COMMUNICATING CLEAN CITIES: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN SHAPING WASTE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN URBAN AFRICA

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Abstract
Rapid urbanisation across African cities has intensified challenges related to waste management and environmental pollution, making public behaviour an important factor in sustaining clean and liveable environments. This paper examines the role of discourse in shaping attitudes and practices associated with waste management in urban African contexts. Adopting a complementary discourse-pragmatic and hermeneutic approach, it examines how language is used to instruct, persuade, and moralise in relation to acceptable waste disposal practices, while also interpreting the social, cultural, physical, and moral meanings embedded in such communication. The study focuses on three purposively selected environmental expressions: "Do not dump refuse here," "Keep your environment clean," and "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Using qualitative textual analysis, the study examines the pragmatic actions performed by these expressions and the contextual meanings through which their communicative force is understood. The analysis reveals three complementary strategies: direct prohibition, responsibility-oriented persuasion, and moral or cultural appeal. From a pragmatic perspective, the expressions function as socially situated actions that regulate conduct, encourage responsibility, and promote the internalisation of environmental values. From a hermeneutic perspective, their meanings are shaped by physical, social, cultural, and moral contexts. The study argues that environmental communication is therefore not merely a means of transmitting sanitation information but also a resource for constructing behavioural norms and giving environmental responsibility social and cultural meaning. The findings suggest that clear, contextually relevant, and culturally grounded communication, supported by appropriate waste-management infrastructure, can contribute to more meaningful public engagement with environmental responsibility.

Keywords: Discourse, Urbanisation, Waste Management, Environmental Communication, Pragmatic Acts, Hermeneutics

Introduction

Rapid urbanisation across many African cities has brought with it a range of environmental challenges, among which waste management and environmental pollution remain particularly pressing (UN-Habitat, 2020; World Bank, 2018). As urban populations continue to grow, the capacity of existing waste management systems is

often stretched, resulting in improper waste disposal, accumulation of refuse, and increased risks to public health and environmental sustainability (Wilson et al., 2012; Kosoe et al., 2021). While considerable attention has been given to infrastructural deficits, policy limitations, and technological solutions, less emphasis has been placed on the role of human behaviour in shaping environmental outcomes within these urban spaces. Waste management is not solely a technical or administrative issue; it is also embedded in everyday practices and social behaviour. The ways individuals dispose of waste, respond to environmental regulations, or participate in public sanitation initiatives are influenced not only by the availability of facilities but also by how environmental responsibility is communicated and understood. Simatele et al. (2017) noted that sustainable waste management in African urban contexts requires not only technical systems but also active public participation and behavioural change. Public campaigns, media messages, signage, and informal interactions therefore serve as important channels through which expectations about cleanliness and civic responsibility are conveyed. However, the effectiveness of such communication varies, raising questions about how language shapes public engagement with environmental practices.

This paper argues that discourse plays a central role in influencing waste management behaviour in urban African contexts. Here, discourse refers to language in use within specific social and cultural situations, encompassing formal and informal modes of communication (Verschueren, 1999). Through discourse, authorities instruct, persuade, warn, and sometimes sanction members of the public in relation to environmental conduct, while individuals interpret, negotiate, or resist these messages. Adopting a pragmatic perspective complemented by a hermeneutic interpretive orientation, the paper examines how such language functions as social action and acquires meaning within its social and cultural contexts (Mey, 2001; Gadamer, 2004). Pragmatic analysis examines what environmental expressions do in particular contexts, while hermeneutic interpretation explains how they are understood in relation to shared values, lived experience, and surrounding circumstances. Together, the perspectives illuminate both the actional force and contextual meaning of environmental discourse.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the role of discourse in shaping waste management practices in urban Africa, with particular attention to how communicative strategies influence behavioural patterns. By foregrounding the relationship between language and action, the study complements approaches that prioritise infrastructure and policy highlighting the importance of communication in achieving sustainable urban environments.

