

Words matter: implications of semantics and imagery in framing animal welfare issues

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Language & Power



- Language shapes & reflects our thinking (Burr, 1995)
- Discourse & practice are intertwined (Schillo, 2003)
- Social construction of animals influences treatment
- Meat industry emphasizes “mastery” discourse (Milstein, 2006)
 - Fosters exploitation & abuse like sexist language (Dunayer, 1995)
- ANS textbooks reflect conceptual framework wherein animals exist primarily to serve needs & tastes of humans (Schillo, 2003)
 - Political nature of the relationship ⇒ humans have power
 - Animals “domesticated” for our use; we control them



Language, ideology & animal agriculture

- Critics & animal industry insiders suggest evaluation & change in discourse of animal agriculture
- Battle for the “hearts & minds of consumers” between the animal industries & animal activists (Kopperud, 1993)
 - Occurs mainly through language & the media (Stibbe, 2001)



Discourse strategies: contrasts in framing the issues

- Pro-animal-rights use two main arguments
 - Animal use as a moral problem--ascribing rights to animals in discourses of suffering, oppression, & depravity
 - Animal use as needless & dangerous to human health
- Anti-animal-rights strategies
 - Construct animal use as necessary (e.g. for human health)
 - Situate animal interests & human welfare as incompatible
 - Animal rights rather than animal use is the moral problem
- Gives the public two highly simplistic, contradictory images

(Swan, 2003)



Discourse strategies: animal rights

- The animal rights movement recognizes the power of language; deliberately tries to change it (Stibbe, 2001)
 - Discourse opposes oppression
 - Uses terms such as “nonhuman animal,” and inclusive terms such as “being”
 - Focuses on animals’ ability to suffer and feel pain *in the same way that humans can*
 - Themes of compassion, love for animals; animal protection (Pivetti, 2005)



Discourse strategies: animal rights

- Activists' objections to modern farming:
 - General "factory-styled" farming claims
 - Specific practices (e.g., tail docking, castration w/o anesthesia, close confinement of animals)
 - Inherent cruelty and pain of practices
 - Interference with animals' social needs
 - Increased need for antibiotics; thus reduced quality

(Reisner, 1992)

Discourse strategies: animal agriculture

- Farmers must treat their animals well to profit
 - Humane handling can be measured by productivity and economic gain
- Only “a few bad apples” statements
- Because farmers by necessity treat their animals humanely and well, implication is no change is necessary in current production systems



(Reisner, 1992)



Discourse strategies: agricultural press as a form of activism

- Dichotomy btwn modern & older farming practices
- Emphasizes advantages of confinement
 - Enhanced animal welfare (protection from predators/weather)
 - Human benefits (high quality, uniform, cheap products)
- Weak ethical arguments & avoidance of ethical issues raised by pro-rights
 - Particularly claims that productivity and welfare are not synonymous

(Reisner, 1992)



Discourse strategies in science & education

- “The scientific & educational community has at times adopted the tactic of using public relations strategies, such as language control.” (Stricklin, 1993)
- Some scientists & ethicists have produced misleading, polarized, simplistic accounts (Fraser 2001, 2007; Swanson & Mench, 2000)
- “...various actors have attempted to influence opinion & events by influencing the language used to describe the interests of food animals.” (Thompson, 2004)



Deconstructing the discourse of animal agriculture

- Industries use discourse of science to make oppression seem “inevitable”, “natural”, “comfortable” (Sperling, 1988; Glenn, 2004)
- ⇒ Industry ideology based on “biological principles & science”
 - Animal rights views relegated to “beliefs”, “fantasies”, “dogma”
- External discourse presents animal treatment as benign, but internal discourse has different objectives (Stibbe, 2001, 2003, 2006)
 - Encourages disregard for pain/suffering for the sake of profit
 - Linguistic devices place animals in “out groups”

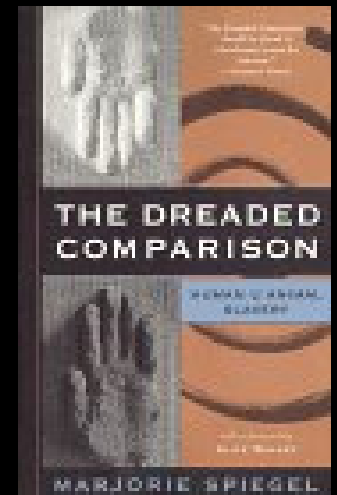


Deconstructing the discourse of animal agriculture

- Lexical representations of animals
 - “Beef” not cow, “pork” not pig
 - Animal is symbolized by the product the industry gets
 - Represented as a meat resource for humans; conceals the meaning of killing a live, sentient being (Singer, 1990; Stibbe, 2001)
 - Animals are “harvested” not “murdered” (Stibbe, 2001)
 - Animals as units (“broilers” - named for a cooking method)
 - Inanimate resources cannot suffer

Deconstructing the discourse of animal agriculture

- Mass nouns remove individuality of animals
 - ⇒ individual value & importance diminish
 - ⇒ harder to identify with & easier to exploit
 - Pronoun use to refer to people vs. animals
 - "Us" vs. "them" ; "which" vs. "who" "it" vs. "him/her" (Stibbe, 2001)
 - Compared to racist discourse
 - "The Dreaded Comparison" (Spiegel, 1988)





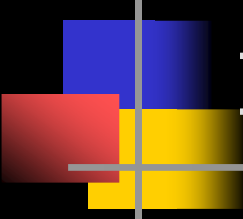
Deliberate manipulation?

