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Depicting and tackling the waste problem: An (eco)stylistic study of Rob Greenfield’s “I wore all my trash for 30 days” TEDx Talk

Abstract. This paper analyses the way the waste problem is depicted in Robin “Rob” Greenfield’s TEDx Talk “I wore all my trash for 30 days.” It first explains the chosen framework – critical stylistics and conceptual metaphor theory – to conduct the analysis. Secondly, it studies the staging of the talk and of the problem, as well as the nouns and verbs used to refer to, respectively, the problem and its origin. Then, it explores the metaphors used by the speaker to denounce consumerism as linked to the exponential production of trash. Finally, it analyses how solutions are mentioned, and how the individual is depicted as having a role to play in tackling and solving the problem. This study demonstrates that, for the speaker, the individual is accountable and must take responsibility for the problem humanity and the planet are facing: by acknowledging the waste problem and showing people the power in their hands, and encouraging them to act rather than wait for other actors to make a move, the discourse appears as a beneficial one having a potentially very positive impact on our vision of the trash problem and on its tackling.

Keywords: Critical stylistics, ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, consumerism, waste studies, metaphors, TEDx Talk

1. Introduction

TED was first launched in 1984 as a conference to discuss Technology, Entertainment and Design (hence the acronym TED), but over the years it has evolved to become a non-profit media organisation. For a few years now it has allowed the organisation of independent local events called TEDx events. This initiative multiplied the number of people reached. Indeed, according to TED’s website (n.d.), “[TED] talks are now viewed or listened to more than 3 billion times annually”, and the official YouTube account (TED, n.d.a) enjoys a huge number of subscribers

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(41.8 million) and an even larger number of views (+8 billion), which means it can potentially have a huge impact, or at least the numbers show that it reaches a lot of people.

The TEDx Talk under study is about waste and our relation to consumption. Talks dedicated to this topic are numerous on the platform. I chose to focus on the latest talk (when this article was written) dedicated to waste. The speaker is Robin “Rob” Greenfield, who is described in this way on the page dedicated to the talk on YouTube:

Rob Greenfield is an **activist and humanitarian** dedicated to leading the way to a more sustainable and just world. He embarks on extreme projects to **bring attention to important global issues** and **inspire positive change**² [...] (2022).

Over the past few years, he has given three TEDx Talks – the first of which focused more on himself – documenting the different challenges he undertook and his “extreme” lifestyle (as he describes it). His main take on the waste problem is that “[...] our actions as individuals really do matter and can make a hugely positive impact” (Greenfield, 2017).

All discourses carry ideology, either explicitly or implicitly (Jeffries, 2010): discourses represent the world in a certain way and here Greenfield is described as wanting to raise awareness but also foster action on the part of the audience. The aim of this article is to show how he does that, by focusing on three main elements: how the waste problem is described; how the potential solutions are depicted; and how individual actions and agency are put forward as a solution to the problem.

2. Theoretical framework

As Viridis (2022) explains, discourses referring to the environment are part of what Myerson & Rydin (1996) call “the environet,” which they describe as follows: “the aggregate collection of texts, words and voices [about the environment], a network making linkage upon linkage between the environment words. [...] Each text comes from the environet and adds to it” (p. 7). They also explain that “in the environet, texts always interact with each other, indirectly because they address issues together, they use the same words, they address similar audiences, they respond to similar feelings, they use the same arguments, or opposing arguments” (p. 10). This TEDx Talk might be one single discourse on environmental issues but it still may have an impact because it is part of this network of discourses: “As arguments accumulate across the environet, the agendas reform. Therefore, any single text has broader impacts than are felt by its readers; each contributes to the aggregate impacts of environmental texts on the culture as a whole” (p. 10).

Ecostylistics distinguishes between three types of ecological discourses. According to Stibbe (2021), beneficial ecological discourses (see also Viridis, 2022) promote an “ecosophy” (Naess, 1995) – or ecological philosophy – which sees in the environment something to be preserved for human beings but also for nature itself. On the contrary, destructive discourses are detrimental

² Except when mentioned, emphasis in all quotes is mine.

to the environment as they promote its exploitation. They are widespread and accepted without really being challenged. Finally, ambivalent discourses, which are very frequent, seem beneficial on the surface but actually encourage a status quo. Greenfield produces within the “environet” a “beneficial” discourse. He tries to raise awareness, and promotes a different relation to consumption and waste – which he calls “trash.” He opposes destructive discourses which encourage – explicitly or implicitly – the destruction of the environment and do not see any problem in ever-increasing consumption.

To analyse this text, I will rely on critical stylistics as developed by Lesley Jeffries. “Stylistics” is to be understood in the broader sense to refer to the choices made by the speaker as they produce a text. These choices are tinged with ideology. Jeffries explains:

the producer of any text, though perhaps in cultural terms restricted by background education and so on, is nevertheless also subject to the pressure of choosing the exact terms in which s/he frames the text. This choice [...] whether made consciously or unconsciously and at the whim of dominant pressures, is always ideologically loaded and may also be ideologically manipulative. (2010, p. 3)

Each text proposes a particular view of the world (Jeffries, 2014, p. 409).

