

# **'Do animals have nationality?' Insights from a cross-linguistic corpus-assisted study on animal representation in online newspapers**

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In recent years, animals have become an increasingly visible topic of research in social sciences and the humanities. Much of this work stems from the idea that, in a post-industrialist society in which real-life animals are "disappearing" (Berger, 2009: 11), looking at representations of animals is essential to understanding their role in human society (Baker, 2001: 190). More importantly, these representations are historically and culturally variable (e.g. DeMello, 2012; N. Taylor, 2013). As such, they not only have the potential to reflect how animals are conceptualised, classified, and regarded by different cultures and discourse communities, but also to reveal some of the peculiarities of these cultural contexts.

So far, the linguistic studies on this topic have limited their analyses of animal representation to a single language (e.g. Jepson, 2008; Sealey & Charles, 2013; Stibbe, 2003; *inter alia*). One exception would be the small body of studies that employ the cognitive metaphor framework to explore how conventional animal metaphors in different languages might serve as a way of exploring cultural differences (e.g. Hsieh, 2006; Talebinejad & Dastjerdi, 2005). However, these studies are, by definition, limited to the analysis of figurative language – that is, to how animal metaphors are used to talk about humans, rather than animals.

By exploring animal representation from an empirical, quantitative, and cross-linguistic perspective, the study presented in this paper aims to fill a methodological gap in the linguistics literature on this topic. The data consists of two comparable, topic-based purpose-built corpora of contemporary (2012-2014) online news stories about animals – one in Romanian, and one in English. Each corpus is organised in five subcorpora, based on the five subtopics/case-study animals used to collect it: dogs, cats, bears, pigs, and horses (these were found to be the most frequently mentioned animals in a general corpus of Romanian and one of English). To analyse this data, I have employed a methodological approach known as Cross-linguistic Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (C-CADS) (Partington, Duguid, & C. Taylor, 2013; Vessey, 2013), which was extended and tailored for the specific requirements of the present study. In the initial stage of the analysis, I used keyword analysis and topic modelling to identify the most salient themes in each subcorpus. I then explored these salient themes further with the help of bilingual word sketches (Kilgarriff & Tugwell, 2002), and collocation and concordance analysis.

A key finding emerging from the analysis, on which I focus in this paper, is that animals are routinely used in online newspaper discourse as a means of highlighting and discussing cultural characteristics and differences. To explore this issue in relation to Romania and the UK, I started by looking

at the frequencies of country names and national adjectives and their distribution across the two corpora of animal news stories. The normalised frequency figures show that Britain is approximately four times more frequently mentioned in Romanian news than Romania is in British news. This might be explained by the fact that Britain, as a prestige nation, has high newsworthiness for Romanian media; additionally, the global outreach of British newspapers such as *MailOnline* seem to make these a prolific news source for Romanian tabloids. Romania is mostly mentioned in the British online press in relation to some very particular situations, such as the horsemeat scandal or Romania's stray dog issue. Based on the distribution of these country names and national adjectives across the files in each subcorpus, I was able to identify some typical uses of these terms. I explored these further using concordance analysis and by qualitatively analysing a small sample of prototypical texts.

Two patterns of use seemed particularly salient: (1) the use of animals or animal products as symbols of national identity; and (2) using animals as proxies for representing other cultures and/or discussing cultural differences. In what concerns the former, the Romanian corpus offers an interesting example of how pigs – or, more specifically, the slaughtering of pigs before Christmas – are framed in the online press as a symbol of Romanian traditions. Despite the controversy generated by such practices, which do not abide by EU animal welfare standards, the corpus data suggests that the traditional slaughtering of pigs is described in Romanian news stories as ceremonial and picturesque, and an important part of Romanian identity. By contrast, the phrase *a nation of animal lovers*, which occurs most frequently (38 occurrences) in the subcorpus of UK news about dogs, suggests that British online news stories reinforce the idea that love for animals is an important part of British identity. Moreover, the idea that Britain is a nation of animal lovers, which seems to implicitly involve consideration for animal welfare, seems to often serve as an argument in negatively stereotyping other nations based on their alleged mistreatment of animals.

Thus, the second pattern of use, which is typical of the British corpus, entails the negative portrayal of Romania and Romanians in animal news stories. Concordance analysis for the lemmas ROMANIA and ROMANIAN seems to corroborate the findings of Ibrahim and Howarth (2016), who showed that, in their coverage of the horsemeat scandal, British newspapers have negatively portrayed Romanian and Eastern-European migrants. Furthermore, the analysis shows that Romania's problem with stray dogs was also used by a part of British media to promote an anti-immigration discourse. As can be observed Fig. 1, the articles about stray dogs go beyond a vivid and generalising description of Romania's cruelty towards dogs, to questioning Romania's membership in the EU, or suggesting that Romanian immigrants are dangerous and dishonest:

1 he had served time in jail for theft and dishonesty in **Romania** and Italy. He was also handed a conditional  
 2 this of dead dogs lying in skips are far too common in **Romania** [PH] "Funds are provided to humanely euthanize  
 3 to Britain from the EU's two poorest countries - **Romania** and Bulgaria - lapsed. - Intimidation and violence  
 4 with new legislation encompassing animal rights. If **Romanians** truly want to join Europe, they need to see the

Figure 1 – Concordance lines for ROMANIA|ROMANIAN

Amongst concerns about increased immigration from Romania and Bulgaria, a part of the British online press seems to have framed animal related topics such as the horsemeat scandal or stray dogs as a means of indirectly expressing xenophobic attitudes.

An interesting question emerging from these findings concerns the extent to which national adjectives can be used with animals. In the two corpora, the adjectives *românesc* ('Romanian') and *British* are in general used in two different contexts: in relation to national economic activities and interests (e.g. *British farmers*); and in relation to traditional foods or products (e.g. *British bacon*). Much less frequently, phrases such as *Romanian dogs* or *Romanian refugee dogs* occur in the British corpus. In the light of the previously discussed findings, such atypical formulations can be interpreted as a means of intertwining emotional stories about abused dogs with an anti-immigration discourse.

Overall, the proposed paper highlights a less discussed aspect in the linguistic literature about animal representation. In addition to revealing a range of cultural and linguistic differences and similarities between Romania and the UK, the comparative analysis of two corpora of animal news stories also suggests that animals are actively and habitually used in online newspaper discourses as surrogates for specific nations or ethnic groups. In my presentation, I will discuss several such situations, and illustrate them with examples from concordance lines and representative texts.

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