

Anthropology Brown Bag presentation

“Little half of the lamb like this”:

The changing discourses of an archaeological artifact

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This presentation uses a specific colonial artifact - a press-molded lamb - as an example of how linguistics can contribute to discussions of archaeological artifacts. The artifact in question was found as part of the excavation of an 17th century pottery kiln site in Old Salem, North Carolina (a historic district in the southern U.S.). Using concepts from linguistic anthropology, this talk explores the transformation of the lamb figurine from an artifact into a guided-tour theme, and finally into the model for a “take-home replica”. Data for this chapter were collected via interviews with an archaeologist, the President of Old Salem, Inc., potters, and tour guides. What we find is that the same object takes on different kinds of social meaning in different contexts –



an artifact, a notable find of interest to collectors, a toy, a tourist attraction, an inspiration, etc. – the ceramic sheep is not any *one* of these things; it is all of them at once. Linguists often discuss the polyvocalic and discursive nature of meaning in language, looking at how a word or phrase can be repeated in order to (re)create and (re)enforce identities; here, that same discussion of “entextualization” is applied to an object, whose various identities reflect the positions and knowledges of the people interviewed for this case study. Looking at specific statements made by the people involved in the ‘life’ of the lamb, we can see how language creates identities and meanings for speakers and for the objects with which they interact.