The “critical” dimension is to be linked to critical discourse analysis (CDA) as theorised and promoted by linguists such as Fowler et al. (1979), Fairclough (1992; 2014), and van Dijk (1993). This type of analysis sees discourse as “social practice” (Fairclough, 2014): discourse is involved in power, as it reproduces and reinforces dominant ideologies. Critical stylistics proposes a slightly different approach. Jeffries gives her framework a more theoretical foundation, focusing mainly on the text, trying to keep some objectivity, where CDA, having concluded that absolute objectivity is impossible, relies on a more partisan discourse (Jeffries, 2014, p. 410). Jeffries rids the term “critical” of the Marxist dimension it is usually associated with. Moreover, when ideology is often described as “the ways of thinking which (re)produce and reflect the power of structures of society” (Goatly, 2000, p. 3) and when CDA aims to “investigate critically social inequality, as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised and so on by language (or in discourse)” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 2), for critical stylistics, ideology is present in every text. Here, ideology is understood differently from the way the term is used in everyday language:

Ideology is seen by most discourse analysts and linguists as an unavoidable fact of all discourse. Unlike its use in the popular press and some political environments, we do not use the term *ideology* to refer only to ideas that are motivated by political aims or selfish intentions. There is not, however, any possibility that any discourse is free of ideas, and thus of ideology (2010, p. 8; the author’s emphasis).

Jeffries’ approach is interesting in that she provides (among other things) a set of tools to analyse texts and help the linguist explain “the cognitive processes which may result in readers

being affected by a text's ideological structure" (2010, p. 2). More particularly, she proposes to explore ten textual-conceptual functions (2014):

- Naming and describing
- Representing actions/events/states
- Equating and contrasting
- Exemplifying and enumerating
- Prioritising
- Implying and assuming
- Negating
- Hypothesising
- Presenting others' speech and thoughts
- Representing time, space and society.

I will more particularly concentrate on the following functions: "naming and describing," "representing actions/events/states," "equating and contrasting," "exemplifying and enumerating," and "implying and assuming," as they are here relevant to show how Greenfield depicts and tackles the waste problem in his talk, revealing the ideology he tries to promote.

As they are linked to the "equating and contrasting" textual-conceptual function, I will also explore the metaphors used by Greenfield. Metaphors are a field of research that has long been at best neglected, at worst rejected. As Lakoff and Johnson point out in their seminal work *Metaphors we live by* (1980), Western philosophy is wary of metaphors: art, and oratory at that, is merely an illusion; metaphors cannot therefore provide access to truth. In contrast, the cognitivists Lakoff and Johnson have developed a "conceptual metaphor theory," which takes as its starting point the premise that metaphors are not just a type of poetic figure of speech, but they structure the way we apprehend the world and reality. Indeed, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, they are not the result of an exceptional use of language; they are everywhere (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Paprotte & Dirven, 1985) and help us to envisage and understand the world. Even if we are not aware of it, they have an impact on our daily lives.

Our conceptual system is based on metaphors because they enable us to grasp reality: they refer to metaphorical concepts. For Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors involve talking about one thing as if it were another: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (1980, p. 5). By convention, these metaphors take the following form: A IS B, where A is the target and B the source. An analogy is therefore established between A and B. This conceptual metaphor then finds its way into the language through various expressions. For example, Lakoff and Johnson highlight the conceptual metaphor: ARGUMENT IS WAR, which is found in everyday speech in the following expressions: "your claims are *indefensible*," "He *attacked every weak point* in my argument" or "I've never *won* an argument with him" (1980, p. 4; the authors' emphasis). Most conceptual metaphors are conventional: we no longer pay attention to them and they have become our default way of thinking and talking about something, to the point where we forget that the reality they depict may only be partial.

Although Lakoff and Johnson's approach has since been criticised (see, for example, Gibbs (2013), Gibbs and Perlman (2006), Pawelec (2009), and Resche (2022)), there remains a fundamental principle on which my analysis of the metaphors used in the talk is based: metaphors (whether conventional or creative) say something about the point of view and ideology of the person using them. They are used for purposes of persuasion and even manipulation (see Charteris-Black (2011), Damele (2016), Knowles & Moon (2006, pp. 95-120), Resche (2023) and, Ritchie (2013)), and by establishing an equivalence between two concepts, they make it possible to convey this ideology more subtly than if they were not used. They also make it possible to understand concepts that elude us, often by equating them with physical elements that we have experienced or are experiencing.

To analyse how Greenfield describes and tackles the waste problem, I will first explore how this discourse is a beneficial one focusing on the atmosphere created. I will study the terminological choices made to refer to the problem (nouns chosen and verbs associated with them). This will lead me to analyse three metaphors used to denounce consumerism, before exploring the way solutions are mentioned and how accountability is tackled.

3. Depiction of the waste problem in the talk

3.1. A farcical approach?

Greenfield's experiment was the following: he immersed himself in consumer society for a month. While he normally tries to live as sustainably as possible, he behaved like an average consumer for thirty days. The challenge, as the title of the conference suggests, was to wear all the trash he produced in a transparent suit (see image 1), thus becoming an embodiment of consumerism.



Image 1. Screenshot of the beginning of the talk

The talk starts as a kind of clownish performance and the first half of the talk is quite farcical and light-hearted. The speaker is wearing a buffoonish costume reminiscent of a clown and relies on humour and pantomime: the suit and the staging of its heaviness implies lots of puffs and pants; there are references to poop:

- (1) And I'm going to talk about one little thing that maybe we're not supposed to usually talk about in public: our poop. So I actually compost my own poop and grow food with it.

and body odours:

- (2) I didn't want to have flies chasing me down the street everywhere that I went.

- (3) So that is where the lavender essential oil was key on the hot and sweaty days.

each time leading to peals of laughter on behalf of the audience. The audience is thus part of an interactive jolly show, which could lead to the interpretation of this discourse as destructive or at least ambivalent (Stibbe, 2021; Viridis, 2022) as it does not seem to be up to the seriousness of the problem it is supposed to deal with.

However, it can also be interpreted as part of a strategy to appeal to the audience and not seem too serious at first. Ecological and sustainability problems have been linked to mental health issues such as solastalgia, a concept coined by Albrecht defined as follows: "It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation)" (2005, p. 45). In other words, this psychological phenomenon is "a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (2005, p. 45). The mention of the environmental crisis can lead to this kind of distress. It is also often coupled with what is now called "eco-anxiety," which the APA describes as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton et al., 2021, p. 71). If one is more linked to the present situation (solastalgia) and the other more to the future (eco-anxiety), both psychoterratic conditions – among others identified by Albrecht (2011) – may inflict physical pain, and create mental health problems.

