Debra Merskin*

She, *he*, not *it*: Language, personal pronouns, and animal advocacy

https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2022-0018
Received January 10, 2022; accepted June 9, 2022; published online June 27, 2022

Abstract: The move away from binary labels of he/she as all-encompassing terms, determined at birth, represents a tidal change in how humans are categorized. However, when it comes to animals other than humans, change appears only as drops in the linguistic bucket with slow progress in recognizing them as individuals, who are sexed, and whose treatment by us is determined by which sex they are assigned at birth. Language that continues to refer to them as "it", for example, rather than "he" or "she" (when sex is known), and not as "they" when it is not, concretizes living beings in the category of object, not subject. This article discusses language as power and focuses on how language matters in the lives of animals other than humans. There is a brief discussion about the creation of animalsandmedia.org. This website is discussed in terms of what informed its creation, what fuels its maintenance, and finally, a media example that shows what using personal pronouns looks like, breaking with style recommendations. How we refer to animals does not reflect who they are, but rather who we are. This matters not only in the categorization and subsequent treatment of animals but also in broader ecological domains and well-being.

Keywords: activism; advocacy; animals; intersectionality; language; media; pronouns

1 Introduction

"Pronouns are suddenly sexy", writes Baron (2020: 1) in the introduction to *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He and She*. Certainly, there has been a linguistic turn in the way human beings self-identify and ask to be identified. The greatest discussion point might be around the third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun "they", particularly in revoking its plurality. The recent migration from binary labels of he/she as all-encompassing terms, determined at birth, represents a tidal change

***Corresponding author: Debra Merskin**, School of Journalism & Communication, University of Oregon, Eugene, USA, E-mail: dmerskin@uoregon.edu

in how humans are categorized. However, when it comes to animals[1] other than humans, the change appears only as drops in the linguistic bucket with slow progress in recognizing them as individuals, who are sexed, and whose treatment by us is largely determined by which sex they are born as. Language[2] that continues to refer to them as "it", for example, rather than "he" or "she" (when sex is known), and not as "they" when it is not, concretizes living beings in the category of object, not subject.

Activism on the part of journalist associations of people of color (e.g. National Association of Black Journalists, Asian American Journalists Association, Native American Journalists Association) and sexual minorities (e.g. Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and others argue there are more respectful and more accurate ways to speak about and portray members of marginalized communities than has been done in the past. Mainstream style guides such as the Associated Press (AP) historically have not reflected interests and needs of those outside of or apart from the dominant culture. As a result, these groups created their own style guides to provide easy access for professional communicators wanting to do the right, respectful, and accurate thing. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)[3] Code of Ethics[4] includes the tenet to "provide a voice for the voiceless" (Freeman et al. 2011: 590). But who speaks on behalf of a group that does not communicate in the same way humans do? Just as racial, sexual, and other stereotypes aim at the erasure of individual human beings who are not valued in the majority culture, so does the lack of gendered pronouns when it comes to speaking about actual animals as groups and as individuals.

In 2014, in response to limited and limiting media re-presentations,[5] Dr. Carrie Freeman and I co-created a style guide[6] targeting professional communicators and private citizens concerned with respectful and responsible re-presenting (Hall 2013) of animals in images and in words. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall (2013: 3) notes: "In part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we

1 While the term "animal" is problematic, for ease of reading I use the term animal when talking about non-human species as well as non-human and other than human animals.

2 In this article, I am speaking about the English language only.

3 The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is an American journalism organization founded in 1909. For more information, please see https://www.spj.org/aboutspj.asp.

4 https://www.spj.org/pdf/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf (accessed 2 May 2022).

5 I use the term "re-presentation" rather than "representation", drawing on the work of Hall (2013), to indicate that what we see in images is not real, rather re-presentations of what might have been real animals in the world.

6 https://animalsandmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Pamphlets-for-AM-guidelines-2020.pdf (accessed 2 May 2022).

tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them". The impetus for creating this style guide was to participate in "real world" animal advocacy. It was the result of, for me, decades of teaching and researching about how media portrayals of marginalized human beings impact their lived experiences, how knowing someone only through the way media and popular culture portray them inevitably results in stereotypes, primarily negative ones. These one-dimensional re-presentations are limiting to the one portrayed as well as to the heart and imagination of those receiving the message. For example, wolves as only and ever ferocious and intent on harming humans, sheep as ever and only passive, and chickens and pigs as dumb. This doesn't serve them or us. Thus, the website is an ecolinguistic project intended to serve as a resource for making visible the invisible, giving voice to the, if not voiceless, the unheard who happen to belong to a species other than human.

