

**A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTUAL MEANING IN THE TEDX TALK  
"WHY I LIVE A ZERO WASTE LIFE" BY LAUREN SINGER:  
A STUDY OF MEANING IN ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the contextual meanings embedded in Lauren Singer's TEDx talk entitled "Why I Live a Zero Waste Life." Drawing on Leech's (1974) framework of semantic meaning types particularly conceptual, connotative, affective, and thematic meaning this research investigates how language functions as a tool of environmental persuasion and ideological positioning. The primary data source is the full transcript of the talk, which was analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The analysis identifies 28 data points across four dominant types of contextual meaning. Findings reveal that affective meaning is the most frequently employed type, followed by connotative meaning, thematic meaning, and conceptual meaning. The study argues that Singer's linguistic choices do not merely describe a lifestyle, but actively construct an environmental identity and appeal to the audience's moral consciousness. This study contributes to the growing body of research on ecolinguistics and environmental discourse analysis in the context of digital public speaking.

Keywords: semantic analysis, contextual meaning, environmental discourse, TEDx talk, ecolinguistics

**INTRODUCTION**

Language is far more than a system of signs and symbols used for basic communication. In every act of speaking or writing, a speaker makes deliberate and sometimes unconscious choices about which words to use, how to arrange them, and what emotional weight to give them. These choices carry meaning that extends well beyond the literal or dictionary definition of the words themselves. This layer of meaning, which is shaped by the social, situational, and cultural context in which language is used, is what linguists refer to as contextual meaning.

The study of contextual meaning sits at the intersection of semantics and pragmatics, and it has been a productive area of inquiry in linguistics for several decades. Among the

most foundational contributions to this field is Geoffrey Leech's (1974) framework of meaning types, which distinguishes between conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning. Each type reveals something distinct about how speakers communicate not just information, but attitude, identity, and intention.

Public discourse particularly in the form of persuasive speeches and talks—provides a rich site for examining how contextual meaning operates in practice. In recent years, TED and TEDx talks have emerged as one of the most influential forms of public communication in the world. Millions of people watch these talks online, and the language used in them is carefully crafted to inspire, persuade, and challenge assumptions. For researchers interested in language, power, and ideology, TED talks offer a particularly compelling corpus.

This study focuses on one specific talk: "Why I Live a Zero Waste Life" by Lauren Singer, delivered as a TEDx talk. Lauren Singer is a well-known environmental activist who gained public attention for producing only a small mason jar of trash over the course of several years. In this talk, she explains her journey toward a zero-waste lifestyle, challenges mainstream consumer culture, and attempts to persuade her audience to reconsider their own habits. The talk is notable not only for its content but for its language, Singer employs a wide range of rhetorical and semantic strategies that make her message both accessible and emotionally resonant.

The choice to study environmental discourse through the lens of semantics is motivated by a broader concern in linguistics known as ecolinguistics, the study of how language shapes and reflects human relationships with the natural world. Environmental discourse is not neutral; it is saturated with values, assumptions, and power dynamics. By analyzing how speakers like Singer use language to frame environmental issues, we gain insight into how environmental consciousness is constructed and communicated.

Given this background, the present study addresses the following research questions: first, what types of contextual meaning appear in Lauren Singer's TEDx talk "Why I Live a Zero Waste Life"? Second, how do these types of contextual meaning function to construct environmental discourse in the talk? These questions are grounded in Leech's (1974) typology of meaning and are pursued through a qualitative descriptive analysis of the talk's full transcript.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to two related fields. On the one hand, it extends semantic analysis into the domain of digital public speaking, a context that has received relatively little attention in Indonesian linguistics scholarship. On the other hand, it engages with the growing academic interest in ecolinguistics and environmental communication. By showing how everyday linguistic choices carry ideological weight, this study hopes to illuminate the ways in which language both reflects and reinforces our understanding of environmental responsibility.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Semantics and the Study of Meaning**

Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning, how it is encoded in language, how it is decoded by listeners and readers, and how it varies across contexts. The field encompasses a wide range of phenomena, from the meanings of individual words (lexical semantics) to the meanings of sentences and larger discourse units (compositional semantics). Within this broad domain, the question of what we mean when we say something means something has generated considerable philosophical and empirical debate.