So, the way sustainability problems are talked of is key if one wants to emulate action and not only cause insuperable distress among one's audience. This farcical introduction may then be interpreted as a good way to keep at bay psychoterratic conditions before moving to the more serious part of the talk. Indeed, if the problem seems not so serious at first and this introduction seems destructive to the cause, beyond the staging, the speech in itself is heavy with references and allusions to the seriousness of the problem, which is made explicit:

- (4) there is **a real serious message** here.

I will now focus on how the seriousness of the problem emerges in the discourse and what are the stylistic devices used to create realisation, raise awareness, and emulate action, making this discourse a beneficial one.

3.2. Naming the problem

Jeffries’ “naming and describing” textual-conceptual function concerns how the text “names” the world, that is, the choices made by the speaker to represent a certain view of the world. Greenfield uses different nouns to refer to what we do not use anymore, what ends up in landfill.

Table 1. Nouns and number of occurrences

Nouns used	Number of occurrences
Litter	1
Waste	2
Garbage	10 (including “garbage can” (4))
Trash	25 (including 1 in the title)

“Litter” obviously refers to trash found in the streets, and it is only mentioned once, in this way. “Garbage” is a quite neutral way to refer to what we put in dustbins, hence the fact this word is found multiple times as part of the compound noun “garbage can.” “Waste,” on the contrary, tells us a bit more about our relation to consumption. Lynch explains that “the dictionary definitions of waste are centered on man. [...] Waste implies negligence or human failure” as “the term is applied to a resource not in use, but potentially useful, wasted time, a wasted life, an empty building or machine” (Lynch, 1990, p. 147). Kennedy follows the same idea: “It seems, then, that waste results from carelessness—that is, from a neglect or failure to care for the things we have valued” (Kennedy, 2007, p. 5). Even if this term is the preferred one in other TEDx Talks, usually linked to the zero-*waste* movement, and if Greenfield uses that word, it is far from being the most frequent in his talk. He prefers using the word “trash,” which is also found in the title of his presentation. Like “waste,” this noun has a negative connotation. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as follows: “something **worth little or nothing** such as things that are **no longer useful or wanted** and that **have been thrown away**” (n.d., Definition 1a). Contrary to “waste,” it does not refer to something that could still be of use but is neglected. Typically, it is something that is left behind in the production or use of something else: it is disposable, it is a useless by-product of our consumption. The negative vision we have of what the term refers to is present in the talk as it is pictured as smelly and dirty (as mentions of cleaning, flies, and the use of essential oils – already referred to above – show).

The use of that word says a lot about the way our society envisages what it refers to. As Kennedy explains:

By calling disposables trash, [attention is drawn] to the way in which we exist as consumers in the throwaway society. We exist, for the most part, in a way that violently negates beings rather than takes care of them. (2007, p. xvi)

Trash is usually something useless, that we should not bother with, something not worthy of talking about or dealing with, but Greenfield turns this around and makes it the centre of the discussion, giving it the place it deserves. By using that word, Greenfield shows how we feel about it, how those things are not desirable and how we would prefer not to deal with them. That is why we as a society decide to outsource its management. So, it disappears and it seems it is not a problem anymore.

The fact that the expression “out of sight, out of mind” appears four times is quite significant:

(5) Well, for most of us, **our trash is out of sight, out of mind**. We simply throw it in the garbage can and never think about it again.

(6) But what I didn't realize is that I was also going to feel the weight of our consumerism with every step that I took. For me, **there was no “out of sight, out of mind.”** I had the burden on my shoulders.

(7) Because of our globalized industrialized systems, **most of this stuff is all out of sight, out of mind**, all along the production line, from extraction, to production, to distribution, to consumption, to disposal, destruction is happening that we are not seeing.

(8) It's just piles of trash being put into the earth. **Out of sight, out of mind.**

This repetition parallels the lie we as a society repeatedly tell ourselves – “the story we live by” as Stibbe (2021) might call it – and emphasises that this mindset is detrimental to our planet. As Kennedy (2007) puts it:

General interest and knowledge of the procedures of waste management and recycling; of the technology of landfilling and incineration; of the life span of petrochemical products is, to all intents and purposes, nil on the consumer level. **We know as much about the ‘away’ to which we throw things as the distant ‘whence’ from which they came.** In this atmosphere of general ignorance, ontological anomalies can readily multiply. **Our everyday consumer circumspection discloses material beings as if they had no physical being, no basis for presence.** (p. 138)

We display our understanding for the essence of the cup through a physical act that in fact simply rehearses the a priori divorce and distance of the object from our bodily being; we throw it away, we pitch it out. **This “out” and this “away” have no meaningful location, lying, as they do, beyond the phenomenal world of everyday consumption.** (p. 141)

The violence of consumption concentrates on the disappearance of beings; when consumed, disposable items are supposed to vanish. Although their material remains, it is wilfully denied

presence within the contextualized disclosure of the meaningful world. **We want no sight of our trash.** (p. 154)

Metaphorically, Greenfield is the sight that cannot be unseen, that will remain with the audience: his goal is to be “a mirror for society to look at,” when we usually look away.

However, what is at stake here is not so much trash as its creation – as it is not a self-generated problem: we (as agents and consumers) perform an action, behave in a certain way which leads to the creation of trash.

3.3. The creation of trash

Individual human activities create negative by-products, one of the most important of which being trash. Because they belong to a consumer society, people in their everyday life create trash through the apparently basic activities Greenfield enumerates: “shopping, eating, consuming,” but also because of other activities such as “[...] extraction, [...] production, [...] distribution, [...] consumption, [...] disposal” that are also linked to consumption. Those are mundane activities, and trash might thus seem unavoidable, but Greenfield begs to differ.

