

The Language of Food Waste

Thinking otherwise and acting for change

Janus Mortensen · Kamilla Kraft · Camilla Falk Rønne Nissen · Alberte Ritchie Green

VELUX FONDEN

BACKGROUND

"While around 20% of food produced in the EU is lost or wasted, some 33 million people cannot afford a quality meal every second day."

"Globally, if food waste were a country, it would be the third largest greenhouse gas emitter after China and the United States."

► **Food waste** is the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions by retailers, food services and consumers.

FAO. 2019. The State of Food and Agriculture 2019. Moving forward on food loss and waste reduction. Rome. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

Fighting food waste – Exploring the interplay between values, choices and habits is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Velux Foundations.

The project sets out to explore which barriers and opportunities can be identified when it comes to fighting food waste in the interaction between consumers, the retail sector and food waste organizations.

The project is a collaboration between researchers from the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Law and the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen and four key stakeholders in the fight against food waste in Denmark.

In the language-focused part of the project we explore the values, choices and logics that are constructed through language in discourses about food waste.

By studying the language of food waste, we gain insights into how institutions and individuals construct and understand food waste and the values they associate with reducing food waste.

Analyzing and mapping such fields of social meaning-making grants insights into how we might use language and raise language awareness to empower sustainable agendas for change.

DATA and METHODS

This poster reports on an ongoing study of food waste discourses in Danish newspapers from 1917 to 2011.

Using the *Mediastream* database at The Royal Danish Library, which holds digitized versions of 35 million newspaper pages, we identified 700 texts featuring the Danish word for food waste, *madspild*.

After initial bottom-up coding of a subset of the data, we developed a coding scheme focused on thematic roles (Saeed 2015) and coded all unique texts in the data set (=500 texts) using Atlas.ti.

The analysis allows us to track how discourses on food waste have changed over time, and how different rationales for the need to combat food waste are realized through language and other semiotic resources.

In this poster, we focus on three thematic roles: GOAL – why should food waste be reduced? AGENT – who produces or reduces food waste? INSTRUMENT – how should food waste be reduced?

Future work will involve newspaper discourses from 2011 till the present day.

DISCOURSES ON FOOD WASTE IN DANISH NEWSPAPERS 1917-2011

GOAL – why should food waste be reduced?

Economic value is by far the most frequent GOAL, accounting for 176 of 284 quotations in total. The code spans the entire data set, from 1917 to 2011. Reducing food waste is seen as a way of saving money in times of crisis, e.g. WW2 and the 2007-2008 financial crisis. The code is also connected to consumerism: money saved on food by not wasting it can be spent on an extra holiday. Oftentimes the need to reduce food waste is connected to public institutions having to reduce their costs.

Employment is the second most frequent code with 36 quotations. Most of these relate to the work of *Landsforeningen til Arbejdsløshedens Bekæmpelse* (LAB), a nationwide food collection scheme in operation in the 1940s and early 1950s. The collection aimed to boost employment and generate livestock feed. The code resurfaces in the 1970s and once in the 1980s, in both cases in relation to high unemployment rates in Danish society at the time.