A central distinction in semantic theory is between sentence meaning and speaker meaning between what a linguistic expression conventionally encodes and what a particular speaker intends to communicate in a given context. While formal semantics has traditionally focused on the former, pragmatics and discourse analysis have increasingly drawn attention to the latter. The present study occupies the space between these two concerns, examining how the conventional meanings of words and phrases are extended, modified, and inflected by the social and rhetorical context of a public speech.

### **Leech's Framework of Meaning Types**

The theoretical backbone of this study is Geoffrey Leech's (1974) influential typology of meaning, as elaborated in his work *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*. Leech proposes seven distinct types of meaning, each capturing a different dimension of what is communicated when language is used. For the purposes of this study, four of these types are most directly relevant.

**Conceptual meaning** refers to the logical, cognitive content of a word or expression the core propositional information that is communicated regardless of context. It is

sometimes equated with denotative meaning, and it represents the most stable and context-independent layer of a word's semantic content. For example, the word 'trash' has the conceptual meaning of discarded material or refuse.

**Connotative meaning** refers to the communicative value that an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, beyond its purely descriptive content. Connotations are the associations often cultural, social, or psychological, that a word carries beyond its literal definition. The word 'trash,' for instance, carries connotations of wastefulness, carelessness, and environmental irresponsibility that go beyond its conceptual content.

**Affective meaning** refers to the emotional attitudes and feelings that a speaker communicates through their linguistic choices. It is the expressive dimension of meaning, reflecting the speaker's personal stance, enthusiasm, disgust, urgency, or other emotional states. Affective meaning is often conveyed through intonation and prosody in speech, but it is also encoded in word choice, metaphor, and rhetorical structure.

**Thematic meaning** concerns the way in which a message is organized and structured to foreground certain elements over others. Through choices of word order, topicalization, focus, and emphasis, speakers signal what they consider most important. Thematic meaning is thus intimately connected to the rhetorical goals of a text, reflecting the speaker's attempt to guide the listener's attention and interpretation.

These four types of meaning are not mutually exclusive; in practice, a single utterance may simultaneously carry conceptual, connotative, affective, and thematic meaning. The analytical task is to identify which type is most salient in a given instance and to explain how it contributes to the overall communicative effect of the text.

### **Environmental Discourse and Ecolinguistics**

Environmental discourse refers broadly to the ways in which language is used to represent, construct, and contest ideas about nature, the environment, and the human relationship to the natural world. As a field of study, it draws on insights from discourse analysis, critical linguistics, and the emerging discipline of ecolinguistics.

Ecolinguistics, as described by Arran Stibbe (2015), examines the role of language in the ecological crisis, how particular ways of talking about nature and human activity either encourage or discourage environmentally destructive behaviors. Stibbe argues that discourse is not simply a reflection of attitudes toward the environment; it is also a shaper of those

attitudes. The stories we tell about nature, consumption, and waste influence how we think about our responsibilities as inhabitants of the planet.

Within this framework, persuasive environmental discourse like Singer's TEDx talk becomes an object of both linguistic and ethical interest. The choices Singer makes what to emphasize, what language to use to describe waste, how to construct her own identity as an environmental actor are not merely stylistic. They are ideological, in the sense that they encode particular values and invite the audience to adopt a particular worldview.

### **TED and TEDx Talks as Discourse**

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks and their independently organized counterparts, TEDx talks, have become a prominent genre of public communication since the early 2000s. Characterized by their informal yet authoritative register, personal storytelling, and inspirational framing, TED talks occupy an interesting space between academic lecture, motivational speech, and personal testimony.

Several scholars have examined the linguistic features of TED talks from a discourse-analytic perspective. Scotto di Carlo (2014) notes that TED speakers frequently use hedging, personal anecdotes, and inclusive language to create a sense of intimacy with their audience despite addressing large and geographically dispersed groups. Moirand (2014) observes that TED talks often employ what she calls 'discourse of expertise' a style that blends personal authority with accessible language to bridge the gap between specialist knowledge and general audiences.