This paper explores this topic through theories of ecolinguistics and intersectionality generally and examines the use of personal pronouns when referring to animals other than humans in media and popular culture specifically. As such, I argue for a change in the accepted writing style when referring to animals other than humans, moving them from objects to subjects of their own lives. In other words, the animal should be referred to rather than as an "it" but as a "he/she/they". In what follows, I discuss language-as-power and focus on how language matters in the lives of animals other than humans. Next is a brief history of animalsandmedia.org. The site is discussed in terms of what informed its creation, what fuels its maintenance, and finally, a media example that shows what using personal pronouns looks like, breaking with AP and other style recommendations (Parks 2021). How and that we refer to animals does not reflect who they are, but rather who we are. This matters not only in the categorization and subsequent treatment of animals but also to broader ecological domains and well-being, i.e. resilience. As Stibbe (2020: 2) writes,

> some of the stories industrial civilization is based on are not working, because society is becoming increasingly unequal and increasingly destructive of the environment. These 'stories' are not the kind that are read to children at bedtime, shared around a fire, or conveyed through anecdotes in formal speeches. Instead, they exist behind and between the lines of the texts that surround us – the news reports that describe the 'bad news' about a drop in Christmas sales, or the 'good news' that airline profits are up, or the advertisements promising us that we will be better people if we purchase the unnecessary goods they are promoting. (Stibbe 2020: 2)

Advancing a non-speciesist discourse does not minimize the importance of human issues. To advocate for animals does not, as I've previously written, make one a "species traitor" (Merskin 2021b: 125). A goal of this paper is to take the lessons of

animal advocacy and the power of words and images to frame and define animal experiences, and through a discussion of the evolution of animalsandmedia.org, present a case study wherein professional communicators and everyday people can rewild our consciousness and improve the world for all beings using personal pronouns when referring to animals other than humans. While we may not be able to undo the damage of the past, through re-languaging and "rewilding ecolinguistic territory" (Cowley 2021: 405) we can engage in "undoing (dismantling, sidestepping, avoidance, creation of new pathways" (Brooks 2021: 167)). Pronouns thus become "epistemic tools that link the [un]said, the suppressed, the taken for granted, and the unnoticed" (Cowley 2021: 406). While amongst human beings we have come to the place within our own species of recognizing and relanguaging to acknowledge and respect that there is more to identity and the right to self-identify than binary terms, when speaking/writing/representing animals they are rarely given that respect or regard. Why not?

2 Language and power

Linguistic relativity,[7] a theory pioneered by Sapir (1929), posits that language shapes thought. While there has been controversy and modifications to this theory, nevertheless it offers a psychologically-based explanation of the influence of words on "reality". This includes what is considered acceptable or unacceptable attitudes to hold, behaviors, and beliefs, and thus who is considered worthy of moral consideration and who is not. Sapir (1929: 209) wrote:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. (Sapir 1929: 209)

The words we use function to maintain, sustain, and perpetuate power relations (Fairclough 2015). "Discourse", writes Foucault (1981: 53), is "the power which is to be seized". Those who have power in a society or culture determine what is accessible in discourse, what is not, and what remains beyond description through

7 Linguistic relativity is not the same as linguistic determinism (LD). LD holds that "our thinking (or worldview) is seen as being determined or shaped by language – simply by the use of verbal language and/or by the grammatical structures, semantic distinctions, and inbuilt ontologies within a language" (Chandler and Munday 2011: 240).

language/image. The stability of limiting vocabularies that account for difference is evident in revisionist efforts that reveal no words exist to describe a particular person, relationship, or situation. One clue that this is happening is when it becomes awkward to find the words to use, such as "same-sex marriage" when the term "marriage" should do. Or verbalizing couples living together who are not married becomes problematic with the multi-meaning term "partner". Language, drawing on Fairclough (2015), thereby can support unequal power relations. According to this view language that erases, veils, and conceals the lived experiences of minorities, for example, is part of "the order of discourse" (Foucault 1981: 51) wherein those with power also allow or limit ways of speaking or representing, including in media and popular culture. An example is racist sports mascots. Defenders say this is "honors" native peoples, whereas those who are represented counter the argument with the lived experience of stereotypes and racism.[8] Discourse is defined as "a practice not just of representing the world but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 1992: 64). In semiotics, the study of signs, to signify is to define what someone or something means. It is a controlled transference of sometimes arbitrary sense that this means that. These "relations are important for what they can explain: meaningful contrasts and permitted or forbidden combinations" (Culler 1975: 14).

Although it is changing, many discussions of language and power exclude animals. In part, this is because many writers, like many everyday folks, simply don't think about them. To do so requires developing a critical awareness of many of the unseen practices that are deliberately hidden from view. Another reason is that animals "are not, themselves, participants in social construction through language" (Stibbe 2001: 146). Because we do not share a language, power over their lives is "carried out by a few people involved in organizations that use" them (Stibbe 2001: 146). They do not consent to their treatment, have few allies, and thereby remain mostly invisible to most of us, particularly those humans living in urban areas. This is intentional. Those animals other than humans exist for our use and are grounded in many religious and cultural beliefs, in other words, in interpretations. Okri (1996: 21) speaks indirectly about the power of ideologies as narratives: "Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings". These ideologies, mental representations, support dominant culture, are circulated, disseminated, and reinforced through discourse as part of "social cognition" (van Dijk 1997: 27). They become the common-sense ways of understanding the world and rationalizing practices.

8 https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots (accessed 25 May 2022).

Communications by meat, dairy, hunting, research, and other animal-as-product industries (see Kheel 1995) are deliberately encoded using conventional metaphors (such as being catty, a bitch, an animal, a greedy pig) to avoid scrutiny by those who might question their practices. As Stibbe (2001: 45) notes: "ideological assumptions embedded in everyday discourse and that of animal industries manufacture and maintain […] consent". Revealing this practice is a radical act.

