

Response to Viewpoint article 'Applied Linguistics, Language Guidelines and Ethical Practices: The Case for the Use of 'Who' with Nonhuman Animal'

Abstract

This response piece welcomes the issues raised in the original Viewpoint article and suggests some areas for further debate.

Cet article de réponse accueille favorablement les questions soulevées dans l'article initial "Viewpoint" et propose également d'autres thèmes ouverts à une discussion plus approfondie.

Keywords

ecolinguistics; anthropomorphism; anthropocentrism; academic writing

This Viewpoint article raises an important issue with which I have some sympathy. I share the authors' concern about environmental degradation, mass extinction, anthropocentrism, and the potential role for Applied Linguistics in exploring how language practices around these topics may be implicated and challenged.

For me, the article brought back memories of controversies dating from the 1970s, about language choices that were (and sometimes still are) disparagingly referred to as 'politically correct'. Like those debates, it invites consideration of a fundamental question, analogous to that often posed about feminist attempts to counter sexist language patterns, i.e. 'whether the adoption and spread of non-sexist language through a community occurs in such a way that it promotes gender equality' (Pauwels, 2003: 562). Likewise, whether the change of pronoun proposed would have practical efficacy in improving animal welfare is an open question, and I don't pursue it further in this short response.

Nevertheless, in light of advances in awareness of the 'sentience of a wide variety of animals', and in the spirit of 'inclusive language use and a respect for nonhuman animals', should applied linguists endorse the authors' proposal that APA guidelines should advise authors 'to use "who" for all animals'?

My own response is influenced by my experience as co-investigator on a research project about the discursive representation of animals¹. An early challenge we faced in collecting our corpus of texts about animals was the definition of the term 'animal'. As the authors note, this 'remain[s] a matter of lively debate'. In our data, two variables correlate with the use of *who* as the relative pronoun for an animal. One is the type of source text: the choice of *who* features most heavily in our subcorpus of literature produced by animal rights campaigns, interviews with such campaigners, and contributions from people with companion animals, although it is also found in some scientific journal articles. But a more striking correlation is with certain kinds of animal, namely (larger) mammals, some birds, occasionally fish too – but not smaller species, such as insects, and certainly not micro-organisms. Thus, if the authors' proposal were to be adopted, some decision would need to be made about how widely it is

¹ 'People', 'products', 'pests' and 'pets' – the discursive representation of animals. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG 2013–063).

to be applied.² At the same time, it may be worth noting that *that* is increasingly used as a relative pronoun in place of *who* with human subjects³.

The authors also suggest that a rejection of anthropocentrism may follow if authors and style guides '[look] more favourably on anthropomorphism'. Here again, I appreciate the commitment to a recognition that animals other than humans are not unfeeling objects. On the other hand, the anthropomorphic impulse may, paradoxically, be consistent with anthropocentrism. That is, the kinds of animals with characteristics most easily identified with our own are potentially valued above those we can understand least. Evidence of 'sentience', 'intelligence', or modes of communication that are interpretable by humans, for example, bring certain species into a category of recognition from which other species are excluded. Furthermore, animals' behaviour is readily anthropomorphised into social, political and even economic paradigms associated with human behaviour (Sealey, 2018, 2019; Sealey & Oakley, 2013). Commentators on wildlife broadcasts, for instance, frequently report reproductive processes in terms of 'romance', and describe attempts to secure sources of food in terms of 'property' and 'theft' – and both as involving 'cheating'.

This brings me to my final observation in response to the article about the role of applied linguists in challenging speciesist language. The more I have researched the discursive representation of animals⁴, the greater my apprehension of the complexity of the issues. Space permits only a few brief indications. Convention and commonsense tell us that there are five senses, because it is through these that humans perceive the world. Regarding sight, as linguists we recognise that colour terms in different languages correlate with different divisions of the spectrum, but many species perceive a greater range of colours, some with composite eyes whose sense of vision is beyond our capacities. We currently lack accessible vocabulary for the additional senses used by many creatures involving, for example, electrical impulses and magnetic fields. We have adopted the concept of the 'hive mind', in a metaphorical sense, but, to paraphrase Nagel (1974), 'what is it like to be an ant or a bee?' And in what vocabulary can we denote those experiences, from our vantage point as human language users? In conclusion, I welcome contributions, such as this proposal, that bring these concerns – concerns explored in the fast growing field of ecolinguistics⁵ – into mainstream Applied Linguistics, and look forward to reading the responses of other readers.

² One journal that does require contributors to 'use language that is respectful of our relation to animals of other species', including insistence on the use of "who" and "whose" but not "its" or "which" is *Society & Animals*. I don't know whether any species referenced by contributors are ever not afforded this respect.

³ E.g. 'people that' is relatively frequent (96.09 per million) alongside 'people who' (138.77 per million) in the Spoken section of the BNC 2014.

⁴ My experience here is confined to the English language. Much work is needed on cross- and multi-linguistic data.

⁵ See, for example, Fill and Penz (2017)

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