Conceptual Clarifications

For clarity, this study engages with a number of key concepts, namely discourse, pragmatics, urbanisation, waste management, and environmental behaviour. These concepts are central to understanding the relationship between communication and

public engagement with environmental practices in urban African contexts.

Key Concepts

Discourse

Discourse is broadly understood as language in use within specific social and cultural contexts. It goes beyond isolated sentences to include how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted in interaction (Verschueren, 1999). From a pragmatic perspective, discourse is not merely descriptive but performative, enabling speakers to carry out actions such as informing, instructing, persuading, and warning (Mey, 2001). In the context of this study, discourse includes formal communication such as government campaigns and media messages, as well as informal interactions through which environmental expectations are expressed and reinforced.

Urbanisation

Urbanisation refers to the increasing concentration of populations in cities and urban areas, often accompanied by expansion in infrastructure, economic activity, and social complexity (UN-Habitat, 2020). In many African contexts, rapid urbanisation has not always been matched by adequate planning or public services, creating challenges for environmental management, particularly waste generation and disposal. Growing populations place pressure on existing waste-management systems and can contribute to environmental degradation when waste is not effectively managed (World Bank, 2018).

Waste management

Waste management, in this study, refers to the collection, transportation, processing, and disposal of waste materials in ways that minimise environmental harm and protect public health. Although effective systems are essential for clean and sustainable urban environments, technical efficiency alone does not guarantee success; public participation and responsible behaviour are equally important (Wilson et al., 2012). Waste management therefore involves not only structural provisions but also social and communicative dimensions.

Environmental behaviour

Environmental behaviour relates to the actions and practices of individuals and communities concerning their surroundings, particularly maintaining cleanliness and reducing environmental harm. It is influenced by factors such as access to facilities, social norms, cultural values, and communication. Studies on waste management in African cities highlight the interaction between infrastructural limitations, public behaviour, and governance challenges (Agunwamba, 1998; Nzeadibe & Ajaero, 2010). Discourse can therefore shape how individuals perceive their environmental responsibilities and act in everyday situations.

Taken together, these concepts provide a framework for examining how language,

within the context of rapid urbanisation, influences waste management practices and environmental behaviour. By focusing on the intersection of discourse and social action, this study highlights the importance of communication in addressing environmental challenges in African cities.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics concerns the interpretation and understanding of meaning in relation to texts and their contexts. Gadamer (2004) emphasises the relationship between the text, its context, and the interpreter in the process of understanding. In this study, hermeneutics provides an interpretive perspective for examining how environmental expressions acquire social, cultural, and moral meanings beyond their literal wording. It therefore complements pragmatic analysis by explaining how the meanings and values embedded in environmental discourse are understood within everyday urban contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Mey's Pragmatic Act Theory (2001) as its principal theoretical framework, focusing on how discourse functions as a form of social action. Pragmatics examines language in use and how meaning is shaped by context and interpretation. Rather than viewing language as a neutral tool for conveying information, a pragmatic perspective emphasises that speakers use language to perform actions such as instructing, requesting, warning, advising, and persuading (Mey, 2001). In urban waste management, this perspective is useful because much interaction between authorities and the public takes place through language. Public messages on waste disposal, environmental campaigns, media announcements, and everyday conversations are not simply informative; they function to influence behaviour. For instance, directives such as "Do not dump refuse here" or appeals like "Keep your environment clean" function to guide public conduct and promote compliance with environmental expectations. By applying pragmatic analysis alongside hermeneutic interpretation, this paper examines both the action performed by environmental expressions and the contextual meanings through which that action is understood. The two perspectives are therefore complementary: pragmatic analysis foregrounds action, while hermeneutic interpretation illuminates the meanings and values that shape it.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach to examine how language shapes waste management practices in urban African contexts. The study focuses on selected environmental expressions found in public environmental communication. Analysis is guided by Mey's Pragmatic Act Theory (2001), particularly the view of language as social action. Attention is given to how the selected expressions perform pragmatic functions such as prohibiting, advising, persuading, and moralising within specific social contexts. The data consist of three purposively selected environmental expressions commonly used in public sanitation and environmental communication:

1. "Do not dump refuse here"

2. "Keep your environment clean"
3. "Cleanliness is next to godliness"

The expressions were selected because they are recognisable forms of environmental and sanitation-related communication and illustrate different ways in which language can be used to influence public behaviour. The selection was therefore based on their relevance to the communicative purpose of the study rather than on numerical representation.