In writing and re-presenting animals other than humans the words used to identify someone by their sex and/or gender matter. "We have structured our language to avoid acknowledgment of our biological similarity" (Adams 2010: 93) and further to "distance us […] from animals by naming them as objects, as 'its'" (Adams 2010: 93). The "it" functions "as a generic term whose meaning is deduced by context" (Adams 2010: 93). This is similar to the male pronoun when used to refer to all human beings. It also "reveals the commonsense assumption that animals are property" (Stibbe 2001: 151). In Gilquin and Jacobs' (2006: 79) extensive study of the relative pronoun *who* in publication manuals, newspapers, dictionaries, an encyclopedia, and other materials they found that using *who* "with nonhuman animals might play a role in promoting human attitudes and behaviors beneficial to fellow animals". They caution it is not a perfect correlation, but this grammatical step can help change attitudes and behaviors.

There have been modifications in human-animal references. In the 1970s, for example, the feminist movement highlighted the use of generic male pronouns to refer to people in general (such as *mankind* or *men*/*he*) (see Moulton et al. 1978; Murdock and Forsyth 1985; Phillips 1981). Gradually English speakers have seen a shift away (neutralization) and recognition that "all men are created equal" was not intended to include women and it is a linguistic act of both erasure and exclusion as "using male pronouns causes readers to imagine men" (Harris et al. 2017: 932). Countries such as Sweden introduced a third gender-neutral pronoun *hen* as a complement to the Swedish words for *hon* ('she') and *han* ('he') (Sendén et al. 2015: 2). There is power in naming (or not naming), in the way words can include or exclude, and "evidence that societies with gendered language consistently display deeper gender inequality than societies with neutral language" (Harris et al. 2017: 932). Adams (2010: 93) wrote of a tension in feminism, where one would naturally expect the inclusion of marginalized beings to include animals. However, "so far feminism has accepted the dominant viewpoint regarding the oppression of animals rather than shed the illuminating light of its theory on this oppression". This has changed in recent years, prompted by Adams (2010) and Donovan (1990, 2006) with more feminist scholars and writers speaking to the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and species (Donovan and Adams 2007). Feminist animal care theory, built on the branch of the psychological theory

developed by Gilligan (1982), has provided a strong ethical and philosophical foundation for developing an intersectional argument for the inclusion of animals in the embrace of moral consideration. Donovan (2006: 305) argues that it is a matter of "*caring about* – what they are telling us" to be "in conversation with animals rather than imposing on them a rationalistic, calculative grid of humans' own monological construction" (Donovan 2006: 306). This dialogical theory argues for seeing how anthropocentrism has in fact shaped language and whose stories are told and from whose point of view.

3 Ecolinguistics and animals

> I am writing of writing, sympathetically, in advocacy, in the joint understandings that we have no dominion – they are not for our use – and that their rights to life, and to maximization of the quality of that life, are much as we conceive our own. Writing enters a new place under such beliefs. In a sense, it has to wrench itself away from itself. I want to write, with that new place in mind, of writing as a means by which we might approach that place. (Brooks 2021: 166)

Ecolinguistics, as defined by Stibbe (2021), emphasizes stories, and the stories we tell about ourselves and others, and the crucial role of language in creating and framing "reality". "Language shapes how we see the world", the "we" being human beings within the social construction of reality. "Stories", as Nigerian writer Okri (1996: 21) has written, "are the secret reservoirs of values". This includes just as much who is present in certain stories as those who are absent, and why. While animals cannot tell their stories in the same way we do, it does not mean they don't have perspectives (Budaev et al. 2019), preferences (Høgh-Olesen 2019), or culture (Laland and Hoppitt 2003) and history (Fudge 2017). Thus, much as they do with vulnerable human audiences, advocates and allies play a crucial role in relaying information. Under US law, animals are property – and yet most of us deeply know that there is a tremendous difference between our dogs and a chair. Yet the words we use, whether in scientific research to test them as data points (Durham and Merskin 2009), torture them (Ferdowsian and Merskin 2012) often means assigning them numbers, not names, for to name prompts caring (Buckmaster 2015; Erard 2015). Goodall (1990) famously resisted assigning numbers to the chimpanzees she studied, giving them names "[w]hen Goodall submitted her first scientific paper for publication, in every place where she had written *he* or *she* to refer to chimpanzees, the editor changed the wording to *it*. Similarly, every *who* was replaced with *which*. To rescue the chimpanzees from 'thing-ness' and restore them to 'being-ness', Goodall changed the words back" (Jacobs 2006: 26).

The word "animal" is itself a problem as the psychological division between Us (humans) and Them (other species) is concretized; one "automatically excludes" the other (Mitchell 2019: 4). "If we speak of animals, then it should be of the specific animals to ~~which~~ whom we refer" (Brooks 2021: 166, strikethrough in original). As human beings, we so rarely speak of or regard ourselves as animals too. As a result, many of the categorical designations (farmed, wildlife,[9] game) function psychologically to distance ourselves from them as kin. As part and parcel of human culture, language (as distinguished from communication), is one of the primary means of transmitting that culture. Since many, if not most, cultures exploit nonhuman[10] animals, language functions as a hegemonic tool with the words used to describe them, research upon them, hunt them, and farm them, supporting the status quo.