The word “trash” is paired 8 times with the verb “create.” The use of that verb is particularly interesting. The Oxford English Dictionary defines that process as follows: “To bring into being, cause to exist; esp. to produce where nothing was before” (n.d., Definition 1.a.; the author’s emphasis). The way this action is represented is telling. When the transitive verb “create” appears in active sentences, the subject is either “we,” “I,” or “the average person,” which all refer to consumers. When the verb is used in passive sentences, the agent is never mentioned – even if the audience probably still understands that it is again consumers – the society as a whole, including companies (see below):

(9) According to “The Story of Stuff,” for every garbage can that we put on the curb, the equivalent of about 30 to 70 garbage cans of waste **are created** up the production line.

(10) True solutions work with reusing things and reducing all of the trash we create in the first place rather than dealing with it once it’s **created**.

People – since they are consumers – are seen as the main creators of trash. Because of its meaning, the verb endows the agent with whom it is associated with great powers but also responsibility. The agent/consumer becomes analogous to a Godlike figure as they bring into being what did not exist before and thus may also choose not to. Therefore, the unavoidable character of the creation of trash is here qualified, as the agent may (or may not) decide to stop or reduce it. Contrary to the verb “produce,” which is defined as follows: “to bring into being or existence. *transitive. gen.* To bring (a thing) into existence from its raw materials or elements, or as the result of a process” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d. Definition 3.a.; the author’s emphasis), and

thus focuses on the process, and includes a notion of transformation, the verb “create” focuses on the end-result, which is submitted to the will of its creator, i.e., in this case, the consumer.

However, the creation becomes more powerful than the creator, who is not aware of the power they have. Indeed, Greenfield describes his experiment this way:

(11) I simply **floated along** in the breeze of consumerism.

The syntax may be active but the subject does not really seem to be the agent of the material process “float” (Simpson, 1993). In fact, Greenfield, behaving like an average consumer, is rather passive, letting himself be carried along. Consumerism is like the wind and the consumer a leaf being blown by it, losing agentivity and will. Greenfield has us consider the link between trash and consumerism, and reassess our unquestioned behaviour.

3.4. Denouncing consumerism with the use of metaphors

Once positively connoted, the word “consumerism” has come to have a negative sense, as “[it] can be used to refer to a life excessively preoccupied with consumption” (Gabriel & Yang, 2006, p. 3). Greenfield opposes this way of life to another, that is to “live in harmony with Earth, humanity and all our plants and animal relatives.” When consumerism is all about humans and their desires, the lifestyle Greenfield tries to promote is about finding a balance, and living as a family (“relatives”) with other inhabitants of the Earth (“plants and animals”) and with the Earth itself. By choosing the word “consumerism” rather than the more neutral term “consumption,” he opposes the prevailing economic ideology which holds that economic growth through ever higher levels of consumption is the solution to our economic, social, and political problems.

The negative sense of consumption is pervasive and made explicit through three metaphors the speaker heavily relies on. They are negative but beneficial metaphors because they expose the dead end we have reached and show that we need to change things, that there is an alternative to the current destructive ideology based on consumerism and the idea that trash production is (nearly) without consequences.

Stibbe identifies the following metaphors (there are others, of course) that structure our relationship to consumption: PURCHASING PRODUCTS IS A PATH TO HAPPINESS and MORE IS GOOD (2021, p. 23; p. 83). Like any metaphor, these metaphors, which make us conceptualise consumption as a good thing, even when it is unbridled, only highlight a certain aspect of reality to the detriment of others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 11; Kövecses, 2010, pp. 91–95³), which may be less positive. They can therefore be identified as destructive because their promotion has a negative impact on nature and everything that is part of it (including human beings), particularly through the creation of “trash,” the theme of the conference. To make his arguments more striking, Greenfield promotes other metaphors that oppose these and highlight the negative

3 Kövecses refers to the following principles: “highlighting” and “hiding.”

impact of consumerism. He therefore seeks a kind of cognitive reframing, because if there is a link between language and the environment (in the sense that the way we use language to talk about the environment, but also the ideologies that language conveys, have a positive or negative impact on the way we see the world (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001, p. 5)), finding beneficial ways of using language could potentially lead to a redefinition of our relationship to it, and above all to a life more in harmony with the world of which we are a part.

3.4.1. CONSUMERISM IS A PRISON

CONSUMERISM is first understood through the source domain PRISON. The idea is to denounce the mental prison created by the ideology that consumer society has developed and imposed as the dominant one. This ideology is all around us, and as a result it imprisons the consumer, who is no longer aware of it; it becomes a given, which is not questioned. As Greenfield explains, his experiment consisted in immersing himself in this lifestyle:

(12) I have **immersed** myself in the consumer lifestyle.

If he is aware of his immersion (as the use of the reflexive pronoun “myself” shows), the average consumer is unknowingly immersed, and that is why consumerism becomes a prison, trapping people in a pattern of endless consumption. It also makes it difficult to correctly perceive reality: overconsumption produces, among other things, an enormous amount of trash but we do not realise how much.

