

## **Wearable texts: Language as embodied, material, and mobile semiotic objects**

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This colloquium aims to explore the various ways in which wearable texts, defined as words displayed on clothing and accessories, might unsettle how we understand the nature of language in social context. Approached as embodied language (Peck and Stroud 2015), wearable texts can serve as vehicles of creative expressions or agentive resistance against dominant language and political ideologies (Coupland 2012; Järlehed 2019; Milani and Kapa 2015). Yet, their often-parasitic relationship with commodities complicates their authorship (Goffman 1981; Johnstone 2009), melding consumer culture and collective ideologies with individual voices. Meanwhile, the materiality of these clothing items carrying wearable texts might override their meaning potential (Caldwell 2017), as when someone purchases a printed t-shirt for its style, comfort, or plain affordability, oblivious to the message it potentially communicates. Nonetheless, they might still be read and interpreted despite the wearer's intention. As such, wearable texts raise a set of new questions about the embodiment, indexicality, and performativity of language.

Moving beyond the individual scale, wearable texts also add a mobile layer to the semiotic landscape of the urban environment (Sebba 2010; Jaworski 2012), redirecting our attention to the materiality and mobility of writing. They move with bodies, creating fleeting encounters between strangers when the global flows of languages and cultures momentarily converge or clash. While largely the product of global cultural flows, wearable texts arguably also constitute parts of the unique visual cultures of global cities. It is from these perspectives, this colloquium brings together three papers to examine wearable texts as an interface between the symbolic and the material, the individual and the collective, the local and the global, and the body and the landscape.

**Keywords:** wearable texts, semiotic landscapes, embodiment, mobility, materiality, performativity, fashion, visual culture, urban encounters, globalisation

## 1. Materializing and mobilizing pride: Love and other 'word-things' in transnational LGBTQ advocacy discourse

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Today's globalized sociopolitical landscapes swell with evocative messages in support of the LGBTQ community, such as 'Love always wins' – regularly emblazoned across items of clothing, embodied through pride marchers, and iteratively re-scaled through digital media. Through such messages, affective resources such as hope, humour, and especially, love, are commonly used to index and interpellate a powerful global collective of LGBTQ people and their allies. Against a theoretical backdrop identifying positive thinking as a crucial value in the corporatized contemporary world, my paper interrogates the seemingly positive, progressive nature of transnational LGBTQ advocacy discourse. I present a multimodal critical discourse analysis of digital communication produced by 4 LGBTQ rights organisations and the wearable items this communication describes. I consider the rhetorics used to frame such items as materializing change itself and mobilizing support through the movements of self-actualizing altruistic subjects. Ultimately, I demonstrate how the semiotization of love, equality and other affective principles within LGBTQ rights discourse can serve as a means of their thingification and commodification (cf. Thurlow and Jaworski 2017). Furthermore, I argue that 'cool activist' campaigning (cf. Chouliaraki 2013) and the sloganized expressions of pride they manifest, like 'Love always wins', in fact reinforce neoliberal logics of depoliticized, consumerist passivity. In encouraging supporters to literally wear pride and progress on their sleeve, the potential for broader social change seems to blur with its imminent, pre-purchased, arrival. Thus, the elusive, intangible (perhaps unattainable) material condition of 'equality' is, apparently, performed through the actions of individuals on display as proud and progressive.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ advocacy, neoliberalism, language materiality, embodiment, affect

## 2. Wearing French: The consumption of language attitudes on T-shirts

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The mobile textuality of clothing, particularly t-shirts has gained quite significant interest in Sociolinguistics research in the last few years. First studied from a cultural perspective (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1994) in terms of their function in modern societies, t-shirts became interesting to sociolinguists after a shift in the 1980s and 1990s in terms of their metacultural and self-referential characters. T-shirts were thus no longer only part of a semiotic system (Barthes, 2010, 2013) but rather as social-semiotic practice (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). So far, research in this area has explored t-shirt texts in order to analyse the intersections of language, fashion, and identity, with studies thus far commenting on regional varieties of English (Johnstone, 2009), self-reflective identity creation (Coupland, 2012), 'sexed signs' (T. Milani, 2013; T. M. Milani & Kapa, 2015), and the expression of cultural identity through linguistic play (Järlehed, 2018).

This paper contributes to this body of work by exploring French texts on t-shirts sold in a number of high-street chains in the UK and South Africa. Drawing on a corpus of over one-hundred French t-shirt texts photographed across ten high-street stores and their online catalogues in both countries, this paper aims to shed light on the popularity for non-French speakers to wear the French language and its implication on language attitudes towards the language. Furthermore, the data shows a large disproportion of women vs men's clothing with French on them, as most are sold in 'women's sections' and have multimodal designs connoting femininity. Relying on the concept of gendered language attitude (Knisely, 2016), we thus also argue that the consumption of French wearable texts partakes in the performance and embodiment of a projected femininity, constructed over time through the linking of the French language and culture with discourses of femininity, love and romance.

**Keywords:** T-shirts, gender, language attitude, French, globalisation

### 3. #Wordswewear: Mobility and conviviality in urban spaces

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Drawing from a sample of some one hundred photographs taken by us internationally on the move, this talk seeks to understand the significance of #wordswewear in the broader context of urban encounters. In the context of the street and other public spaces, the brevity of contact between strangers, typically short-lived visibility of #wordswewear, or momentary (non-)accessibility of emplaced/embodyed text tend to render communicative events structured around #wordswewear fleeting, though not insignificant partly due to their persistent recurrence. Notwithstanding certain long-standing interpretations of the city as intrinsically alienating, a terrain of everyday social incivilities and even hostilities, minor counter-currents latch on to such evidence of low-level sociability between strangers' (Laurier and Philo, 2006: 193), despite Gill Valentine's (2008) warning against easy romanticizing and celebration of the apparent togetherness or conviviality of urban dwellers. To circumvent any simplistic and celebratory view of urban conviviality, we align our stance with Christopher Stroud (Williams and Stroud, 2013), who locates conviviality in public performances such as stand-up comedy or hip-hop shows. In these speech events, through acts of stylization, parody and voicing, performers play out a co-existence of competing linguistic ideologies or convey diverse voices, stereotypes and stances. The freedom for different languages, voices and stances to surface alongside one another in these and other contexts (e.g. in education) is for Stroud linked with the idea of 'linguistic citizenship' (Stroud, 2018). In the case of our data, it appears that, other things being equal, and notwithstanding the commercial and corporate dimension of #wordswewear, the wearers of the words, the expressive persons, re-centre their stances and voices as a panoply of individualistic, seemingly uncoordinated and unsynchronised activities with a surprisingly unifying effect of an urban gestalt or assemblage.

**Keywords:** mobility, embodiment, conviviality, linguistic citizenship, encounters, urban space, visual culture, commodification

#### **Discussant**

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