According to Brooks (2021: 166), "one of the simplest and most pervasive ways in which we distance and degrade NHAs is by the application of the third person singular neutral pronoun", in other words, using *it* for animals. No living being should ever be regarded as an *it*. A cow, a chicken, a dolphin, or a dog is either he or she, him or her, male or female. Despite what the *Associated Press Style Guide*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or Microsoft Word Spell Check tells us to do. According to the seventh edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2020), if the animal has a known name and sex, "it" *can* be assigned a gendered pronoun. In an article titled "How to handle animal pronouns: He, she, or it?" (Friedman 2010) published in *Writer's Digest*, the question is posed, and two answers are given:

> Q: When I write stories that include horses, is it grammatically correct for me to say "he" or "she" when I write about a horse? Also when referring to a horse in context, can I write "who" and "whom"; e.g. "Whom shall I ride today?" – Hans C.

The answers?

> An animal is referred to as "it" unless the relationship is personal (like a pet that has a name). Then it's OK to use "he" or "she" when referring to the animal. This also applies to using "who" and "whom". If the animal has a personal relationship with the person, then use "who" or "whom". Otherwise you must exclusively use "which" or "that". Here's an example that incorporates both of these rules:

9 Words that blur the use and abuse of animals such as "farm animals" or "wildlife" are purposely written in ways meant to illustrate this veiling. For example, "farm animals" becomes "farmed animals".

10 Non-human is not a satisfactory substitution as it still privileges humans over other animals As Brooks (2021:166) notes: "the use of 'human animal' and 'non-human animal', […] is itself brutal in its way, maintaining as much violence as it seeks to avoid".

Personal: *My horse, whom I call Steve, is my best friend. He comforts me when I ride him.*

Generic: *The stray dog, which I saw chasing its own tail, was shedding hair.*

They advise the same thing to apply when writing for children when the animals can speak. These answers privilege the human being in the dynamic and their relationship to the animal, not vice versa.

In an open letter from more than 80 global animal advocacy and conservation leaders, generated by animalsandmedia.org and In Defense of Animals, signatory Dr. Jane Goodall notes:

> I've often said that to make change you must reach the heart, and to reach the heart you must tell stories. The way we write about other animals shapes the way we see them – we must recognize that every individual nonhuman animal is a 'who', not a 'what'. I hope that we can advance our standards in this regard globally to refer to animals as individuals, and no longer refer to them as objects, so that the stories we tell spark compassion and action for these fellow beings.[11]

Furthermore, Dunayer (1990) argues, "The consciousness of any animal merits who: 'The bird who flew past'. Similarly, an animal's gender warrants she or he, not it. With rare exceptions (for example, hermaphroditic worms), animals are female or male. A hen or mare is obviously she, a rooster or stallion he. In cases of unknown sex, she or he avoids both speciesism and sexism". This matters because "[s]peciesist usage denigrates or discounts nonhuman animals. For example, terming nonhumans 'it' erases their gender and groups them with inanimate things. Referring to them as 'something' (rather than 'someone') obliterates their sentience and individuality. Pure speciesism leads people to call a brain-dead human 'who' but a conscious pig 'that' or 'which'" (Dunayer 2003: 61).

Novelist Lauren Hillenbrand stated: "[W]e form beautiful, profound relationships with them, and we justly place animals on a moral plane alongside ourselves and far above that of the cinder block or the hubcap, the things we call 'it'".[12] Furthermore, "languages become epistemic tools that link the said, the suppressed, the taken for granted, and the unnoticed" (Cowley 2021: 406).

The epistemic nature of language as a tool connects the "absent referent" (Adams 2010: 13), the real animal, with a concept of known sex/gender, as with human beings, are "semogenic[13] creatures whose bodies manage organized life,

11 https://idausa.lattecdn.com/assets/files/assets/uploads/pdf/openletterapstylebook.pdf?v=1 (accessed 2 May 2022).

12 https://www.npr.org/2021/04/03/984008349/opinion-animals-deserve-gender-pronouns-too (accessed 2 May 2022).

13 Semogenics or semogenesis is "the process by which meaning, and particular meanings, are created" (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 17).

attitudes, and ways of acting" (Cowley 2021: 407). While Brooks (2021: 167) encourages us to interrogate the term "species" as well as inaccurate or "distinctively patriarchal" taxonomic terms, doing so is beyond the scope of this paper, as are euphemisms of animal exploitation including "the very words we use to conceal it's [meat's] origin, we eat beef, not bull […] and pork, not pig […]" (Singer 1990: 95). Naming or renaming by settler colonizers is another area to push back against. However, for this paper, the emphasis is on the need for personal pronouns, in particular substituting for "it". "When we consign other animals to the category thing, we obscure their sentience, individuality, and right to autonomy" (Dunayer 1990). In an interview with Sander Vanocur,[14] Martin Luther King called objectification or othering as "thingification" and he said:

> You can't thingify anything without depersonalizing that something. If you use something as a means to an end at that moment you make it a thing and you depersonalize it. […] the negro was brought here in chains treated in a very inhuman fashion. This led to the thingification of the negro. So he was not looked upon as a person. He was not looked upon as a human being with the same status and worth as other human beings. And the other thing is that human beings cannot continue to do wrong without eventually rationalizing that wrong.[15]

I argue that it is not necessary to choose one aspect of identity over the other, such as being true only to one's race or to one's species. Rather, being a compassionate human being means cultivating awareness of the naturalness of caring for others. Believing in ending, or at least not contributing to, suffering, is the goal. A crucial step is recognizing the intersectionality of race, gender, sex, and species as a path to liberation, for when we "Stop treating animals like we treat animals; then it will not be possible to treat humans like animals" (Wadiwel 2004).

4 Walking the talk

Recognizing that language is power and the words and images used to re-present anyone will impact their lives, with special attention to those who don't share a language with human beings, animalsandmedia.org was created to be a web-based style guide for media practitioners in the professions of journalism, entertainment media, advertising, and public relations offering concrete guidance for how to re-present nonhuman animals in a fair, honest, and respectful manner in

14 https://medium.com/@mrshortscreates/mlk-legacy-legacy-legacy-legacy-26f94ae9efbd (accessed 2 May 2022).

15 I am not equating human and animal experiences; this is not either/or but and/also phenomenon. To care for animals does not mean to care less for human beings. Rather that the circle of compassion should include all beings.

accordance with professional ethical principles such as those listed in the SPJ code. It is also for the public when interested in evaluating messages that are about or include animals. Important academic research has developed over the last decade that reveals information on the power of media to influence how, when, if people think about animals other than humans. Inclusion or exclusion from media and popular culture matter in animal lives. Based on decades of research on the representation of human beings in the media, in particular the power of stereotypical portrayals, it is evident that in the absence of a wide range of portrayals, viewers often will think they know those different from themselves, absent personal experience, based on the way the media portray them (Merskin 2018). The same thing happens with animals. If the media present a uniform image, and according to (persistently, consistently, corroborated) these portrayals come to form a "truth" (DeFleur and Dennis 1994). Sometimes this is artificially positive (as in the case of polar bears) but more often negative (wolves, coyotes, and other predator species) or at least are one-dimensional and unrealistic. This makes the work of conservation groups, for example, particularly difficult, especially when the animal is seen often on television, in films, or on greeting cards.

Given the scope of industrialized animal oppression and environmental crisis globally, the mission statement of animalsandmedia.org notes that we believe fellow animals, as sentient living beings, deserve not only increased attention in media and popular culture, but the coverage that encourages human society to transform our relationships with various animal species in ways that foster less domination and exploitation and more respect, care, and ecological responsibility. This also includes animals as stakeholders in decisions that affect them (see Merskin 2021a). The lives and habitats of the world's animals are largely dependent on the cultural values and worldviews promoted in the media. Therefore, encouraging humans to identify as animals is part of the mission of animalsandmedia.org.

Animalsandmedia.org carries the subtitle "A Style Guide for Giving Voice to the Voiceless". This is based on the SPJ ethical mandate for journalists to be a "voice for the voiceless" (see Freeman et al. 2011). This doesn't suggest that nonhuman animals lack a voice of their own or abilities to communicate. Rather that they rely on humans, media producers especially, to interpret and amplify that voice, by creating mechanisms (through allies and experts) for animals to speak for themselves. In the case of journalists, they "have an obligation to provide the perspective of nonhuman animals (NHA) in stories that affect them" (Freeman et al. 2011: 590). Furthermore, if an organization *is* committed to "truth in relation to inclusion and diversity" NHAs must be included (Freeman et al. 2011: 591). This can be accomplished through audio-visual media and by consulting with appropriate human spokespeople to ensure animals' interests are more frequently and fairly included in discussions that concern them.

5 Why other animals matter

For these guidelines to be sought out, taken seriously, and applied, professional communicators and everyday people must be convinced that animals and their media re-presentations matter. To provide evidence for our central argument, the website includes a section that discusses animal cognition research that shows nonhuman animals are individuals with personalities, thoughts, and preferences, yet, at the same time, they are vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and cruelty due to lack of strong legal protection. This animal rights viewpoint challenges human exceptionalism and entitlement that is routinely used to justify using other animals for our own purposes. The site argues for their right to autonomy, to live lives of choice, with opportunities to engage with others of their species (conspecifics), to raise families, and make choices as to whether or not to engage with us and under what circumstances. Based on their ability to feel, think, and care about their lives, animals other than humans deserve inclusion within the moral community. They matter because things matter to animals (Midgley 1998) and because they are "subjects of a life" (Regan 1983: 245).