These observations are directly relevant to the present study. Lauren Singer's talk exemplifies many of the rhetorical features characteristic of the TED genre, and understanding these features helps to contextualize the semantic choices she makes throughout the talk.

### **Previous Studies**

Several studies have applied semantic analysis to public speeches and environmental discourse, providing a useful context for the present research. Wahyuni (2019) conducted a semantic analysis of Greta Thunberg's speeches and found that affective meaning was the most dominant type, reflecting the speaker's urgent emotional appeal to world leaders. Pratiwi and Sari (2021) examined contextual meaning in environmental campaign slogans and demonstrated how connotative meaning is systematically exploited to construct environmental identity.

In the specific context of TED talks, Kusumawardani (2020) analyzed the lexical choices in climate-themed TED talks and found that speakers consistently use emotionally charged language to frame environmental problems as matters of personal moral responsibility. These studies collectively suggest that environmental discourse tends to foreground affective and connotative meaning as strategic tools of persuasion—a hypothesis that the present study tests against a new dataset.

What distinguishes the present study from previous work is its focus on a specific speaker whose message is grounded in lived experience rather than expert authority. Singer is not a scientist or a politician; she is a young woman who made a lifestyle change and decided to talk about it publicly. This positioning shapes her linguistic choices in distinctive ways, which the present analysis will explore in detail.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, which is appropriate given the interpretive nature of semantic analysis. Rather than attempting to quantify meaning in ways that would obscure its complexity, the analysis seeks to describe and explain the contextual meanings present in the data with attention to their rhetorical and ideological functions. This approach is consistent with the practice of discourse analysis as outlined by Fairclough (1992) and the tradition of semantic description associated with Leech (1974).

### **Data Source**

The primary data source is the full transcript of Lauren Singer's TEDx talk "Why I Live a Zero Waste Life," which was originally delivered at a TEDx event and is publicly available online. The transcript consists of approximately 2,800 words and covers Singer's personal journey toward a zero-waste lifestyle, her explanation of the practical steps she took, and her call to action for the audience. The transcript was obtained and verified against the original video recording to ensure accuracy.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection proceeded through a close reading of the transcript in its entirety. The researcher read the transcript multiple times to develop a thorough understanding of its overall structure, argumentative strategy, and key themes. On subsequent readings, specific utterances were identified as data points on the basis of their semantic interest—that is, their

apparent use of language in ways that go beyond straightforward propositional content and engage one or more of Leech's types of contextual meaning.

A total of 28 utterances were selected as data points. These utterances were drawn from different sections of the talk to ensure that the analysis reflects the full range of the text rather than focusing disproportionately on any single passage. Each data point was transcribed and coded using a coding scheme derived from Leech's typology.

### **Data Analysis**

Each selected utterance was analyzed in three steps. First, the conceptual or propositional content of the utterance was identified—what the utterance literally says. Second, the contextual meaning was identified by examining the utterance in relation to its immediate linguistic context (the surrounding sentences), its situational context (the rhetorical purpose of the passage in which it appears), and its broader social and cultural context (the discourse of environmentalism and lifestyle politics). Third, the dominant type of contextual meaning was classified according to Leech's framework, and an interpretation was provided explaining how that meaning type functions in the talk.

The findings are presented in a combination of tabular and discursive form. Tables are used to provide a systematic overview of the data, while the discussion section offers a more detailed interpretive account of selected examples. The goal is both comprehensiveness, ensuring that the full range of contextual meanings in the talk is documented and depth ensuring that the most significant examples receive the close analytical attention they deserve.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility of the analysis, the researcher employed several strategies consistent with qualitative research best practices. All analytical decisions were grounded in explicit theoretical criteria derived from Leech's framework, reducing the risk of arbitrary interpretation. The coding scheme was applied consistently across all 28 data points, and exemplary cases from each meaning type are presented in full in the findings section to allow readers to evaluate the interpretations independently.

