

**ENTANGLED IN LANGUAGE**  
**The Linguistic Terrain of Human-Animal Relations**

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**Abstract**

Drawing on analyses of scientific knowledge and language from Foucault and Lyotard, this article explores the role of language in human-animal relations and human-animal ethics. The author examines several ways in which two linked manifestations of language—definitions and available vocabulary within a dominant discourse—aid in the production of linguistic or discursive borders between humans and other animals. Definitions of words such as “culture” or “cruelty” shape, among other things, our perceptions of animals as more or less like ourselves and what we consider reasonable to be done to them. Western scientific processes contribute to the vocabulary that is available to make legitimate knowledge claims about animals. Lyotard proposes the concept of “the social bond” that is created between humans through their everyday language and makes a distinction between this everyday language and scientific language. Using the examples presented in the article, the author contends that Western scientific language, as it relates to animals, also functions to contribute to the human social bond.

## Introduction

In this article I extend an exploration into the role of language in human-animal relationships and engage with the idea of linguistic or discursive borders in those relationships. We cannot separate the role of language and discourse from societal concepts of and attitudes toward non-humans. This is not an inherently new observation and has been explored in depth, especially from a post-structuralist perspective both inside geography (e.g., Whatmore 2002, Hinchliffe et al. 2005, Lulka 2009) and outside the discipline (in particular, e.g., see Derrida 2008, Wolfe 2003). In this article, I would like to further this scholarship by suggesting viewing the connection between language and human-animal relations and, importantly, ethics in terms of two linked manifestations, with Western science connecting to each and mediating them in the production of human-non-human borders. I classify the two manifestations as 1) definitions and, 2) available vocabulary within a dominant discourse. “Definitions” relates to the understanding of certain terms and concepts that have been/are important in constructing ethical frameworks and the border between humanity and animality. “Available vocabulary” indicates limitations imposed on verbal expression by dominant social discourses, particularly in the context of science. I will present information that demonstrates these manifestations of language in human-animal relations and I will draw on analyses of Western science and knowledge by Foucault and Lyotard to highlight the connections between language, science, and these relations. Finally, I will draw together the examples I present with Lyotard’s analysis of language and the human social bond to suggest that the language processes of Western science work to demarcate human society and exclude the animal “other”. This paper suggests that, in Western society, decision-making about human moral obligations to non-humans is significantly infused with these aspects of language and with substantial influence from Western (often English-dominated) science. I ultimately conclude that the relationship between science and language in the two manifestations that I present produces a powerful framework that entangles non-human species and plays a significant role in often positioning them in a distant region, or at times completely outside the borders, of our human realm of moral consideration.

## Definitions

### Scientific – animal language

Many of the debates over the qualities that distinguish humans from other animals hinge on non-humans’ linguistic capacities. Determining these capacities further hinges on how one defines language. There is very little doubt that animals communicate with conspecifics (members of the same species). However, human language has been defined as more than a means of basic communication. The first level of distinction from simple communication is that human language

is a system in which a significant function is the representation of abstract concepts and for which the use of symbols is constitutional (Bickerton 1990). Humans were long assumed to be the only species capable of using symbolic language, but when apes were successfully taught American Sign Language in the late twentieth century, humans' unique ability to grasp symbolic representation was severely challenged. Therefore, syntax was put forth as a new defining element of language (de Waal 2005). Not surprisingly, the issue of non-humans' syntactical ability is, therefore, now also much debated (e.g., Bickerton 1990; Savage-Rumbaugh et al. 1993; Wise 2000.) The other-than-human species that can be considered capable of using language (as opposed to mere communication) has become a critical point in many debates over humans' ethical obligations to some species, with language - defined as a symbolic system with complex syntactical structural rules - often being used as an appropriate "dividing line" relative to the granting of more comprehensive legal and moral rights. Indeed, a number of legal and ethical arguments are based on such a linguistically-defined line (see e.g., Wise 2000.)

