

People, Products, Pests and Pets: the discursive representation of animals

Both scientific research and changes to the environment have brought a new urgency to understanding of the boundary and relationship between humans and animals.

The project will examine how language choices realise specific stances towards animals. Findings will be relevant to both natural and social scientists, and will inform public debates about the ways animals feature in human experience: as companions, commodities, and quarry in hunting; in domains such as medical experiments, food production and consumption; and in respect of the practice and ethics of decision making about these issues, such as the balance between economic and conservationist criteria.

The project will collect extensive empirical data encompassing a wide range of discourse about animals, and investigate how linguistic choices within that data relate to particular scientific, philosophical, ethical, popular and practical stances towards them. Our findings will: deepen theoretical understanding of the relation between the linguistic system of English, choices made within it, and representations of animals; illuminate the degree to which established ways of talking and writing are attuned to describing the rapidly changing environment in which humans and animals co-exist; and provide evidence about whether current ways of speaking and writing contribute to, or detract from, positive action in sustaining that co-existence.

The project uses a distinctive methodology to create an overview of the many ways in which animals feature in human practices, and how the views of those communicating professionally about animals relate to the language they use and its effects. Our data will be of three kinds: (a) texts (both writing and transcribed speech) representing animals, (b) interviews with those producing such texts, and (c) focus groups reflecting their reception by the public. The analytical method used will reveal the inter-relationships between them.

First we shall collect a large digital database of texts about animals drawn from sources such as newspapers, wildlife broadcasts, campaigning literature, food product labels, etc. This corpus will be analysed using specialised linguistic software to reveal frequent patterns of language use. Second we shall conduct and transcribe a series of interviews with some producers of such texts, again drawn from a wide range of interests and practices in relation to animals: broadcasters,

scientists, environmentalists, animal welfare campaigners, farmers' representatives, and others, to elicit their views on the best language to achieve their purposes. The third dataset is transcriptions of focus groups, some with various interest groups, others with members of the general public, to ascertain their responses to a series of selected texts from the corpus. In this way we shall be able to correlate analysis of texts about animals with insights into their production and reception, thus avoiding the danger of over reliance on textual analysis alone. At the same time, the transcribed spoken data, from the interviews and focus groups will itself be added to the digital corpus of discourse about animals, for additional linguistic analysis.

The team working on the project will comprise: Professor Guy Cook, King's College London, (Principal Investigator); Dr Alison Sealey, University of Birmingham, (Co-Investigator); two half-time Research Assistants for the first two years of the project, one at each institution; two PhD students, one at each institution. One of the two PhDs on the project (at King's) will add a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural dimension to the findings by investigating aspects of the representation of animals in a language other than English; the other PhD (at Birmingham) will add a diachronic dimension by investigating an aspect of how representations of animals in English have changed historically.

There will also be a steering committee made up of staff in different disciplines from the two universities, and three specialist consultants from other universities.