## FINDINGS

### Overview of Contextual Meanings Found

The analysis of Lauren Singer's TEDx talk transcript yielded 28 data points distributed across four types of contextual meaning identified by Leech (1974): conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, affective meaning, and thematic meaning. The distribution of these types is summarized in Table 1 below.

*Table 1. Frequency of Contextual Meaning Types in Lauren Singer's TEDx Talk*

| Type of Contextual Meaning | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Conceptual Meaning         | 5         | 17.86%         |
| Connotative Meaning        | 7         | 25.00%         |
| Affective Meaning          | 10        | 35.71%         |
| Thematic Meaning           | 6         | 21.43%         |
| Total                      | 28        | 100%           |

As Table 1 shows, affective meaning is the most frequently occurring type (35.71%), followed by connotative meaning (25.00%), thematic meaning (21.43%), and conceptual meaning (17.86%). These figures suggest that Singer's talk is primarily oriented toward emotional persuasion, a finding that is consistent with the genre expectations of a TEDx talk and with the advocacy purpose of the speech.

### Data Analysis Table

Table 2 presents the 28 selected utterances along with their classification and interpretation. The utterances are organized chronologically as they appear in the talk.

*Table 2. Contextual Meaning Analysis of Lauren Singer's TEDx Talk*

| No. | Utterance / Data  | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation              | Context           |
|-----|---|-----------------|--|-------------------|
| D1  | <i>This is all of the trash that I've produced in the</i> | Conceptual      | Refers literally to the physical waste | Opening statement |

| No. | Utterance / Data  | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation   | Context                               |
|-----|---|-----------------|---|---------------------------------------|
|     | <i>past three years.</i>  |                 | produced by Singer over three years. Functions as an establishing statement that grounds the talk in verifiable fact.   |                                       |
| D2  | <i>People think that I'm crazy or that I'm lying.</i>                               | Affective       | Conveys Singer's awareness of social ridicule and disbelief. Projects vulnerability and self-deprecating humor while building rapport with the audience.        | Response to perceived public reaction |
| D3  | <i>No trash. This is a big concept.</i>   | Thematic        | Short, declarative sentences foregrounding the radical nature of zero waste. The repetition of 'no trash' functions as a rhetorical anchor for the entire talk. | Definition of zero waste              |
| D4  | <i>She would have this big plastic bag with a plastic clamshell full of food, a</i> | Connotative     | The repeated use of 'plastic' accumulates   | Anecdote about classmate              |