### **Scientific—animal culture**

Another long-held boundary of human-ness - culture - is also important, again because (some) animals' having this quality would erode this once bright dividing line between humans and non-humans. Questions about how culture might be defined (and identified) in animal societies have taken their place alongside the language debates (e.g., see Laland and Galef 2009). As with language, arriving at a "true" definition of culture is often accomplished within an anthropocentric framework. For example, in their study of the transmission of primate foraging techniques at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University in the United States, Horner et al. (2006) note that "[h]uman culture provides an inevitable benchmark against which to evaluate animal studies" (13879). Even assuming the familiarity of human benchmarks, the means by which culture in non-humans is proved are often difficult, as indicated by comments from another set of researchers at Yerkes who discussed the merits of being able to use a captive (as opposed to wild) chimpanzee population to do a study of a particular social grooming practice (Bonnie and de Waal 2006). This 12-year study attempted to identify the means of transmission of what is considered to be a unique chimpanzee social custom and, therefore, could be defined as a form of culture. The importance of a captive population, the researchers note, is that studying such behavior transmissions in the wild is extraordinarily difficult due to lack of both observational access and the ability to control variables. For these reasons, the study of behaviors such as this grooming practice in captive populations is important in identifying what may be reasonably defined as culture in non-humans.

What these accounts from the Yerkes researchers suggest is that, first of all, the standard for culture (as that for language) among animals will be defined with reference to what we humans do,

and that procedures for proving culture will have to hold true to that standard. Therefore, unrestricted observational access and experimental controls are necessary so that possible alternate explanations (e.g., ones that indicate that behaviors are instinctive and/or exist throughout the species and consequently do not demonstrate human-like culture in a sub-population) can be ruled out. The researchers in the social grooming study note that there is a “relative absence of rigorous analysis” (Bonnie and de Waal, 28) of observed chimpanzee behaviors and that this is partially attributable to the inability to control natural, non-captive settings. Therefore, the control of research environments in these types of cases contributes directly to the ability to make sufficiently rigorous scientific claims.

Foucault is instructive here in his analysis of scientific knowledge claims. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault discusses the “governing” of scientific statements and refers to “the politics of the scientific statement” (112). He describes the notion of each society’s “‘general politics’ of truth,” saying that this is:

...the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (131).

Foucault’s description of the “politics of the scientific statement” parallels Lyotard’s (1979) discussion of the manner in which scientific statements are formed. Lyotard says that such statements are legitimated by the degree to which they conform to “stated conditions,” which “determin[e] whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community” (8). In much of Western science, control of settings and, therefore, variables is one of those conditions. The Yerkes researchers acknowledge the standards that must be met before their writing about chimpanzee culture (defined against a human benchmark) will be considered legitimate (“true”) scientific statements.

### **Scientific and societal - animal experiences**

In addition to the more anthropocentric concepts of language and culture, there is lack of scientific agreement on the definition of terms related to experiential welfare - terms such as “pain,” “distress,” or “suffering”. Disagreement on these types of definitions can be mystifying outside of science because these experiential states are often seen as self-evident. Allen and Bekoff (2007) report that definitions of such terms “will be more or less convincing” depending both on what one wants to do with an animal and one’s pre-existing opinions or ideology (313-4.) Regarding the definition of pain and animals’ experience of it, the philosopher and animal scientist Rollin (2007a) gives a survey of opinions that prevailed throughout much of the twentieth century. These views of many individuals in the Western scientific community,

following the Cartesian paradigm (i.e., that animals are non-feeling automata) had in many cases denied that non-humans (as well as neo-natal humans) can feel pain. This denial had even been codified (until the mid-1980's) by the International Association for the Study of Pain in its definition of pain, which included a requirement for linguistic competence in order to be able to experience it (Rollin 2007a).

Language and definitions are not only important with respect to things experienced, such as pain, but also to acts. Rollin (2004, 2007b) argues that language for human-animal interactions, especially with regard to institutional uses of non-humans, is inadequate in this present historical moment. He says that for much of history, before modern-day animal research and industrial agriculture, an injunction against cruelty was sufficient to protect animals against the rare person who had a sadistic bent and would perpetrate egregious, violent acts. However, the present mistreatment of animals in research and on industrial farms is not, according to Rollin, due to the actions of sadists. Therefore, the language of “cruelty,” which was sufficient for earlier, minimal requirements for animal treatment to protect them from wanton acts, no longer fits with present-day realities in which individuals are not seeking to gratuitously harm animals but, rather, harm them only as a means of purportedly achieving benefits for humankind. This lack of distinction between purposeless, sadistic cruelty, and acts that may cause similar harm but are nonetheless pursued for often ostensibly laudable goals, has effectively squelched productive dialogue between those who utilize animals in their work and those who seek to protect them from harm. In this view, language has not changed commensurately with social changes in human-non-human relationships.