The study employs a hermeneutic method to interpret the meanings and communicative intentions embedded in the selected expressions. The approach enables the expressions to be understood in relation to their linguistic form, immediate communicative context, and broader social and cultural environment. This is relevant because their meaning and pragmatic force are shaped not only by linguistic forms but also by the contexts in which they are used and interpreted. Following the hermeneutic interpretation, the expressions are subjected to qualitative pragmatic analysis using Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory. The analysis considers how the expressions function as context-bound pragmatic actions and how their textual and contextual features contribute to their communicative force. It therefore focuses on the relationship between discourse, context, pragmatic action, and behavioural influence. The study relies on interpretive textual analysis rather than quantitative measurement. Through combining hermeneutic interpretation and pragmatic analysis, the study explains how seemingly simple environmental expressions perform socially meaningful actions and communicate expectations concerning waste management and sanitation in urban African contexts.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a discourse-pragmatic and hermeneutic analysis of the three selected environmental expressions. Drawing on Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory (2001) and a hermeneutic interpretive perspective, the analysis examines how the expressions function as socially situated actions and how their meanings are shaped by their physical, social, cultural, and moral contexts. It focuses on three complementary strategies: prohibition, responsibility-oriented persuasion, and moral or cultural appeal.

Instructing and Prohibition as Behavioural Control

A prominent feature of waste management discourse in public and institutional contexts is the use of directive expressions to regulate behaviour. These directives are typically realised through imperative constructions that establish clear behavioural expectations. "Do not dump refuse here" exemplifies this pattern. The expression functions primarily as a prohibitive pragmatic act because it prevents the addressee from engaging in a specified waste-disposal practice. The imperative construction "Do not dump" leaves little room for negotiation and establishes the prohibited action as unacceptable. From Mey's (2001) perspective, the meaning of the expression lies not only in its grammatical form but also in the social action it performs within a particular context. Here, the expression regulates conduct and discourages indiscriminate waste disposal. The

deictic expression "here" is significant to the interpretation of the message. Its meaning depends on the physical location in which the expression is encountered. Hermeneutically, the message defines a particular space as subject to an environmental rule. The reader is expected to interpret the location, recognise the relevance of the prohibition to that space, and adjust behaviour accordingly. The expression consequently constructs public space as a shared environment governed by socially recognised expectations concerning cleanliness and appropriate waste disposal.

The choice of the verb "dump" strengthens the negative evaluation of the prohibited behaviour. Unlike the more neutral term dispose, dump suggests careless, inappropriate, or uncontrolled disposal. The expression therefore does more than prohibit an action; it implicitly characterises that action as environmentally undesirable. Its pragmatic force emerges from the interaction between the imperative form, the physical context, and the social expectation of responsible waste disposal, demonstrating how direct prohibition functions can establish behavioural boundaries and construct expectations of environmental responsibility.

Persuasion and Responsibility Framing

Beyond direct prohibitions, waste management discourse can employ persuasive strategies to encourage responsible behaviour. Rather than preventing a specific undesirable action, such expressions invite individuals to assume responsibility for maintaining their surroundings. The expression "Keep your environment clean" provides a clear example of this approach. The expression functions primarily as an advisory and persuasive pragmatic act. Although grammatically realised as an imperative, its force differs from the direct prohibition in "Do not dump refuse here." Instead of prohibiting a particular behaviour, it encourages the addressee to adopt a continuing practice of environmental cleanliness. From Mey's (2001) perspective, its pragmatic force emerges from its use within a social context where maintaining a clean environment is recognised as a desirable communal practice. The possessive pronoun "your" is particularly significant because it personalises a relationship between the addressee and the environment, presenting the environment as something for which the individual is responsible. The expression therefore moves beyond an externally imposed environmental rule and encourages the audience to perceive cleanliness as a personal and collective obligation. The apparently simple choice of *your* consequently contributes to the persuasive force of the message.