| No. | Utterance / Data  | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation   | Context                  |
|-----|---|-----------------|---|--------------------------|
|     | <i>plastic fork and knife, a plastic water bottle, a plastic bag of chips.</i>        |                 | negative connotations of excess, disposability, and environmental carelessness. The enumeration functions as implicit criticism.                                      |                          |
| D5  | <i>I was that girl.</i>   | Affective       | A moment of personal confession and moral reckoning. The phrase carries strong affective weight shame, self-recognition, and the beginning of ethical transformation. | Self-recognition moment  |
| D6  | <i>Every single thing in my fridge was in one way or another packaged in plastic.</i> | Conceptual      | Describes the factual reality of Singer's kitchen. The specificity grounds the talk in observable, everyday experience.   | Kitchen discovery moment |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation   | Context                         |
|-----|--|-----------------|---|---------------------------------|
| D7  | <i>Quitting plastic... Not so easy of a thing, right?</i>  | Affective       | Uses conversational register and direct address to build solidarity with the audience. The rhetorical question implies that the audience shares the same challenge.                           | Acknowledging difficulty        |
| D8  | <i>What is your toothbrush made out of? Plastic. What is your toothpaste probably packaged in?</i> | Thematic        | Topicalizes everyday objects through a question-answer structure. This rhetorical device places the audience in the position of the speaker's earlier self, making the problem feel personal. | Listing plastic products        |
| D9  | <i>My mind was completely blown.</i>   | Affective       | Colloquial expression signaling a profound shift in perception. Conveys   | Discovery of Bea Johnson's blog |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context                   |
|-----|--|-----------------|--|---------------------------|
|     |  |                 | astonishment and inspiration in language accessible to a broad audience.   |                           |
| D10 | <i>I cared about the environment, studied sustainability, talked about sustainability, protested for sustainability. But I realized that I wasn't actually implementing any of those values into my day-to-day life.</i> | Connotative     | The tripling of 'sustainability' activities followed by the conjunction 'But' creates a connotation of hypocrisy and incongruity. Invites the audience to reflect on the gap between stated values and lived practice. | Personal realization      |
| D11 | <i>I stopped buying packaged food.</i>   | Conceptual      | Describes a concrete behavioral change. Functions as the first step in a practical guide, grounding the talk's message in actionable terms.  | First practical step      |
| D12 | <i>My boyfriend at the time used to brush his teeth</i>  | Affective       | Humor and exaggeration   | Anecdote about toothpaste |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation   | Context                |
|-----|--|-----------------|---|------------------------|
|     | <i>using baking soda, and I thought he was probably the grossest person in the entire world.</i>                         |                 | ('grossest person in the entire world') create levity and relatability. Signals an ironic reversal the narrator herself now does the same thing.  |                        |
| D13 | <i>Not making any new trash.</i>   | Thematic        | The negative construction foregrounds absence what is not done rather than what is done. This reframing is a key rhetorical move throughout the talk, defining sustainability as a practice of restraint. | On secondhand shopping |
| D14 | <i>I'm the kind of person who's really sentimental, and I can tell you as to why a toothpick needs to be in my life.</i> | Affective       | Self-deprecating humor acknowledges the emotional difficulty of minimalism. Creates intimacy  | On downsizing          |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation   | Context                                |
|-----|--|-----------------|---|--|
|     |  |                 | and trust by admitting personal weakness.   |  |
| D15 | <i>Everything was easier to clean.</i>   | Conceptual      | Straightforward description of a practical benefit. Serves as an accessible, non-ideological entry point into the case for minimalism.                                | Benefits of downsizing                 |
| D16 | <i>I'm just an average lazy person, and I would have lived this lifestyle if it was difficult.</i> | Affective       | Strategic self-deprecation to preempt audience resistance. The claim to being 'lazy' paradoxically strengthens the argument that zero waste is achievable for anyone. | Addressing misconception of difficulty |
| D17 | <i>The benefits of living this lifestyle far outweigh any of the negative things.</i>              | Connotative     | Framing the zero-waste lifestyle positively through comparative language. Carries connotations of rational evaluation   | Transition to benefits section         |

| No. | Utterance / Data  | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context                         |
|-----|---|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|
|     |   |                 | and balanced judgment, lending the speaker authority.  |                                 |
| D18 | <i>I'm not paying for the embedded cost of packaging.</i>   | Conceptual      | Introduces a specific economic concept ('embedded cost') that makes the financial argument precise and credible. Grounds an ideological choice in pragmatic reasoning.                       | Financial benefit of zero waste |
| D19 | <i>The average American person produces approximately 4.4 pounds of trash per person per day. Over the course of a year, that's like taking eight and a half of your best friends and throwing them in the trash.</i> | Connotative     | Statistical fact is recontextualized through an absurd and emotionally provocative metaphor. The image of discarding one's friends activates strong connotations of betrayal and negligence. | Statistical argument            |
| D20 | <i>Don't do that. It's not</i>  | Affective       | Deadpan humor  | After metaphor                  |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context                       |
|-----|--|-----------------|--|-------------------------------|
|     | <i>nice.</i>   |                 | following a disturbing metaphor. The understatement ('it's not nice') about discarding friends creates a moment of comic relief that reinforces rather than diminishes the emotional impact. | about trash                   |
| D21 | <i>You can't solve a problem of having a lot of waste until you know what it is.</i> | Thematic        | Foregrounds epistemic action, knowing before doing, as the foundation of change. This thematic prioritization positions self-awareness as the first step of environmental responsibility.    | First suggestion to audience  |
| D22 | <i>Low-hanging fruit.</i>  | Connotative     | Idiomatic expression carrying connotations of  | Second suggestion to audience |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context            |
|-----|--|-----------------|--|--------------------|
|     |  |                 | accessibility and ease. Functions strategically to make environmental action seem non-threatening and achievable.  |                    |
| D23 | <i>Using a reusable bag instead of a plastic or paper bag, or using a stainless steel or glass water bottle instead of buying plastic water bottles.</i> | Conceptual      | Provides concrete, actionable examples of behavioral change. The specificity of materials (stainless steel, glass) grounds abstract environmental principles in everyday consumer choices. | Practical examples |
| D24 | <i>When you go to a store, and you have to buy products, you kind of have to settle, and accept them as they are.</i>                                    | Connotative     | The word 'settle' carries connotations of compromising on one's values or preferences. Implicitly frames consumer culture  | On DIY products    |