### **Societal-legal**

These social changes in practices have brought about some interesting changes in legal definitions, however. Two significant ones bear discussion. The first is the definition of the word “animal” itself. Remarkably, in 2004, the US Department of Agriculture amended the Animal Welfare Act to reflect a new definition of “animal.” This definition (part of the 2002 Farm Bill) “...specifically exclude[es] birds, rats of the genus *Rattus*, and mice of the genus *Mus*, bred for use in research” (USDA 2007). Perhaps not coincidentally, these three species comprise more than 90% of the animals currently used in research in the US (AAVS 2011). This act has effectively created an uneven geography of animality : a mouse in the field is an animal, but a mouse in a research laboratory is something else.

In contrast to this narrow legal definition of “animal” is the broadening definition, in US law, of “terrorism.” In late 2005, President Bush signed into law the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA), which has expanded the prosecutorial impact of the Animal Enterprise Protection Act (enacted in 1992). AETA can effectively define as terrorists animal protection advocates who

solely cause profit loss (without harming any individuals) to a business that uses animals in its operations (e.g., research institutions, fur farms, agricultural enterprises, etc.) (Boghosian 2006). Therefore, a successful Internet or boycott campaign against a business could be defined and prosecuted as an act of domestic terrorism.

### **Available vocabulary**

As discussed above, inherited language related to the mistreatment of non-humans uses a concept of cruelty that may be too blunt to address present-day issues in a way that contributes to bettering animals' lives or even a social dialogue about their well-being. In this respect, there is not sufficient vocabulary available to adequately deal with what is, in many ways, a more complex relationship between humans and other animals in Western society today than has existed in earlier times or that may presently exist in other societies. Rollin (2005) says that, because of humans' primarily utilitarian relationship with non-humans, we are conceptually limited in our views of them. This conceptual limitation can be seen as hampering our ability to discuss animals in terms that might allow for their increased inclusion in our moral sphere. For example, in the United States, dogs and cats are broadly referred to as being owned and, of course, they are legally considered to be property. It is for this reason that animal advocates have tried to introduce terms such as "guardian" instead of "owner" and "companion animal" instead of "pet" in order to create a new conceptual category for these animals not only to better reflect their increasingly familial status in many households, but also to discursively challenge their status as property (IDA 2012).

The vocabulary available can of course change depending on social context. The US ecologist and evolutionary biologist Bekoff (2008) recounts a situation, as an exemplar of the attitude of many animal scientists, in which a researcher discussed a dog in qualitatively different terms in two different contexts - one personal, the other professional. In the personal account, the researcher used anthropomorphic language and ascribed mental states and emotions to the dog. In the professional context, he levelled the dreaded charge of anthropomorphism at the notion that animals' subjective mental states or their experience of emotions can actually be known. This example illustrates the available vocabulary with respect to both context and ideology. As the Allen and Bekoff quotation in the previous section states, one will be more disposed toward certain definitions depending on one's ideology. The literary critic Eagleton (1991) has stated that "exactly the same piece of language may be ideological in one context and not in another" (9). Bekoff's account of the scientist suggests a corollary to this statement. Rather than "the same piece of language," the same concept or entity may be represented ideologically differently "in one context and not in another." In Bekoff's example, the researcher's scientific ideology with respect to a presumably contextually stable entity (a dog) was not exhibited in one speech act

(the personal) but was fully represented in another (the professional). He did not use “the same piece of language” in the two situations, but drew on different available vocabularies with respect to the same concept to reflect an ideology.

This example also illustrates an adherence to Western science’s positivist tradition of reporting solely on observable phenomena. Würbel (2009), a scientist of animal welfare and ethology in Germany, says that scientists use terms such as “normal bodily function” and “full expression of the behavioural repertoire” as “proxies for well-being” when speaking about animals (119). According to Würbel, they use these “proxies” in order to maintain the objective nature of scientific language. Use of this language can also be seen as a way to avoid the scientific sin of anthropomorphizing. Returning to Lyotard, he says that scientific language is comprised of denotative statements and that, further, both what is stated must pertain to referents that are open to repeated examination and that the statement must conform to a “language judged relevant by the experts” (18). Because this language must conform to the standards of observability and (alleged) objectivity, the vocabulary legitimately available for use in scientific discourse about non-humans is limited.