The expression can also be interpreted hermeneutically as constructing cleanliness as a shared social value. The meaning of "your environment" extends beyond individual ownership to encompass the physical surroundings in which people live and interact. Within an urban context, the expression invites readers to understand their surroundings as a communal space whose condition is partly determined by individual actions. Its interpretation therefore depends on the audience's social understanding of responsibility, community, and environmental wellbeing. Unlike "Do not dump refuse

here," which establishes an explicit prohibition, "Keep your environment clean" does not specify an undesirable action or threaten consequences for non-compliance. Its strategy is therefore less coercive, encouraging responsible behaviour by presenting cleanliness as a desirable norm and connecting the individual with the condition of the shared environment. The expression demonstrates how environmental discourse can seek behavioural change through persuasion rather than direct prohibition. In this respect, the expression demonstrates how environmental discourse can promote personal and collective responsibility and seek behavioural change through persuasion rather than direct prohibition.

Moral and Cultural Appeals

In addition to direct prohibition and persuasive responsibility framing, environmental discourse may draw on moral and ideological values to influence public behaviour. Such expressions move beyond immediate behavioural instruction by presenting cleanliness as a value that is desirable in itself. The expression "Cleanliness is next to godliness" exemplifies this form of environmental communication. The expression functions primarily as a moralising and persuasive pragmatic act. Rather than directly commanding the audience to perform a particular action, it establishes a connection between physical cleanliness and moral or spiritual worth. From Mey's (2001) perspective, its pragmatic meaning extends beyond its literal proposition because it performs a socially situated action of encouraging desirable behaviour through an appeal to shared values. The expression therefore seeks to influence conduct indirectly by making cleanliness appear morally commendable.

The phrase "next to godliness" is particularly significant because it invokes a cultural and religious understanding in which cleanliness is associated with moral goodness. Its meaning cannot be fully understood from its literal wording alone. Hermeneutically, the expression requires the audience to draw on cultural and religious knowledge in order to interpret the relationship it establishes between cleanliness and godliness. The message consequently gives an ordinary sanitation practice a broader moral significance. Unlike "Do not dump refuse here," which establishes an explicit prohibition, and "Keep your environment clean," which directly encourages responsible behaviour, "Cleanliness is next to godliness" operates through value-based persuasion. It does not identify a prohibited action or issue a direct instruction. Instead, it encourages compliance by presenting cleanliness as consistent with an accepted moral ideal. Its pragmatic force therefore depends substantially on the audience's recognition of the cultural and moral values embedded in the expression. The expression also illustrates the importance of context in the interpretation of environmental discourse. In an urban African setting where religious and cultural values may form an important part of everyday social understanding, the association between cleanliness and godliness can give the message a significance that extends beyond sanitation. The expression frames environmental cleanliness not merely as a practical requirement but as a practice associated with desirable personal and social values. The expression therefore frames environmental

cleanliness not merely as a practical requirement but as a morally valued practice through which shared cultural and religious values can influence behaviour.

Comparative Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the three environmental expressions reveals that waste-management discourse employs different but complementary pragmatic strategies to communicate environmental expectations. From a pragmatic perspective, "Do not dump refuse here" functions primarily as a prohibitive act, "Keep your environment clean" as an advisory and persuasive act, and "Cleanliness is next to godliness" as a moralising and persuasive act. Their pragmatic force is not derived from their linguistic forms alone but from the social contexts in which they are used and the behavioural expectations they establish. The three expressions also demonstrate a progression in the way environmental responsibility is communicated. "Do not dump refuse here" relies on external control by establishing a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. "Keep your environment clean" moves from prohibition towards personal and collective responsibility, encouraging the audience to participate voluntarily in maintaining environmental cleanliness. "Cleanliness is next to godliness" goes further by connecting environmental behaviour with moral and spiritual values, encouraging individuals to internalise cleanliness as a desirable way of living. The findings therefore suggest that environmental discourse can construct and communicate responsibility through different degrees of behavioural regulation, ranging from direct prohibition to responsibility and finally to value-based internalisation.

