

# **Badgers, hedgehogs and squirrels: a diachronic corpus-assisted discourse study of British wildlife in the news**

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## **Introduction and rationale**

A recent Leverhulme-funded project (2013 – 2016) investigated the discursive representation of animals in contemporary Britain across a range of spoken and written discourse types.<sup>1</sup> My own research attached to this project uses a modern diachronic corpus-assisted discourse analytical (MD-CADS) approach (Partington, 2010) to investigate how a small number of key wildlife species in Britain – badgers, hedgehogs and squirrels – are represented in a diachronic corpus of news texts published over a 220-year period.

The “wildlife” classification represents a particular type of social relationship between humans and the animals belonging to it. Wildlife species are not the “property” of humans, unlike domesticated species bred to fulfil a human requirement; for food, products or companionship, for example. It has been established that human perception of animals is influenced by social, political and cultural factors (Kean, 2001) and this is reflected in the language used to represent them, as demonstrated by Arran Stibbe’s work in particular (2001, 2003, 2006; and 2012). Human experience of animals in Britain has undergone major shifts since the industrial revolution; factors such as urbanisation, technological and agricultural advances – all consequences of industrial advancement – have changed the landscape of Britain, impacting on the way people interact with nature and wildlife (and Lovegrove, 2007; see Ritvo, 1987). The status of wildlife species, including squirrels, badgers and hedgehogs, has been subject to change historically as a result of these and other external factors which cause humans to perceive and manage their relationships with them differently. Importantly, the roles animals play in human society are imposed by humans – animals cannot self-identify as belonging to a particular social group, neither can they subscribe to or resist human discourses. If, as it has been argued, linguistic representations of human social actors and groups historically can have implications for how these people are perceived in present day society (see, for example, Baker, 2014) then it is worthwhile to study the role of language in shaping human relationships with animals in historical society, particularly since people tend to frame present issues with reference to the past and (re-)interpret the past with reference to current understanding (see Carr, 1990).

The intended outcomes for this study at the outset were to establish:

- (1) the role of language in defining human-wildlife relationships in British cultural history

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<sup>1</sup> *'People', 'Products', 'Pests' and 'Pets': the Discursive Representation of Animals*, 2013. Grant number: RPG-2013-063

- (2) which linguistic factors – motivated by external political, social and cultural influences – have contributed to the (un)sustainability of human-animal relationships in the past
- (3) the extent to which the findings can be used to inform understanding of future linguistic representations of wildlife

## Data and methods

As well as identifying changes in linguistic variation, MD-CADS can be used to study the influence of social, political and cultural perspectives on language change (see Corpora special edition edited by Partington, 2010; and Partington, 2012). This paper discusses the impact of such influences on news discourse about squirrels, badgers and hedgehogs across the late-modern period of English. Unlike traditional MD-CADS, I did not use temporally parallel corpora for diachronic language comparison but rather a (relatively) continuous dataset gathered specifically for this study. Three corpora of news texts (letters and articles) gathered from the *Times Digital Archive* were constructed – one each for badgers (714 texts and 372172 tokens), hedgehogs (455 texts, 296516 tokens), and squirrels (including both the red and grey species) (696 texts, 328140 tokens). The corpora comprised all texts containing at least one mention of the animals under investigation published in *The Times* between 1785 and 2005.

The resulting diachronic distribution and the limited size of the corpora had a bearing on the methods available for carrying out a diachronic analysis. Each of the three corpora were segmented into distinct periods for diachronic comparison guided by the waves, peaks and troughs (WPT) statistical method (Gabrielatos, McEnery, Diggie, & Baker, 2012) using Brezina's (2014-2015) "Change over time" tool (from the "Statistics in corpus linguistics toolbox" provided by CASS at Lancaster University). This analysis allows the researcher to make an informed decision about corpus segmentation points given peaks and troughs in the diachronic distribution of texts; these peaks and troughs reflect the frequency difference between articles published in each year, compared with the preceding year.

I utilised a multi-perspective analytic method comprising six individual corpus analyses for each animal ("red squirrel(s)", "grey squirrel(s)", "badger(s)" and "hedgehog(s)") across the respective corpora; the analysis allowed me to gain a broad sense of the dominant representations of each of the animals under investigation, as well as the ways in which such representations have changed over time. A "keywords by corpus" analysis identified keywords for each of the corpora in turn, using the other two corpora as a single reference corpus. The remaining five analyses explored the diachronic aspect of the data by comparing texts contained within individual time periods with the remainder of the relevant corpus. I applied the diachronic categorisation proposed by McEnery and Baker (2015) in their diachronic collocates analysis – *initiating*, *transient*, *consistent* and *terminating* – to the corpus outputs from three analyses: diachronic collocates, diachronic keywords, and diachronic modifiers. Finally, I examined the behaviour of two clusters that were present across each of the corpora, over time: *[species name]+BE*; and *of (the) [species name]*.

This multi-perspective analytical method highlighted a number of broad themes and sub-themes in the linguistic representation of squirrels, badgers and

hedgehogs; for example, I found language relating to the themes of *geography, places and spaces; animal qualities, states and attributes; and actions, pursuits and behaviours*. I then selected three major sub-themes identified in this process (see Findings below for details) for investigation using more detailed corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Each of these selected themes can be found across all three corpora and can be seen to change over time in response to text external factors. For each selection, I ensured that there was both enough data to examine and that this data was suited to diachronic analysis.

## Findings

I will present key findings from this study, discussing them in the context of the broader social, cultural and political history of Britain in line with the discourse historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). These findings are linked to three major sub-themes: (i) *life cycle and health*, which includes language about animal age, the seasons, and disease; (ii) *origin and nationality*, which includes language relating to spatial distribution, the presence and absence, and the expansion and decline of species; and (iii) *human actions and pursuits*, which includes language about defence, protection and promotion of wildlife populations as well as the control, killing or otherwise harming of wildlife for country sports, population control (culling) and accidental death by machines (e.g. cars). I discuss patterns of change and continuity in the language about these animals in relation to these three sub-themes and the extent to which these patterns are consistent with changing human practices and attitudes. Specifically, I demonstrate in this paper the ways in which *anthropocentrism* (the tendency to interpret reality on the basis of human values) – an overarching topic common to all three corpora and all three selected sub-themes – is evident in the language used to represent squirrels, badgers and hedgehogs, and the behaviour of this topic over time in response to social, cultural and political external factors.

In short, I found that squirrels, badgers and hedgehogs are discussed in relation to human interests in news discourse. This might be because they are considered to cause financial or material losses; they are used for human amusement or hinder people's enjoyment of another species; or, more indirectly, because parallels are drawn between humans and animals, to the extent that a wildlife species may even stand as a proxy for human social groups. I conclude that by examining the ways in which wildlife species have been represented in the past, as well as the ways in which these representations respond to text-external social, cultural and political factors, we might better be able to understand human responses to wildlife-related issues, both current and beyond.

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