Würbel justifies this limitation (and certainly others do as well), but this of course begs the question of what is being left out of statements. The Dutch ethologist (animal behaviorist) Frans de Waal (2001) gets at this point in a commentary on the hegemony of Western science and its effective elision of different cultural perspectives. De Waal points out that Western dualistic notions of human/animal and nature/culture have shaped how Western scientists have practiced and continue to practice their trade. Many non-Western cultures, in contrast, have not historically embraced these same dualisms and therefore scientific practice, especially in the life sciences, emerged differently outside the West. De Waal (2000/2001) also suggests that typical non-Western beliefs in the interconnectedness of all life, human and non, as well as less hierarchical views of species taxonomies, have facilitated several identifiably different cultural perspectives outside the West that are significant for the life sciences. These perspectives include the ready acceptance of the theory of evolution, early openness to ideas about animal culture and individual animals’ distinct personalities, and scientists’ not having to guard against the charge of anthropomorphism in their scientific work. Cultural attitudes are of course inseparable from language and de Waal has stated that linguistic hegemony has had an effect on the practice of science worldwide, noting that “it is hard for non-English speakers to make themselves heard in an English-speaking world” (3). He says that although having the common language of English for sharing scientific work is beneficial, many English speakers take the utility of shared communication to a level of domination through their often dismissive attitudes toward non-native speakers at conferences and in the “re-packaging” or ignoring of ideas expressed in non-proficient English. Therefore, what may be seen as a globally unified scientific perspective

actually bears the marks of the particular Western perspective that tends toward a dualistic view of human and non-human life. These comments by de Waal and Würbel support the idea that Western science, the practice of which includes rules for speech, contributes to the conception of an objective, non-human world that exists separate from humans.

Finally, the sanctioning of certain forms of scientific language affects not only how something can be stated, but also if something can be said in a professional context at all. For example, students and professors at Colorado State Veterinary School in the US had kept silent for many years about the school's usual practices in canine surgery training (e.g., multiple surgeries on one dog, little surgical aftercare, etc.). After one surgeon finally spoke out against the practices, a number of other faculty and students joined him and, significantly, expressed that they had held very strong views about the issue for a long time (Rollin 2005). Another example comes from Marino (2009), a biologist at Emory University (also in the US), who encourages students to express their concerns about animal welfare, but says that this is difficult because stating such concerns is seen as a form of activism by the scientific community, which generally considers this type of behavior inappropriate and even actively discourages it. Lyotard is useful here in his observation of the ways in which one comes to be considered "learned" in the scientific community. He says that this is achieved by (paralleling Foucault) producing "true" statements that are verifiable or falsifiable. Therefore, making statements that are not considered verifiable or falsifiable, but instead express a value judgment may not contribute to one's status as "learned" and, as indicated by the two examples just given, may in fact be seen as unprofessional.

### **Language and the "social bond"**

Reflecting on the above examples of the linked manifestations of language, I will now discuss an application of a particular point of analysis by Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard examines knowledge (scientific and non) and language in Western society. He employs Wittgenstein's (1958) concept of "language games" (Lyotard 10), which are defined as categories of speech acts that have rules for their use, much like the moves in a chess game, saying that these language games are the "minimum relation required for a society to exist.... The question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game, the game of inquiry" that positions the one asking a question, the one being asked, and the person or thing asked about (15). In this statement, Lyotard is referring to the knowledge-making that humans who share a linguistic culture do with their everyday speech acts. He contrasts the knowledge, which he calls "narrative", made in this way through the social bond, with knowledge created through present-day Western science. He says that scientific discourse is separate from the language games that comprise the social bond, and that it is not "a direct and shared component of the bond" (25). Here I would like to suggest, however, that scientific discourse, as it relates to non-humans, does

function as a component of the social bond and that, recognized or not, science mobilizes the aspects of language that I have discussed - definitions and available vocabulary - to further and solidify a human social bond.

