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## Die Wertstofftonne – More than your average bin?

German waste policy is in the midst of a major shift as the Government works to revise its primary piece of waste legislation, the *Kreislaufwirtschaftsgesetz*. This revision will both implement the EU Waste Framework Directive and potentially bring changes to the country's legendary waste collection system.

Anybody who has lived in Germany for any length of time will have encountered the colourful myriad of bins into which residents are expected to sort waste. Their colours vary from place to place, but I would venture to say that most bins are as follows:

Brown – biodegradable waste

Blue – paper and cardboard [sometimes not offered kerbside]

Grey – residual or non-recyclable waste (*Restmüll*)

Yellow – packaging

What the German Government is proposing to do, in short, is to introduce a single bin to collect both packaging and comparable non-packaging materials (*stoffgleiche Nicht-Verpackungen*), e.g. toys, cutlery, pots and pans. This bin is referred to as *die Wertstofftonne* in German, literally the **recyclables bin**. This approach is being taken in an effort to maximise the amount of household waste sent for recycling, a practice that is increasingly being referred to as **urban mining**. An alternative version of the bin, *die Wertstofftonne plus*, would also include scrap electrical and electronic appliances.

Beyond its contents, the main sticking point is the issue of who will be responsible for collecting this bin and thus have access to the all-important and lucrative recyclables: local authorities or private companies. Public entities and private businesses have long tussled over who is in charge of collecting Germany's waste, primarily in the cases of packaging and paper. As I write this blog post, the Mediation Committee, which acts as the intermediary between the *Bundestag* (the national parliament) and *Bundesrat* (the legislative body representing the *Länder* or federal states), is meeting to find a consensus on this piece of legislation.

As a translator specialising in waste management issues, *die Wertstofftonne* has become the phrase I have come to love to hate over the past year or so. It has joined the ranks of *Selbstentsorger* and *Branchenlösung* as German buzzwords that have no direct translation into English. A descriptive

approach is definitely the best option where space allows. The German Environment Agency and others simply refer to *die Wertstofftonne* as a **recycling bin**. Other similar translations that I have seen include the **resource bin** or the **dry recyclables bin**. Another version referred to the *Wertstofftonne* as a **single-stream bin** (side note: single-stream is the American English term for what Brits refer to as commingled waste collections). However, as one colleague pointed out to me, this wording might be confusing because it indicates that the bin contains a single fraction rather than being a single bin for the collection of most dry recyclables.

So what how do I translate *die Wertstofftonne*? As always, it depends on the context. Looking back at recent texts, I have frequently called it a **single bin for both packaging and non-packaging recyclable waste**. Not exactly short and sweet, but I think that it conveys some aspects omitted by the simplistic translation of **dry recyclables bin** (which I have also used in titles and other texts with word constraints).

The *Wertstofftonne* conundrum is emblematic of two issues that translators often face, namely that the foreign concept does not exist yet in our native country or, particularly in this case, that a single word in German requires many more in English to explain. It also demonstrates the importance of translators doing in-depth research and keeping their fingers on the pulse of the industries in which they specialise in order to come up with the best possible translation.