From a hermeneutic perspective, however, these expressions cannot be adequately understood without considering the contexts and systems of meaning surrounding them. The significance of "here" depends on the physical location in which the message is encountered and on the audience's understanding of that space as one governed by particular environmental expectations. Similarly, the interpretation of "your environment" depends on an understanding of personal and communal responsibility. In "Cleanliness is next to godliness," the meaning is shaped more strongly by cultural and religious knowledge that associates cleanliness with moral worth. Thus, each expression requires the audience to interpret its wording in relation to a broader horizon of social experience. The combined pragmatic and hermeneutic analyses show that environmental expressions operate simultaneously as communicative actions and carriers of social meaning. Pragmatic analysis foregrounds their action and behavioural function, while hermeneutic interpretation illuminates the meanings, values, and contexts through which those actions become intelligible.

A major finding of the study is therefore that effective environmental communication does not depend solely on issuing instructions. The three expressions demonstrate that behavioural influence can be achieved through prohibition, appeals to responsibility, and moral or cultural persuasion. Their pragmatic force is mediated by the audience's interpretation of the physical, social, cultural, and moral contexts in which they occur.

Environmental discourse thus functions not merely as a means of communicating sanitation expectations but as a resource for constructing behavioural norms and giving environmental responsibility social and cultural meaning. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the pragmatic and hermeneutic perspectives are complementary. Mey's (2001) pragmatic perspective explains how environmental expressions function as socially situated actions, while hermeneutic interpretation reveals how their meanings are understood within particular contexts and systems of value. Together, they show that seemingly simple environmental expressions can regulate conduct, construct responsibility, and encourage the internalisation of environmental values.

Summary

This section has examined the three selected environmental expressions through pragmatic and hermeneutic perspectives. "Do not dump refuse here" functions primarily as a prohibitive pragmatic act, "Keep your environment clean" promotes personal and collective responsibility through a persuasive directive, and "Cleanliness is next to godliness" employs moral and cultural appeal. The findings demonstrate that environmental communication can regulate conduct, construct social responsibility, and encourage the internalisation of environmental values, while the meanings of such expressions are shaped by their physical, social, cultural, and moral contexts. Pragmatic action and contextual interpretation therefore work together in the construction of environmental meaning.

Implications

One implication is the need for clear and responsibility-oriented environmental communication. "Do not dump refuse here" demonstrates how direct and context-specific language can establish clear behavioural boundaries, while "Keep your environment clean" encourages individuals to view cleanliness as a personal and collective responsibility. Environmental campaigns can therefore combine clear behavioural guidance with messages that encourage participation, ownership, and concern for shared environments. The analysis also demonstrates the importance of culturally and contextually grounded communication. "Cleanliness is next to godliness" derives part of its persuasive force from cultural and moral associations between cleanliness and godliness. Environmental messages are interpreted through existing systems of meaning and may therefore be more meaningful when they draw appropriately on culturally familiar values and expressions. At the same time, communication cannot by itself resolve waste-management problems where appropriate disposal facilities and reliable services are unavailable. Communication strategies should therefore be coordinated with accessible infrastructure, effective service delivery, and broader environmental policies.

Overall, the study contributes to an understanding of waste management as both a material and communicative process. The pragmatic perspective demonstrates how environmental expressions function as socially situated actions, while the hermeneutic

perspective shows how their meanings are interpreted within particular contexts. A more integrated approach to waste management should therefore recognise discourse, contextual interpretation, infrastructure, and public participation as interconnected dimensions of sustainable environmental practice.

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