Lyotard says that scientific discourse must adhere to rules of acceptability and that these rules are communicated through “meta-prescriptive” language (65). I contend that the prescribed descriptive (or “denotative,” per Lyotard) language employed by Western science in discussing non-humans actually functions to contribute to the social bond of a human society. As the specific examples in this paper have illustrated, the dualism between human and animal is maintained and reproduced through the restrictions on the language deemed permissible in discussing what we know (or can know) about non-humans and also in discussing the ways in which they might or might not be like us. This denotative language of science can be seen as producing an “other” while at the same time producing knowledge about the other. Similar to the everyday, non-scientific, narrative speech that, according to Lyotard, is part of the social bond, I contend that the rules and constraints of scientific language in Western society, and the ways in which these rules and constraints shape what we believe to be known and knowable, have become comparably mundane as scientific norms and discourse are communicated to the wider society through popular media. Science ostensibly allows us to know increasingly more about other species, but also keeps them discursively separate, even if what we are learning shows them to be similar to ourselves. I suggest that by creating linguistic difficulties in defining both basic experiential states and more complicated concepts such as culture in non-humans, and placing constraints on the statements that scientists themselves may make, the parameters of scientific discourse function as one of the language games that are “direct and shared components” of the human social bond. In other words, scientific discourse is a normative framework that has extended beyond the scientific community and to which non-scientists are increasingly exposed. This framework enrolls us as a community of knowers, engaged in a very specific type of knowledge acquisition. This in turn affects society at large in the ways that we collectively think and talk about the non-human world, although this is not a totalizing framework, as illustrated by Bekoff’s example of the researcher’s personal statements about a dog, which very much did not adhere to scientific speech norms. However, according to Bekoff, when the researcher (in his role as professional scientist) was reminded of the anthropomorphizing language he had used in the personal context, he effectively repudiated his earlier statements, saying that they were merely “stories” about the dog, told in a non-professional setting, and not actually knowledge claims of any sort at all. This suggests that the scientist was perhaps conscious that he had transgressed a normative linguistic line and decided to recant these non-scientific statements rather than validating an alternate form of truth-telling. Therefore, though not all-encompassing, I am suggesting here that boundaries between the human

and other species are drawn, demonstrated, and reproduced linguistically, with significant influence from scientific discourse, thus contributing to the Lyotardian social bond as described above.

## Conclusion

What should be clear from the foregoing discussion is the multiple role of language in creating the ethical terrain of human-non-human relationships. I argue that language and its uses suffuse these relationships and their mediation, even, as exemplified in the extreme case of AETA, in restricting forms of contestation and protest. In terms of my two categories, I began with several important definitions. As other animals have been taught to use (certainly at a much less sophisticated level) a representational system similar to human language, previous definitions of language have been refined and new debates have emerged. Possible animal culture is also debated and defined by human standards. Defining concepts is a fraught process even with respect to our own individual experiences, and becomes even more complicated in attempting to define something such as an emotional or experiential state in another living being. These definitions become crucial, however, in animals' lives. The positivist tradition places limits on how these states in non-humans might be understood or described. Connected to experiential states, cruelty in many cases is defined by intent, location, or the category of recipient (both animal and human). The definition of cruelty becomes elusive, contingent on the geography and context of an act.

As stated in the introduction, the observation that language is a factor in human-animal relationships is not new. This article's contribution is examining and connecting two aspects of language that are dispersed throughout our human relationships with animals in Western society. I have touched on many issues that could be further problematized but have left much uninterrogated. I believe further analysis using Lyotard's ideas about the prescriptive meta-language of science and its role in strengthening the human social bond is warranted, as science's narrative alter-ego continues to affect the discursive rules that define the ways in which we believe we can know and discuss animal "others". Although in this article I have not intended to portray Western science and its practitioners as monolithic, the examples I have used indicate that there are positivistic and dualistic ways of thinking that still wield significant influence on views toward non-human species.

Writing about the history of positivism, Giddens (1978) tells us that Comte predicted that science and technology would move beyond the realm of the purely physical into the "political and moral" as well (246). I doubt that Comte was considering the role of non-humans in this prediction, but surely this expansion into the political and moral is evidenced by the examples

presented in this paper. Science is also firmly in the rhetorical in its self-conscious monitoring of its language and the wielding of language to include and exclude. Communicators, language-users, or neither, non-humans are entangled in our human language, and they fare better or worse depending on its use.

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