, words are themselves quite literally or concretely the stuff of waste – something we witness on our streets every second week (see photo, courtesy of student Alessandro Pellanda).

It is in this way that the FNE project has opened up a new direction for both me and for my students. For me, it has been an excellent example of teaching-led research. For the students, it responds to a strong desire to engage with issues of sustainability across their studies. The course will certainly be one I teach as often as possible. Beyond this, students already felt invited now to make waste – and other issues of sustainability – a valid topic for their BA and MA theses.

I would be more than happy to share my syllabus for “Language and Waste” and other teaching materials.