| No. | Utterance / Data   | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context                          |
|-----|--|-----------------|--|----------------------------------|
|     |  |                 | as a system of imposed limitations rather than genuine choice.   |                                  |
| D25 | <p><i>If I don't like the way they smell, I change the scent.</i></p> <p><i>If I don't like the ingredients in them, I change it. If I don't like the packaging, it's my choice.</i></p> | Thematic        | <p>Parallel syntactic structure foregrounding the theme of personal agency and control. The anaphoric repetition of 'if I don't like' emphasizes autonomy as a core value of the zero-waste lifestyle.</p> | On making own products           |
| D26 | <p><i>Cleaning product manufacturers aren't even legally required to disclose the ingredients of their products.</i></p>   | Connotative     | <p>Legal framing carries connotations of institutional negligence and corporate opacity. Positions the industry as adversarial to consumer interests, strengthening the</p>                                | On cleaning product transparency |

| No. | Utterance / Data  | Type of Meaning | Contextual Interpretation  | Context              |
|-----|---|-----------------|--|----------------------|
|     |   |                 | case for DIY products.   |                      |
| D27 | <i>I get comments all the time that I'm doing this for attention.</i>   | Affective       | Acknowledges external criticism directly, then deflects it. Demonstrates personal authenticity and resilience. The confession of public judgment creates sympathy and credibility.                               | Addressing criticism |
| D28 | <i>I want to be remembered for the things that I did while I was on this planet and not for the trash that I left behind.</i> | Thematic        | Closing statement foregrounds legacy as the ultimate theme of the talk. The juxtaposition of 'things I did' and 'trash left behind' frames environmental responsibility as a question of identity and mortality. | Closing statement    |

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Conceptual Meaning: Grounding the Argument in Reality**

Conceptual meaning, as Leech (1974) defines it, constitutes the core propositional content of an expression the factual, descriptive information that it conveys. In Singer's talk, conceptual meaning tends to appear at moments where the speaker is attempting to establish credibility and ground her message in verifiable reality. Datum D1, for instance, opens the talk with a straightforward factual claim: the speaker's trash over three years fits in a single jar. This is not an emotional appeal or a rhetorical flourish; it is an assertion of fact designed to establish the talk's central premise.

Similarly, D6 'Every single thing in my fridge was in one way or another packaged in plastic' functions as a descriptive claim about a specific moment of discovery. The word 'every' is important here: it is a universally quantified statement that brooks no exceptions, and its function is to make the scale of the problem concrete and undeniable. D11, D15, and D23 follow a similar logic, providing specific, actionable descriptions of the steps Singer took and the changes she experienced. In each case, the use of conceptual meaning reflects a rhetorical strategy of anchoring the talk's larger claims in specific, observable facts.

What is notable about Singer's use of conceptual meaning is the way it is embedded within a largely affective and connotative framework. The facts she cites are not presented neutrally; they are framed by emotional context, placed at rhetorically significant moments, and surrounded by language that invites the audience to draw moral conclusions. This suggests that conceptual meaning functions, in this talk, less as an end in itself than as a foundation for more emotionally and ideologically engaged forms of communication.

### **Connotative Meaning: The Politics of Word Choice**

Connotative meaning is perhaps the most pervasive and politically significant type of meaning in Singer's talk. Leech (1974) defines connotative meaning as the communicative value of an expression beyond its purely conceptual content the associations and implications that a word carries by virtue of its cultural and social context. In environmental discourse, connotative meaning is a primary mechanism through which values and ideologies are embedded in seemingly descriptive language.