Coexistence is also necessary, and we argue urgent, based on ecological principles of interdependence and shared habitats. The current geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is unprecedented in terms of planetary history in that never before has a single species so impacted the planet. In only 50 years or so, human beings have destroyed environments, and contributed to species extinction at a rate never seen before, in what has become called "the great acceleration", or, in other words, the Anthropocene (McNeill and Engelke 2016). Human beings have a moral obligation to repair ecosystems and reveal and change unsustainable and cruel practices such as hunting, dirty energy exploration, reliance on fossil fuels, pollution, excessive consumption, animal agribusiness, commercial fishing, and genetic modification of organisms. Through language, the mass media can support these changes not only by prioritizing news coverage of these issues and revealing the ideological systems that profit from them, but also, through example, changing the words they use to describe animals as well as including their perspectives in the stories that they tell.

Finally, the website explores how animals' lives are impacted by the cultural values and information shared (or ignored) by the media and why media-makers have a responsibility to reduce harm and be more inclusive of the animals with whom we share the planet. "To be represented in mass media, particularly in the digital age, is to be validated. Absence is erasure" (Freeman and Merskin 2015: 208). The words reporters, advertisers, zoos, aquaria use to tell animal stories, or use animals to tell our stories, matter in NHA lives. When rendered symbolically their real lives become invisible and their voices erased. As a result, they are even more vulnerable, particularly when they are presented as comic fodder or used as

symbolic stand-ins for human emotions in greeting cards, comic strips, commercials, and multi-media content. Rather than bringing us closer to understanding, which is what healthy levels of anthropomorphism can do, these representations further distance them from us" (Freeman and Merskin 2015: 209).

Animalsandmedia.org offers examples, through style guidelines, of ways to do a better job of representing animals and/or using them in communications. The goal is to shine a light on how images and words can reify species division and objectify species, and then offer alternatives. The site has separate sections for journalists, advertisers, public relations practitioners, entertainment media makers (film and television), and for the public that include specific recommendations. The section "Selecting Appropriate Terminology" in the "Guidelines for Journalists" section, is particularly relevant to this essay. It reads: Similar to language that denigrates, devalues, and misrepresents certain human beings based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, speciesist language is also a form of "self-aggrandizing prejudice" (Dunayer 2001: 1) that "promotes a false dichotomy between humans and nonhumans" (Dunayer 2001: 4) and emphasizes a privileging of humans as separate from and superior to the animal kingdom, tacitly justifying humans' entitlement to use others as a resource" (Freeman and Merskin 2015: 213).

The website makes specific recommendations to address bias in language as reflected in the Table 1:

Table 1: Appropriate terminology.

Instead of these terms	Use these more precise and neutral terms
It, that, which or something	He, she, they, who, whom, someone or somebody
Pets	Companion animals, nonhuman family members
Objectifying industry terms	**Animated species names**
Livestock	Cows, sheep, pigs, donkeys, etc.
Poultry	Chickens, turkeys, geese, etc.
Pork	Pigs
Veal	Calves
Seafood	Fish, salmon, shrimp, etc.
Game	Deer, rabbits, foxes, etc.
Passive terms that conceal human control	**Active terms that reveal human control**
Farm animals	Farmed animals, animals raised for food
Dairy cows	Cows used for their milk/dairy
Beef cattle	Cows and bulls killed for beef/meat/flesh
Lab rat	Rats used as research subjects
Circus elephant	Elephants kept in circuses; elephants trained to perform for humans

Source: https://animalsandmedia.org/project/selecting-appropriate-terminology/.

6 The case of an iconic, ethereal bird

Think Wild is a native wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and education nonprofit located outside of Bend, Oregon.[16] In March 2021, a great gray owl came into their care (as a result of a window strike). The story of the bird, his recovery, and his release was told in an article titled "Great Gray Owl Perseveres after Flying into Sunriver Window" by Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Parks (2021). The way Parks tells the story and their use of personal pronouns in relationship to the owl is an example of how storytelling with this adjustment in writing, can make a difference in how the reading public views the animal and is consistent with the guidelines of animalsandmedia.org. In the story, Parks wrote, "They located the injured bird and safely put him in a warm, dark crate to try to calm him down. Harris [a local] said another birder nearby had the number to the Sunriver Nature Center, which then arranged transport for the owl to Think Wild".[17] Later in the article Parks wrote:

> The great gray that came into Think Wild's care had mild hemorrhaging in the back of his eye, which is indicative of head trauma, Baker [Director of Wildlife Rehabilitation] said. The hospital treated him with an anti-inflammatory medication to minimize visual deficits possibly incurred from the hemorrhage, so they could be sure the owl could hunt. He passed all his tests, which included capturing live prey […].[18]

This is a single example but it serves to illustrate how not using "it" but rather "he/him" even if the sex isn't known, which is difficult in the case of birds (Griffiths 2000), is important to seeing NHAs as individuals, not as objects.