This imprisonment is represented first and foremost visually, as Greenfield wears (in a transparent suit) the result of a month’s average consumption: he is locked in his suit and is prevented from moving freely. Only his head, hands and feet are still visible; the rest of his body has disappeared, swallowed up by the waste produced (see image 1). The empty stage draws attention to the trash and its incredible quantity. When everything is usually done to make the consequences of our consumption disappear, Greenfield stages them, and the trash created becomes the centre of attention: the audience can no longer escape it, which again leads to a sense of being trapped. The ambient and usually unquestioned MORE (CONSUMPTION) IS GOOD metaphor prevents us from realising the golden prison we are in and, above all, from considering any alternative. By allowing the audience to visualise this prison, Greenfield makes the invisible finally visible:

Greenfield also discursively brings to the fore what is normally hidden. He makes trash the theme of his presentation: as already mentioned, the word “trash” appears multiple times alongside other terms to refer to waste. This textual proliferation mimics the proliferation and ubiquity of trash, and the way in which it surrounds us. While consumers think of themselves as agents (they are the grammatical subject of the process “create,” which appears 6 times with “trash” as its object), their passivity in their everyday lives is obvious. But Greenfield’s

exceptional experiment has led him to meet many people and to plant the seeds of doubt in them, reinjecting critical thought in people's minds:

- (13) And through these conversations, I could really see **the wheels just turning** inside of people's heads. In spaces where you don't usually see **critical thought and self-reflection**, I saw it happening.

By enabling passers-by and conference-goers to visually assess the problem and realise the prison it creates, Greenfield seeks to make the possibility of doing things differently obvious. And to do so, people need to escape. Hence the use of the expression "to break free from consumerism," which is found twice in the talk:

- (14) I've made it my life's mission to **break free from consumerism**, show that there's another way and live in harmony with Earth, humanity and all our plants and animal relatives.
- (15) Millions of people **are breaking free from consumerism**, are taking power back and are becoming a part of the solution.

The consumer becomes an agent of change – this agency is a positive one, unlike the negative agentivity of the blind consumer – able to take back a power that was taken away from them when they decided to accept, without ever questioning it, a lifestyle in which consumption rules supreme. In that sense, Greenfield goes against the prevailing economic ideology that economic growth and the ever-increasing consumption it relies on is part of the solution and not of the problem. On the contrary, an ever-increasing consumption leads to an ever-increasing creation of trash. The multimodal (visual and linguistic) metaphor proposed by Greenfield is designed to raise awareness in order to begin the work of liberation. To do so, it is important that consumers also realise the consequences of their lifestyle for themselves and for the planet.

3.4.2. CONSUMERISM IS WEIGHT

Beyond the PRISON metaphor, the image created by the costume is reminiscent of actors wearing a fat suit to represent a state of obesity. The visual impression created is striking: it is the first thing the spectator sees when the speaker enters the stage. Even before Greenfield speaks, and as he is arriving, the first sounds we hear coming from his mouth are groans ("Ahhh. Uhhh."), and a cry of relief ("Whew!") when he finally stops walking and can adopt a position that relieves him of the weight of his costume. Greenfield overplays the physical discomfort his suit inflicts on him, linked to the weight of the trash he is carrying. He often huffs and puffs. Although they do not experience it themselves on a day-to-day basis, the viewer is made visually and aurally aware of the weight of their consumption.

This metaphor, far from being only visual, is actually multimodal, as it is accompanied by linguistic devices that reinforce it. Indeed, our compulsive consumption is echoed in the references to quantities that pepper the discourse, particularly in a passage devoted to statistics on waste production. The following passage is the only one in which we find figures (apart from those used to refer to the passing of days in the account of his experiment):

- (16) This is one month of living the average consumer lifestyle. **Seventy-two pounds** of trash. The average person creates about **five pounds** of trash per day here in the United States. That adds up to **about 150 pounds per month**, and that's close to **one ton** of garbage per year. So now imagine for a moment what 10 years of trash might look like. That could cover **this whole auditorium**. And now imagine a lifetime of trash. That could **be a small mountain** of trash to leave behind for future generations. [...] But what you do see here is really just the tip of the trash iceberg. According to "The Story of Stuff," for every garbage can that we put on the curb, the equivalent of **about 30 to 70 garbage cans** of waste are created up the production line.

The audience is overwhelmed with figures and references to quantities – linked to the production of waste – which increase steadily over the period under consideration: one day leads to the creation of 5 pounds of trash; one month represents 150 pounds; one year, 1 ton. After a year, the figures give way to more telling *images*, as it is difficult to fully comprehend what several tons represent: the amount of trash created in 10 years is equivalent to the surface area of the auditorium, and in a lifetime, a small mountain of trash is produced. To this, we must add what is produced upstream ("about 30 to 70 garbage cans of waste"): Greenfield uses images to help the audience better understand the order of magnitude involved. The use of the metaphor "the tip of the iceberg" drives the point home, as the spectator, already overwhelmed by the dizzying quantities mentioned, realises that there is even more.

The exponential growth of our waste is reminiscent of cancer: like cancerous cells, the abnormal growth of our consumption weighs on our environment and therefore on ourselves, and it endangers us. The CONSUMERISM IS A DISEASE metaphor is not new; it has already been mentioned by Stibbe as a frequent one (2021, p. 69). Here, the use of the WEIGHT metaphor means that consumerism is described as a kind of obesity, and the metaphor CONSUMERISM IS WEIGHT is also reflected in the representation of waste (its exponential accumulation being one of the by-products of our consumerism) as a burden. The target domain (CONSUMERISM) denotes something abstract, and Greenfield allows us to grasp it through a physical, tangible concept (WEIGHT), as abstract thought – for cognitivists – is only possible through the use of metaphors (Goatly, 2007, p. 14). What is more, we need this embodiment of the consequences of our lifestyle because the waste we produce is an unthinkable fact of consumer society (at least for most consumers). The system has organised itself so that the consequences of our consumption become invisible: as already mentioned, the expression "out of sight, out of mind" is used no fewer than four times to talk about trash and our relation with it. Everything is done to ensure

that the consequences of our behaviour are not directly accessible to us, by automatically and quite naturally getting rid of our waste (see (5): “**simply** throw”) and exporting it or outsourcing its management. So it is easy not to feel the weight of our actions.