Datum D4 provides one of the most striking examples. Singer describes her classmate's daily consumption in exhaustive detail: 'a big plastic bag with a plastic clamshell full of food, a plastic fork and knife, a plastic water bottle, a plastic bag of chips.' The word

'plastic' appears five times in rapid succession. On the conceptual level, this is simply a list of the materials the classmate's items are made of. On the connotative level, however, the accumulation of 'plastic' creates a strong impression of excess, thoughtlessness, and environmental harm. Plastic has become, in contemporary environmental discourse, a culturally loaded term associated with pollution, disposability, and corporate irresponsibility. Singer exploits this connotative weight to construct her classmate as an environmental anti-model, though she quickly complicates this by revealing that she, too, was 'that girl.'

D10 demonstrates another form of connotative meaning one that depends on structural contrast rather than lexical accumulation. Singer describes her past self as someone who 'cared about the environment, studied sustainability, talked about sustainability, protested for sustainability' and then continues: 'But I realized that I wasn't actually implementing any of those values into my day-to-day life.' The conjunction 'But' signals a reversal, and the repetition of 'sustainability' in the first clause, followed by its absence in the second, creates a connotation of hypocrisy. The audience is invited to recognize and perhaps to share the gap between environmental values and environmental practice.

D19 offers a particularly creative instance of connotative meaning. Singer translates the abstract statistic of 4.4 pounds of trash per person per day into a visceral image: 'that's like taking eight and a half of your best friends and throwing them in the trash.' The connotations here are deliberately chosen for shock value friendship, loyalty, and interpersonal care are invoked only to be juxtaposed with the act of discarding. The absurdity of the image makes it memorable, while its emotional weight makes it morally challenging.

### **Affective Meaning: Emotional Persuasion and Relational Building**

Affective meaning is the dominant type in Singer's talk, accounting for 35.71% of all identified data points. This finding is consistent with the persuasive and inspirational purposes of the TEDx genre, in which speakers are expected to not only inform but to move their audiences emotionally. For Singer, affective meaning serves two related functions: it establishes her authenticity as a speaker, and it creates emotional alignment between herself and the audience.

One of the most distinctive features of Singer's affective language is her use of self-deprecating humor. D2, D12, D14, and D16 all employ humor to acknowledge the perceived extremism or difficulty of her lifestyle while simultaneously disarming potential resistance. In D16, for example, she describes herself as 'just an average lazy person,' a claim that is

clearly ironic given the considerable effort required to live a zero-waste life. But the irony works rhetorically: by positioning herself as relatable and ordinary, Singer lowers the barrier to identification and makes her message more accessible.

D5 'I was that girl' is among the most affectively charged moments in the talk. The simplicity of the sentence belies its emotional complexity. Singer is publicly acknowledging that she was, until recently, the very person she had been criticizing. The admission carries connotations of shame and humility, but it also positions the speaker as someone who has undergone genuine moral transformation a narrative arc that is central to the persuasive impact of the talk. This moment of self-recognition is what transforms Singer from an environmental idealist into a credible environmental actor.

D20 demonstrates the use of understatement as affective strategy. Following the disturbing metaphor of throwing one's friends in the trash, Singer delivers the deadpan punchline: 'Don't do that. It's not nice.' The bathos the deliberate deflation from the serious to the trivial creates a moment of comic relief that actually reinforces rather than undermines the emotional impact of the preceding metaphor. The audience laughs, which releases tension, but the unsettling image lingers. This kind of tonal modulation is a sophisticated rhetorical technique that characterizes the most effective TED talks.

### **Thematic Meaning: Organizing the Message**

Thematic meaning, in Leech's (1974) framework, concerns the way in which the organization and structure of an utterance reflects and reinforces its communicative priorities. It is, in a sense, the rhetoric of syntax, the way in which grammatical choices enact ideological ones. In Singer's talk, thematic meaning is most clearly visible in her use of parallel structures, repetition, and strategic sentence placement.