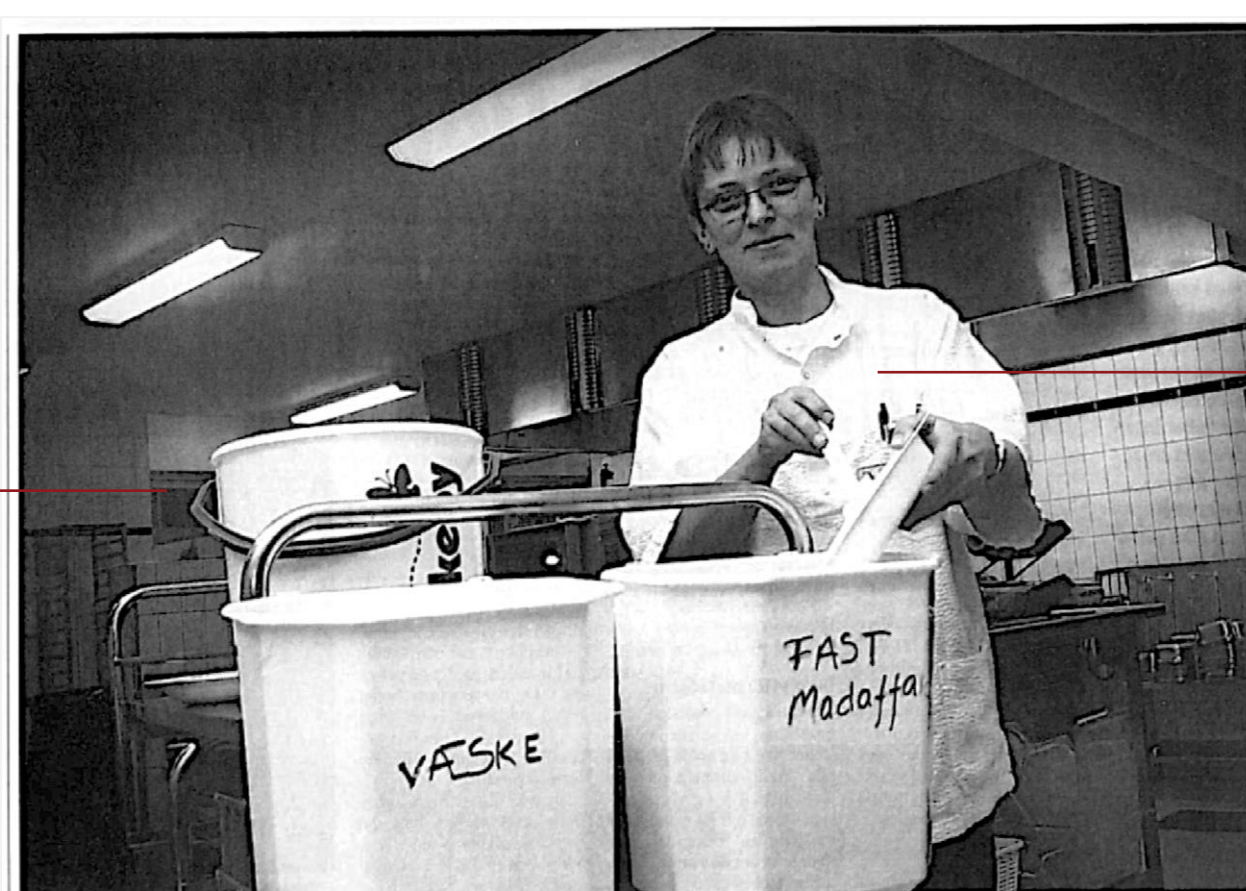
The environment takes third place with 29 quotations. Unlike the two GOAL codes above, the environment only enters the Danish newspapers in 1976, not to reoccur until 1987, but is then mentioned consistently until 2011. The environment code is primarily connected to state initiatives to improve conditions for the environment. Food waste is seen as part of protecting earth's resources. We hypothesize that this code will be replaced by the climate in discourses post 2011.

AGENT – who produces or reduces food waste?

Housewives. The AGENT category has been subdivided into agents who produce food waste and agents who reduce it. In both subcategories, *husmoderen* (literally 'the mother of the house') features prominently from 1940 to the 1960s, accounting for roughly 1/3 of all quotations in the entire data set for this category. Housewives are positioned as agents morally responsible for contributing to waste collection in the 1940s and 1950s and as homemaker-consumers in ads in the 1960s (cf. technology under INSTRUMENT). From the 1970s onwards, housewives disappear in the data, but there's frequent reference to households as agents.

Public institutions – e.g. hospitals, care homes, barracks, and schools – constitute another category of agents who are seen to produce as well as reduce food waste. In the decades following WW2, soldiers are frequently scolded for wasting food, which is portrayed as a moral lapse. From the 1980s onwards, most quotations concern hospitals. Here discourses on food waste are often tied to questions related to nutrition.

Civil society organizations make up a salient third group in this category, but in this case exclusively as agents that help reduce food waste. *Landsforeningen til Arbejdsløshedens Bekæmpelse* (LAB) is the most frequent organization in the data (cf. INSTRUMENT and GOAL), but there are also several others, e.g. Lions Clubs. Interestingly, food waste reduction is not the primary goal of these organizations. It's a means to achieving other ends.