7 Conclusion

Change takes time, and as recent revisions in pronoun use have shown, it can feel awkward to use words in ways we were taught were incorrect (for example, *them*/*their* as singular). In referring to humans the non-binary pronouns of "they" and "their" moved to common use by an individual, if preferred, not known, or in the interest of gender-free writing. Admittedly it's tricky. People noting preferences in email signatures or desk signage is another new step. However, "most change is so

16 https://www.thinkwildco.org/ (accessed 2 May 2022).
17 https://www.opb.org/article/2021/03/29/great-gray-owl-window-strike-oregon/ (accessed 2 May 2022).
18 https://www.opb.org/article/2021/03/29/great-gray-owl-window-strike-oregon/ (accessed 2 May 2022).

for a time; it is the prejudice, abuse, and disrespect that, a part of the culture so long, have become naturalized" (Brooks 2021: 166). In 2020, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) called on the AP to change the "it" designation for animals in their stylebook.[19]

> The 2019 edition of the stylebook currently requires the use of "it" for any animal who hasn't been given a name or had their sex identified by humans. For instance, it now offers "The cat, which was scared, ran to its basket." PETA – an organization that opposes speciesism, the damaging belief that all other animal species are inferior to humans – suggests using the pronouns "he," "she," or "they" for all animals, with "they" as an appropriate choice for an animal of unknown gender.[20]

In 2021, animalsandmedia.org and In Defense of Animals again led the charge, with support from public figures such as Scott Simon (2021) of National Public Radio, Dr. Jane Goodall,[21] and journalist, activist, and former CNN host Jane Velez Mitchell (2021). The advocacy and pressure have continued, and the AP has agreed, after much correspondence with animalsandmedia.org and In Defense of Animals, to visit this issue for consideration in their next stylebook revision. For professional communicators as well as non, Dunayer (1990) offers an additional suggestion: "If you quote someone who refers to a nonhuman animal as that, which, or it, consider inserting [sic] to mark this pronoun use as speciesist". Importantly, as demonstrated by the Oregon Public Broadcasting story (Parks 2021), "these changes remind us that thoughtful adjustments to our language don't have to wait for a stylebook".[22]

References

Adams, Carol J. 2010. *The sexual politics of meat*, 20th anniversary edn. New York: Bloomsbury.
American Psychological Association. 2020. *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*, 7th edn. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
Baron, Dennis. 2020. *What's your pronoun? Beyond he and she*. New York: Liveright.
Brooks, David. 2021. *Animal dreams (animal publics)*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
Buckmaster, Cindy A. 2015. Ain't no shame in namin. *Lab Animal* 44. 237.

19 https://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/clearly-an-animal-isnt-an-it-peta-wants-change-to-ap-stylebook/ (accessed 2 May 2022).

20 https://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/clearly-an-animal-isnt-an-it-peta-wants-change-to-ap-stylebook/ (accessed 9 May 2022).

21 See https://idausa.lattecdn.com/assets/files/assets/uploads/openletterapstylebook.pdf (accessed 9 May 2022).

22 https://www.npr.org/2021/04/03/984008349/opinion-animals-deserve-gender-pronouns-too (accessed 2 May 2022).

Budaev, Sergey, Christian Jørgensen, Marc Mangel, Sigrunn Eliassen & Jarl Giske. 2019. Decision-making from the animal perspective: Bridging ecology and subjective cognition. *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 7. 1–14.

Chandler, Daniel & Rod Munday. 2011. *A dictionary of media & communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cowley, Stephen J. 2021. Ecolinguistics reunited: Rewilding the territory. *Journal of World Languages* 7(3). 405–427.

Culler, Jonathan. 1975. *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics, and the study of literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

DeFleur, Melvin L. & Everette Dennis. 1994. *Understanding mass communication: A liberal arts perspective*, 5th edn. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Donovan, Josephine. 1990. Animal rights and feminist theory. *Signs* 15(2). 350–375.

Donovan, Josephine. 2006. Feminism and the treatment of animals: From care to dialogue. *Signs* 31(2). 305–329.

Donovan, Josephine & Carol J. Adams (eds.). 2007. *The feminist care tradition in animal ethics: A reader*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dunayer, Joan. 1990. On speciesist language. On the issues. https://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1990winter/winter1990_dunayer.php (accessed 2 May 2022).

Dunayer, Joan. 2001. *Animal equality: Language and liberation*. Derwood, MD: Ryce.

Dunayer, Joan. 2003. English and speciesism. *English Today* 19(1). 61–62.

Durham, Debra & Debra Merskin. 2009. Animals, agency, and absence: A discourse analysis of institutional animal care and use committee meetings. In Sarah E. McFarland & Hediger Ryan (eds.), *Animals and agency: An interdisciplinary exploitation*, 229–249. Leiden: Brill.

Erard, Michael. 2015. Should research animals be named? Naming research animals may improve their well-being – or bias experiments. *Science*. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa7904. (accessed 2 May 2022).

Fairclough, Norman. 1992. Discourse and text: Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society* 3(2). 193–217.

Fairclough, Norman. 2015. *Language and power*, 3rd edn. New York: Routledge.

Ferdowsian, Hope & Debra Merskin. 2012. Parallels in sources of trauma, pain, distress, and suffering in humans and nonhuman animals. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 13(4). 448–468.

Foucault, Michele. 1981. The order of discourse. In Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structuralist reader*, 51–78. Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Freeman, Carrie P. & Debra Merskin. 2015. Respectful representation: An animal issues style guide for all media practitioners. In Núria Almiron, Matthew Cole & Carrie P. Freeman (eds.), *Critical animal and media studies: Communication for nonhuman advocacy*, 205–220. New York: Routledge.