D8 provides a clear example of thematic organization through a question-and-answer structure. Singer asks: 'What is your toothbrush made out of? Plastic. What is your toothpaste probably packaged in?' This pattern of posing a question and immediately answering it topicalizes everyday objects by making them the subject of focused attention. More importantly, by using the second person ('your toothbrush,' 'your toothpaste'), Singer places the audience in the position of the self she described earlier, the person whose refrigerator was full of plastic. The thematic choice to use the second person here is a key mechanism of identification.

D25 exemplifies thematic meaning through syntactic parallelism. The repeated structure 'If I don't like X, I change/it's my choice' foregrounds personal agency as the central theme of this passage. Each repetition reinforces the contrast with the constrained consumer experience described in the preceding utterance, where buyers must 'settle' for whatever is on the shelf. The anaphoric structure is not merely stylistic; it enacts, through syntax, the autonomy that Singer is arguing for.

D28, the talk's closing statement, is perhaps the clearest instance of thematic meaning in the entire transcript. 'I want to be remembered for the things that I did while I was on this planet and not for the trash that I left behind' juxtaposes action and waste, presence and absence, legacy and refuse. The thematic organization of the sentence places 'the things that I did' in a position of positive assertion and 'the trash that I left behind' in a position of negation. This organization embodies the talk's central argument: that a life is defined by what it contributes, not by what it discards.

### **Synthesis: Language as Environmental Advocacy**

Taken together, these findings suggest that Singer's talk is a sophisticated instance of environmental advocacy discourse in which linguistic choices are consistently oriented toward persuasive, identity-building, and ideological ends. The predominance of affective meaning reflects the talk's orientation toward emotional engagement; the prevalence of connotative meaning reflects its engagement with the broader cultural codes of environmentalism; the presence of thematic meaning reflects its careful rhetorical architecture; and the use of conceptual meaning provides the factual grounding that lends the emotional and ideological appeals their credibility.

What is particularly striking about Singer's language is the way it positions the zero-waste lifestyle not as an act of sacrifice or deprivation, but as an act of liberation, alignment, and authentic selfhood. This reframing from environmental obligation to personal fulfillment—is perhaps the most significant rhetorical achievement of the talk, and it is accomplished almost entirely through the management of contextual meaning at the lexical and syntactic levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the types and functions of contextual meaning in Lauren Singer's TEDx talk "Why I Live a Zero Waste Life," drawing on Leech's (1974) framework

of semantic meaning types. Through the analysis of 28 selected utterances, the study identified four types of contextual meaning: conceptual, connotative, affective, and thematic meaning.

The findings reveal that affective meaning is the most frequently employed type (35.71%), followed by connotative meaning (25%), thematic meaning (21.43%), and conceptual meaning (17.86%). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that environmental advocacy discourse tends to foreground emotional and associative dimensions of meaning as primary tools of persuasion.

The analysis further demonstrates that these meaning types do not operate in isolation; they interact in complex and mutually reinforcing ways to construct a coherent and compelling environmental message. Singer's self-deprecating humor, her strategic use of culturally loaded terms like 'plastic,' her syntactic parallelism, and her grounding of abstract principles in concrete fact all contribute to a rhetorical performance in which linguistic form and communicative function are deeply integrated.

This study contributes to the fields of ecolinguistics and environmental discourse analysis by demonstrating how semantic analysis can illuminate the ideological dimensions of environmental advocacy. It also contributes to the growing body of research on the language of TED and TEDx talks as a distinctive genre of digital public communication.

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a single text, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research might usefully apply the same framework to a larger corpus of environmental TED talks, or compare the linguistic strategies of speakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the present study has focused on the written transcript of the talk rather than the spoken audio, and a prosodic analysis of the original recording might reveal additional affective dimensions not captured in the text.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates the value of semantic analysis as a tool for understanding how language shapes, reflects, and contests our relationship to the environment. In a world increasingly defined by ecological crisis, the ability to read and critically evaluate environmental discourse is not merely an academic skill, it is a form of literacy that has practical and political stakes.

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