Quantity and the selection of food are often seen as STIMULI for food waste in public institutions. This is also part of the considerations at this care home in Middelfart in 2011.

The kitchen manager of a care home in Middelfart is sorting leftovers into liquid (væske) and non-liquid (fast) food waste. The latter is sent to a facility 30 kilometers away in Kolding to be processed and turned into pig feed (INSTRUMENT).

Sortering sparer penge

OVERSKUD: Mindre affaldsmængde giver bedre miljø og sparer penge
"Sorting saves money. SURPLUS: reducing the amount of waste is good for the environment and helps save money". *Fyens Stiftstidende*, 14 January 2001.

From the 1990s onwards, protecting the environment and economic value are two frequent GOALS

INSTRUMENT – how should food waste be reduced?

Technology is the most frequent instrument in the data, accounting for 126 of 395 quotations in total for this category. The code emerges in 1950 and is frequent throughout the 50s and 60s, mainly in ads for home refrigerators and *Vita Wrap* plastic wrap. In the 1980s and again in the beginning of the 2000s, machines for food packaging in institutional food facilities begin to feature, supplementing the focus on food waste in private households.

Collection and redistribution/reuse of food waste is the second most frequent code with 77 quotations. Most of these relate to the work of *Landsforeningen til Arbejdsløshedens Bekæmpelse* (see under GOAL) where household waste was collected, but there are also instances in the 70s, 80s, and 2010s. The method has been revitalized in recent decades, with a focus on surplus food.

Animal feed takes third place with 70 quotations, spanning all decades in the data set, except the first decade of the 21st century. The code often co-occurs with collection as INSTRUMENT and economic value as GOAL.



The image of a woman anchors the 'you' used in the text below.

UUNDVÆRLIG BAAD SOMMER og VINTER

Get a GRAM fridge and "you will avoid food waste in your kitchen."



Ansåf Dem et GRAM køleskab bord- eller indbygningstype. De udgår madspild i Deres køkken, og De kan foretage færre, men større samlede indkøb og sparer derved både tid, penge og kræfter. Skabene, der rummer 62 liter, er hygiejniske, praktiske og økonomiske i drift, og de sælges naturligvis på lønligt betalingsvilkår.

Save time, money and effort.

This ad for GRAM refrigerators from 1953 links technology (INSTRUMENT) with housewives (AGENT) and economy (GOAL). *Korsør Avis*, 5 March 1953.

People employed by LAB were referred to as waste collectors. The collection of waste, including food waste, was motivated by economic considerations, but job creation was an equally central GOAL, making the waste collectors BENEFICIARIES.

In the 1940s and 1950s, farmers are often positioned as AGENTS that help reduce food waste because they can use food scraps and surplus food to feed their livestock. Later in history, farmers are positioned as AGENTS that produce food waste.



Carriage used for collection (INSTRUMENT) outside the LAB (AGENT) waste collection facility in Vejle. On the right a farmer is picking up boiled food waste to be used as pig feed (INSTRUMENT). *Vejle Amts Folkeblad*, 21 August 1941.

| Thematic roles | |
|----------------|---|
| GOAL | why should food waste be reduced? |
| AGENT | who produces or reduces food waste? |
| INSTRUMENT | how should food waste be reduced? |
| STIMULUS | what causes food waste? |
| LOCATION | where is food waste produced? |
| BENEFICIARY | who/what might benefit from reduced food waste? |

| Number of texts per decade in the data set | | | |
|--|-----|-----------|-----|
| 1910–1919 | 1 | 1970–1979 | 43 |
| 1930–1939 | 7 | 1980–1989 | 66 |
| 1940–1949 | 96 | 1990–1999 | 21 |
| 1950–1959 | 115 | 2000–2011 | 102 |
| 1960–1969 | 46 | | |

LANGUAGE AWARENESS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

One of the ambitions of the overall project is to produce learning materials, e.g. in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. How can complex societal problems such as food waste be translated into specific teaching activities? Hypothesis: We can engage learners in real-world problems by raising linguistic awareness. The newspaper study can be replicated at smaller scale to allow students to develop critical reading skills through comparative textual analyses, focusing on the intersection between discourses on food waste and e.g. gender roles in different historical periods.