Freeman, Carrie P., Marc Bekoff & Sarah M. Bexell. 2011. Giving voice to the "voiceless": Incorporating nonhuman animal perspectives as journalistic sources. *Journalism Studies* 12(5). 590–607.

Friedman, Jane. 2010. How to handle animal pronouns: He, she or it? Writer's digest. https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/how-to-handle-animal-pronouns-he-she-or-it (accessed 2 May 2022).

Fudge, Erica. 2017. What was it like to be a cow? History and animal studies. In Linda Kalof (ed.), *Oxford handbook in animal studies*, 258–277. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Gilquin, Gaëtanelle & George M. Jacobs. 2006. Elephants who marry mice are very unusual: The use of the relative pronoun who with nonhuman animals. *Society & Animals* 14(1). 79–105.
Goodall, Jane. 1990. *Through a window: My thirty years with the chimpanzees of Gombe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Griffiths, Richard. 2000. Sex identification in birds. *Seminars in Avian and Exotic Pet Medicine* 9(1). 14–26.
Hall, Stuart. 2013. *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.
Halliday, Michael A. K. & Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen. 1999. *Construing experience through meaning: A language-based approach to cognition*. New York: Continuum.
Harris, Chelsea A., Natalie Blencowe & Dana A. Telem. 2017. What is in a pronoun? Why gender-fair language matters. *Annals of Surgery* 266(6). 932–933.
Høgh-Olesen, Henrik. 2019. *The aesthetic animal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jacobs, George M. 2006. Bias against other animals: A language awareness issue? *Global Issues: Integrating Global Issues into Language Teaching* 19. 25–29.
Kheel, Marty. 1995. License to kill: An ecofeminist critique of hunters' discourse. In Carol J. Adams & Josephine Donovan (eds.), *Animals and women: Feminist theoretical explanations*, 85–125. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Laland, Kevin N. & William Hoppitt. 2003. Do animals have culture? *Evolutionary Anthropology* 12. 150–159.
McNeil, John R. & Peter Engelke. 2016. *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*. London: Harvard University Press.
Merskin, Debra. 2018. *Seeing species: Re-presentations in media & popular culture*. New York: Peter Lang.
Merskin, Debra. 2021a. Circle of responsibility: Animals as stakeholders. In Donnalyn Pompper (ed.), *Public relations for social responsibility: Affirming DEI commitment with action*, 103–119. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
Merskin, Debra. 2021b. Species traitor? Foundations and tensions in human/animal scholarship and advocacy. In Natalie Khazaal & Núria Almiron (eds.), *Like an animal: Critical animal studies approaches to borders, displacement, and othering*, 125–158. Leiden: Brill.
Midgley, Mary. 1998. *Animals and why they matter*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
Mitchell, Jane V. 2021. Jane Goodall says stop calling animals … it. https://unchainedtv.com/2021/04/05/jane-goodall-tells-ap-stop-calling-animals-it/ (accessed 2 May 2022).
Mitchell, Les. 2019. *Reading the animal text in the landscape of the damned*. Grahamstown: NISC.
Moulton, Janice, George M. Robinson & Cherin Elias. 1978. Sex bias in language use: "Neutral" pronouns that aren't extended. *American Psychologist* 33. 1032–1036.
Murdock, Nancy L. & Donelson R. Forsyth. 1985. Is gender-based language sexist? A perceptual approach. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 9(1). 39–49.
Okri, Ben. 1996. *Birds of heaven*. London: Phoenix.
Parks, Bradley W. 2021. Great gray owl perseveres after flying into Sunriver window. https://www.opb.org/article/2021/03/29/great-gray-owl-window-strike-oregon/ (accessed 2 May 2022).
Phillips, John L. 1981. More on the pronoun problem. *American Psychologist* 36. 694.
Regan, Tom. 1983. *The case for animal rights*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Sapir, Edward. 1929. The status of linguistics as a science. *Language* 5. 207–214.

Sendén, Marie G., Emma A. Bäck & Lindqvist Anna. 2015. Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: The influence of time and attitudes on behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6. 1–12.

Simon, Scott. 2021. Opinion: Animals deserve gender pronouns, too. https://www.npr.org/2021/04/03/984008349/opinion-animals-deserve-gender-pronouns-too/ (accessed 9 June 2022).

Singer, Peter. 1990. *Animal liberation*. New York: New York Review of Books.

Stibbe, Arran. 2001. Language, power, and the social construction of animals. *Society & Animals* 9(2). 145–161.

Stibbe, Arran. 2020. Ecolinguistics and economics: The power of language to build worlds. *WEA Commentaries* 10(3). 2–7.

Stibbe, Arran. 2021. *Ecolinguistics: Language, ecology and the stories we live by*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

van Dijk, Teun A. 1997. Discourse as interaction in society. In Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction, vol. 2: Discourse as social interaction*, 1–37. London: Sage.

Wadiwel, Dinesh. 2004. Animal by any other name? Patterson and Agamben discuss animal (and human) life. *Borderlands e-Journal* 3(1). https://16beavergroup.org/articles/2004/06/17/rene-animal-by-any-other-name-patterson-and-agamben/ (accessed 2 May 2022).