But Greenfield makes this weight visually tangible through his so-called “trash-suit” (even more so as it is transparent). As noted above, he stages its weight, explaining that he had to find a position to relieve himself of it (see image 2), even if only temporarily, because, contrary to what usually happens for us, “there is no away” for him in this experiment:



Image 2. Screenshot of Greenfield’s relief position

(17) So, this suit is pretty **heavy**, and I did come up with sort of a genius way to **let the weight off my shoulders**. I simply **rest** these front bags on my legs, and I can kind of just sit here and **take the weight off my back**. Oh, that feels good. [...]

(18) For me, there was no “out of sight, out of mind.” I had **the burden on my shoulders**. Ooh. So, forgive me, I may have to **rest** once in a while. [...]

(19) Ooh. I might need one of those **rests**. Uhh.

The words “heavy,” “weight,” “burden,” and “rest” clearly show how our consumerism weighs on us and on the entire planet: weight is perceived negatively as a burden. The way our society has found to relieve itself is simply to make waste disappear visually – but it does not mean it disappears physically. Like Greenfield’s strategies for relieving his back and shoulders, we, as a society, have developed strategies to relieve our eyes and consciences, but trash remains, and the planet must bear the growing burden of our consumption: the more we consume, the greater the amount of trash, which means the heavier the burden.

That is why references to weight – in addition to the various quantities mentioned earlier, which add to the impression of burden – are so prevalent in the text: “burden” appears three times; the adjective “heavy” once (modified by the adverb “pretty,” understood as an understatement and thus actually amplifying the meaning of the adjective); finally, the noun “weight” is used four times. The recurring association of those words with consumerism and the trash-suit means that the garment comes to represent both visually and textually the ideology being denounced. Moreover, the expression “the weight of consumerism” appears twice: the nominalisation⁴ of the process “to weigh” means that there is no longer any assertion, and so the fact that our consumerism weighs on us and the planet can no longer be questioned; it is taken for granted. When Greenfield says:

(20) I’ve really felt **the weight of our consumerism** over the last month

what is being asserted (since this is a declarative sentence) is not that our consumerism weighs on us (it could then be negated) but the fact that he *really felt* the weight of our consumerism, as opposed to people usually not feeling it. Because the underlying process has been turned into a nominal, it is not the content of a proposition anymore but a mere argument of another verb (“feel”), making it harder to question its existence. The only element that could be negated in (20) is the predicative relationship <I-feel the weight of our consumerism>, but the fact that there is a weight resulting from our consumerism is made self-evident and is not open to debate.

Our daily behaviour as consumers therefore has an impact on ourselves and on the planet, even if we are not always aware of it, because society has created the illusion that consumerism is a positive thing, hiding the negative aspects it has. By becoming aware of this, it is possible to take action and free ourselves from it. In this perspective, Greenfield revisits a conceptual metaphor at the foundation of our culture.

3.4.3. MORE IS GOOD

Among the types of metaphor Lakoff and Johnson identify there are those they call “orientational metaphors” (1980, pp. 14–21). They are based on the fact that we have a body and that we perceive the world through it: more precisely, we perceive the world on a vertical axis. They therefore give a spatial orientation to the target domain. I am interested in two of them: MORE IS UP and GOOD IS UP. They combine to create a metaphor that is a fundamental value of our culture, and structures our relationship with the world: MORE IS GOOD, and its corollary: LESS IS BAD. The consequences are numerous. While in many cases more is indeed a good thing, in others it is more questionable. Goatly shows the catastrophic consequences it can have, particularly in the field of nutrition (2007, pp. 165–170). In Greenfield’s talk, this equation (MORE CONSUMPTION

4 Nominalisation – the turning of a process into a noun – is also part of the “naming and describing” function identified by Jeffries.

is good) leads to unbridled production and consumption, enhanced by the elements identified above (proliferation of quantitative references, among others).

Other TEDx Talks dealing with trash are linked to the zero-waste movement and usually promote a reduction of waste by relying on the LESS IS GOOD metaphor, as shown in the screenshots below (images 3, 4 and 5).



Image 3. Screenshot of Lauren Singer’s talk “Why I live a zero waste life.” (2015, TEDxTeen)



Image 4. Screenshot of Bea Johnson’s talk “Two adults, two kids, zero waste.”
(2016, TEDxFoggy Bottom)

In images 3 and 4, we can see the speaker showcasing a small jar containing all the waste they have produced in a year (Johnson and her family) or in three years (Singer).

Greenfield himself used this rhetoric in his first TEDx Talk in 2017.



Image 5. Screenshot of Rob Greenfield's talk "Be the Change in the Messed up World"
(2017, TEDxIHEParis)

Image 5 shows Greenfield sharing a picture (in the background on a screen) of himself with a small bag containing the 2 pounds of trash he created in 104 days during another project.

Of course, Greenfield's 2022 talk also promotes a reduction of our trash by physically embodying our excesses. But the MORE IS GOOD metaphor is so ingrained in our way of thinking that trying to replace it with another does not seem to always be the best solution. So rather than changing it to LESS IS GOOD (which would not be consistent with the metaphorical structure of the concepts at the foundation of our culture, LESS being generally seen negatively, while MORE is positively connoted), Greenfield redefines the terms. By redefining what MORE covers, it is possible to look at it in a different way, and possibly change our way of thinking, and our behaviour, while maintaining a positive mindset.

The main problem here is growth, and what grows. Interestingly, alongside the references to large quantities (discussed above), Greenfield very often also uses the quantifier "every":

- (21) **Every** coffee cup, **every** plastic bottle, **every** shopping bag, **every** to-go container, **every** Amazon delivery.

This determiner reflects our conception of consumption: it is only one cup, only one plastic bottle, only one shopping bag... However, the use of the singular should not conceal the fact that the repetition of several noun phrases such as "every + singular noun" creates an accumulation

of trash in the end. Moreover, while “every” refers to a single element, it implies a larger group the element belongs to, meaning that it is one single element but in addition to all the others.