- Meat industry strategies to construct consumer support
 - **Doublespeak** (Glenn, 2004)
 - Sterile language--intentionally misleading by being ambiguous or disingenuous
 - E.g., use of term "euthanasia" to describe killing of piglets by slamming their heads against the floor
 - misrepresents the practice as humane; conceals & condones violence & suffering
 - "Farm" animals become "food & fiber" (Stricklin, 1993)
 - Veal "crates" ⇒ the wrong image, instead, use "stall"
 - Gestation "crates" ⇒ "stalls" ⇒ "IGAs"

Deliberate manipulation?

- **“Speaking” animals** in advertisements to sell animal products (Glenn, 2004)
 - Blurs lines between humans and animals
 - Works to construct ways of thinking that obscure suffering of animals & endorse industry practices despite serious concerns
 - “Great cheese comes from happy cows.... ”





Implications of industry discourse

- Ambivalence about full disclosure of practices
 - Inconsistent with scientific & industry goals
 - “the public needs to be more educated”
- Difference between education & advocacy/advertising
 - Advertisers & politicians use “purr” vs. “snarl” words to influence us (Jacobs, 2004)
 - “Bacon burger” vs. “murdered bovine with brutally massacred swine strips” (Mills, 2003)
 - **Scientists, educators have moral obligations to be wholly truthful, objective, transparent**

Implications of industry discourse

- Risks of sanitized language & imagery
 - Ethically problematic---public right to know
 - Erosion of credibility
 - Educational gaps exploited by animal activists
 - Effects felt in marketplace, politics, classrooms



Framing animal welfare issues: scientific statements vs. emotive imagery

- Key agricultural messaging points
 - Food safety, nutrition, environmental stewardship, affordability
- Key activist messages
 - Use images to neutralize/negate animal agriculture
 - Raise suspicion about agriculture's integrity





What is the role of Veterinary Medicine in framing animal welfare issues?

- Veterinarians have a natural ethical responsibility to lead in animal welfare (Rollin, 1991)
- Ideally positioned; credible with public
- Yet, Vet. Med. struggles to find a “voice” in welfare
- Attention to veterinarians absent in discourse analysis



What is the role of veterinary medicine in framing animal welfare issues?

- Represented by pro- animal rights as extensions of animal industries
 - “.....a professional veterinary group that works for an animal-use industry (e.g., the AASV)...are in the employ of industry and their “science” often reflects the thinking of the industry itself. ...the ...consequence is that AVMA often defends obviously inhumane practices or...stands on the sidelines... ” (Pacelle, 2009)

Veterinary medicine & welfare discourse: conflicting construction of animals

- No cohesive response on welfare
- Irreconcilable differences in views of animals as instruments/commodities vs. animals as companions (Jamison, 2009)
 - Student assessment of pain perception differed depending on species & area of emphasis (Levine et al., 2005)
- Contrasts in marketing of animal care
 - Companion animals
 - "Care, compassion, humane..."
 - Equine and Farm Animal care
 - "Service, health care"



*They're Not Just Pets,
They're Family*



Implications for veterinary medicine

- Internal issues (Easton, 2004)
 - Lack of veterinary education in animal welfare
 - Different attitudes to animals within the profession
 - Conflict between veterinarians' vocation and their interest in making a good living
 - Veterinarians' approach to pain management influenced by concern about cost (Hewson et al., 2007)
- Framing of welfare primarily/solely in scientific terms
 - Yet different views of animals represent different values relative to animals within the veterinary community



Implications for veterinary medicine

- Failure to lead in welfare debate reflects catch-22
 - Large animal practitioners
 - May have less public but more agricultural credibility in farm animal welfare → dismissed as “parrots/servants” of industry
 - Small animal practitioners
 - Greater public credibility in animal welfare due to perceived compassion, but little agricultural credibility → may be excluded from debates due to knowledge deficits
- Profiting from human-animal bond undermines both groups; exploited by animal rights activists



Conclusions

- Need to be mindful of language choices & what they represent (Dunayer, 2001; Milstein, 2006)
- It is appropriate....to be sensitive to industry image. But..failure to recognize, anticipate & deal with real issues is a threat to ag. institutions" (Stricklin, 1993)
- The view that animal science's main goal is to maximize profit, without regard for the experiences of animals, is irreconcilable with the view that animals have value/significance beyond their use (Cuomo, 2003)
- Need transparency & a real ethic of care & respect for animals



Conclusions

- Animal welfare education imperative for veterinarians
 - “In the interest of both animal welfare and promotion of AVMA's policies ..., it is useful to investigate ..what veterinary students perceive as humane...” (Levine, 2005)
 - Need actual & perceived competence for credibility/leadership
- Engage the ethical issues
- Focus on key issues & strengths
 - Pain management, euthanasia
- Develop consistent narrative of animals and animal welfare