In a consumer society, growth is linked to increased production and purchase of goods, which inevitably leads to an enormous amount of waste upstream and downstream:

(22)⁵ Because of our globalized industrialized systems, most of this stuff is all out of sight, out of mind, all along the production line, from **extraction**, to **production**, to **distribution**, to **consumption**, to **disposal**, destruction is happening that we are not seeing.

The nouns – the result of nominalisations – for the activities associated with consumer society follow one another and accumulate, producing ever more trash: more consumption means more destruction; so much for MORE IS GOOD.

One may then think that living creates trash, and humans would have to stop everything – including living – to be sustainable. But we do not need to stop living; we need to live differently. What needs to change is our mindset and our behaviour. Greenfield opposes these destructive activities to meaningful, low-impact ones, as well as connections with other human beings.

The talk begins with a fairly short enumeration of what the life of an average consumer entails:

(23) For the last month, I have been living just like the average person – **eating, shopping, consuming**, just like so many of us are used to [...].

These are three rather mundane material processes. When Greenfield lists the actions that he takes in his usual life, the number grows:

(24) I just want to take you back to a little day in my life. At home, I try to create as little trash as I can. You’ve all heard of the three Rs, I’m sure: reduce, reuse, recycle. Well, I try to follow at least 7 Rs: **rethink, refuse, reduce, reuse, repair, repurpose, rot**, and then, as a last resort, **recycle**. I **compost**; I **buy secondhand items**; I **share** things with my friends; I **fix** items when they break; I **grow** some of my own food; I **forage**; I **carry** my own reusable containers wherever I go; I’ve ditched most disposable items.

What is striking is that three activities as ordinary as eating, shopping and consuming (“consuming” in fact subsumes the other two) weigh more heavily in the production and accumulation of trash than no fewer than eight actions (all the verbs in re-; the other verbs in bold are variations on these actions). So, it is not living that produces trash, but the way we do it. This is reminiscent of what Eisenstein says (also quoted by Stibbe (2021, p. 83–84)), highlighting the misconception of some ecologists:

5 This passage was earlier cited as (7); it is repeated here for clarity.

I disagree with those environmentalists who say we are going to have to make do with less. In fact, we are going to make do with more: more beauty, more community, more fulfillment, more art, more music, and material objects that are fewer in number but superior in utility and aesthetics. The cheap stuff that fills our lives today, however great its quantity, can only cheapen life (2021, p. 40).

We need to retain the fundamental MORE IS GOOD metaphor, but we need to change the noun determined by “more.” So, the solutions seem to rely on individuals.

4. Solutions

In a talk dealing with the waste problem, we might expect solutions to be put forward (the word “solution” appearing 7 times at the end of the talk), but the largest part of the talk is dedicated to the experiment and the presentation of the problem itself. Out of 1823 words – onomatopoeia included – 335 words are dedicated to solutions, which are presented as being of two types, which are contrasted (the “contrasting” textual-conceptual function is fundamental here).

The first type of solutions mentioned – which are given more room – are those put forward as adequate by governments and techno-optimists. Those are the main solutions we are presented with on a daily basis: incineration, recycling and scientific breakthroughs such as bacteria eating plastic or vacuums sucking up trash.

(25) So whether it's the landfill, incineration or recycling, these are not solutions to the root of the problem.

(26) These really exciting and expensive ideas like bacteria that will eat our plastic and vacuums that suck up our trash, although they are exciting, they also don't get to the root of the problem.

However, since they do not tackle the problem in its entirety, but only its consequences, they are exposed as inadequate palliative solutions. They are associated with negative words, the negative appraisal of which is reinforced by the use of intensity adverbs and hyperbolic adjectives: incineration is described as “**very** toxic” and “**not very** efficient”, as well as releasing chemicals; recycling is a “**very highly** resource- and energy-**intensive** process”; bacteria and vacuums are “**really** [...] **expensive** ideas.”

That is why these so-called solutions are implicitly presented by Greenfield as “fake” solutions, and therefore not solutions:

(27) So I want to **talk a little bit about solutions**, because the solutions are out there. **True solutions** go to the root of the problem.

By saying “I want to talk a little bit about solutions” after mentioning recycling, bacteria, landfill, or incineration, he implies that what has just been mentioned is not solutions, and

adding the evaluative adjective “true” to the noun “solutions” in the following sentence makes it explicit that what we are sold and what we end up believing (recycling is a good solution, or technology will save us, for example) is actually a lie, and we cannot expect much from it.

“The root of the problem” is mentioned three times because according to Greenfield only solutions getting to it are “true solutions,” which are the second type of solutions mentioned. Here, the audience might be left hungry for more as no specific initiative is mentioned – contrary to the list given as exemplification for the other type of solutions. But the root of the problem is our consumerism, which means action must come from us, and they are not ready-made solutions. The individual level is then the level at which actions must be taken, because what makes something trash is its uselessness and the fact that we bought it and got rid of it: from a probably optimistic – if not naïve – perspective, if we do not create trash, the problem is solved.

5. People’s accountability, responsibility, and agency

When it comes to responsibility, what is interesting is not so much who is mentioned as who is not. Governments and companies are not mentioned as being responsible for the problem or as having to take action and change, when we know that their behaviour has a major impact. The way actions are represented is then quite telling. Through the constant use of passives:

(28) the equivalent of about 30 to 70 garbage cans of waste **are created** up the production line

(29) piles of trash **being put** into the earth

(30) Most plastic **was never designed** to actually **be recycled**

the agents, also responsible for the ecological problems we have to face, are not explicitly referred to.

The use of nouns instead of verbs (see (22): “production line, [...] extraction, [...] production, [...] distribution, [...] consumption, [...] disposal, [...] destruction”) also erases who is responsible and who the actors/grammatical subjects of those processes are.

Another way to avoid mentioning industries, companies and governments is simply by making trash the subject of verbs:

(31) And where **does your trash actually go?**

(32) **the trash continued** to add up

(33) Or maybe it’s the pictures of **all the trash piling up** in the oceans

(34) some of that **trash**, though, **does go** to incinerators

(35) how much **our garbage added up**

Those sentences do not make use of the passive but the real agent is not present: we are very close to a middle voice since the grammatical subject (“trash” or “garbage”) is not doing anything.

This is probably due to the non-divisive and non-polemical character of TEDx Talks:

No talks with an inflammatory political or religious agenda, nor polarizing “us vs them” language. [...] We seek to build consensus and provide outside-the-box thinking, not to revisit familiar, unresolvable disputes on these topics. (TED, n.d.b)

All those linguistic devices make it possible not to mention certain actors – namely industries and governments – as agents and as part of the problem, even if implicitly the audience probably understands.

However, they are clearly mentioned at the end of the talk, but as being part of the solution:

(36) We need **massive systemic change**. And the good news is that that is happening. **There are examples of governments and corporations around the world showing that it is absolutely possible**. The solutions are out there, and they are waiting for you to join them. So it’s all possible.

If the fact that (some) governments and corporations are seen in a positive way could be seen as destructive, as it puts the burden of action solely on the consumer, it is also empowering for people, and the main goal of the talk is to be a call for action to individuals, giving them their agency back.

Moreover, the individual is pictured as belonging to a community. Greenfield verbally creates a community, to which he also belongs, even if he has a different lifestyle from most people: the reference to “us the people” is reminiscent of the first words of the preamble of the American constitution, conferring power to the people as opposed to solutions depending on other actors. The recurring use of “we” (30 times), “us” (3 times) and “our” (15 times) (always including the speaker) joins individuals together, as individual actions do not have to be solitary but may be collective. When confronted with “fake” solutions or debilitating anxiety, change and action might seem impossible or in vain. If individuals are given back agency – they are responsible for the creation of trash so they can decide to reduce it – they become active and not merely passive in this crisis because their actions do have an impact. The question which ends the talk is consistent with this analysis:

(37) So now that **you** know that there is no away, I invite **you** to remember this. And next time **you’re** reaching for that consumer good, ask **yourself**, if **you** had to wear that piece of trash, would **you** still reach for it or would **you** find another way?

Greenfield directly addresses the audience, this time using the pronoun “you/yourself”, making it clear that people need to act and not wait for others to do something. They have to create their own sustainable solutions (“find another way”).

Acting at the individual level can be seen as a way to escape what Pierre Peyretou (Affiliate Professor at the ESCP business school in France) calls “the triangle of inaction” (2020).

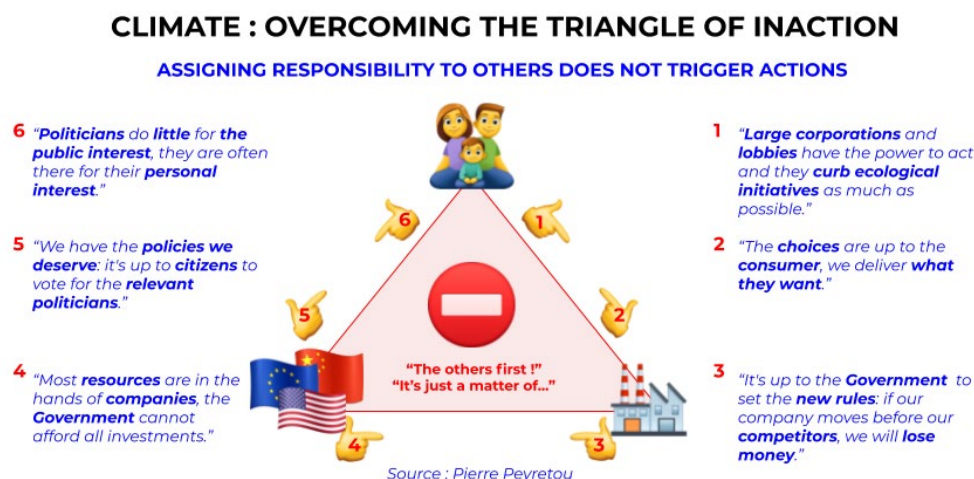


Image 6. The triangle of inaction (Peyretou, 2020)

Rather than pointing the finger at others, waiting for them to act first, which leads to a dead end and stark inaction because each participant believes that the others must act first, realising that one can act and have an impact individually makes a huge difference, and when individuals come together, they have more impact and can make other actors (companies and governments) act, too. The fact that people are seen as crucial actors who do not have to wait for others to act to have an impact on the problem is a refreshing take on the problem and the way to deal with it, which might actually encourage action from the audience.

6. Conclusion

Greenfield’s talk is a good example of a beneficial environmental discourse. The way language is used clearly reflects an ideology which promotes a life in harmony with the planet – plants and other animals included. Through a meaningful choice of words and representation of actions, in a carefully crafted discourse, he contributes to raising awareness among the audience and emulating change, making a concealed problem unavoidable: we may try and close our eyes, but the trash we create has become a problem we must tackle now.

The main goal of such presentations as TEDx Talks is to make the audience think and, if the speaker is highly successful, to make them change. Greenfield is no exception here, as he directly addresses the audience, making them the main actors. This means that the weight of the problem seems mainly to be on individuals, which might make the discourse rather ambiguous when (some of) the two other actors – governments and companies – are seen as already acting

and finding solutions. But regaining agency and realising that one has the possibility to act and change things with simple actions is actually empowering, even more so when individuals are not alone but are encouraged to come together for their actions to add up.

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