

Rejecting Human-Animal Dualism via Pronoun Choice: Evidence from an Animal Welfare Discourse Corpus

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability efforts are a reaction to the realization that human activity is out of balance with the rest of the natural world. A core driver of attitudes that lead to unsustainable and ecologically destructive behaviour is human-nature dualism: The notion that humans are separate from nature. A component of human-nature dualism is human-animal dualism, in which humans are thought of as apart from or superior to other species. These notions are reflected and encoded in widespread language practices. However, there are alternatives. This paper describes findings from an animal welfare discourse corpus that shows how pronoun choices in the English language can resist and reject the destructive thinking of human-animal dualism. In the corpus, there is a statistically significant and very clear preference to use gendered pronouns, singular THEY, or “he or she” types of constructions rather than IT in reference to individual, arbitrary or generic nonhuman animals. The pronoun choices exemplified in the corpus indicate a direction humans can take in which we use language in ways that encourage unity and balance with the rest of the natural world, not dualism and destruction.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, animals, pronouns, corpus

1 INTRODUCTION

The anthropocene, a proposed new geologic era [3], is characterized by the effects of human activity having profound and extreme effects on the rest of the natural world, including anthropocentric climate change, plastics pollution, and loss of biodiversity. Why do humans behave in ecologically destructive ways? There is no simple answer, but human-nature dualism has been posited as key component of the ways of thinking that lead to ecologically destructive behavior [13].

Human-nature dualism is a way of thinking about the world in a manner that sets humans apart from or above the rest of nature. It is an anthropocentric position. Anthropocentrism and the story-myth of human centrality poses serious dangers for life on Earth [8]. It implies that humans are different and/or superior to the rest of nature. Such thinking undergirds activities that objectify, exploit, and destroy the more-than-human world without regard for the ecological systems and processes that ultimately preserve all life on Earth, including human life.

A sub-type of human-nature dualism is human-animal dualism. In human-animal dualism, humans are not really considered to be animals. Instead, humans are seen as categorically different than other animals, and often as existing in a hierarchy above nonhuman animals. This justifies human exploitation of, and cruelty toward, other animal species.

Dualist attitudes are reflected in many language practices. Although there are some exceptions, in English, for example, the pronominal system generally characterizes humans and other animals as different classes, and we come to think that this framing is a true account of reality. In the third-person, the gendered pronouns HE or SHE, or in some cases the gender-neutral singular THEY, are applied to humans.

Meanwhile, the pronoun IT is applied to nonhuman animals, as well as inanimate, non-sentient things such as hammers, pebbles, and helium. The effect is that one class ends up framed as thinking, feeling ‘beings’ and one class as ‘things’. This ‘traditional’ dichotomy is illustrated in Figure 1.

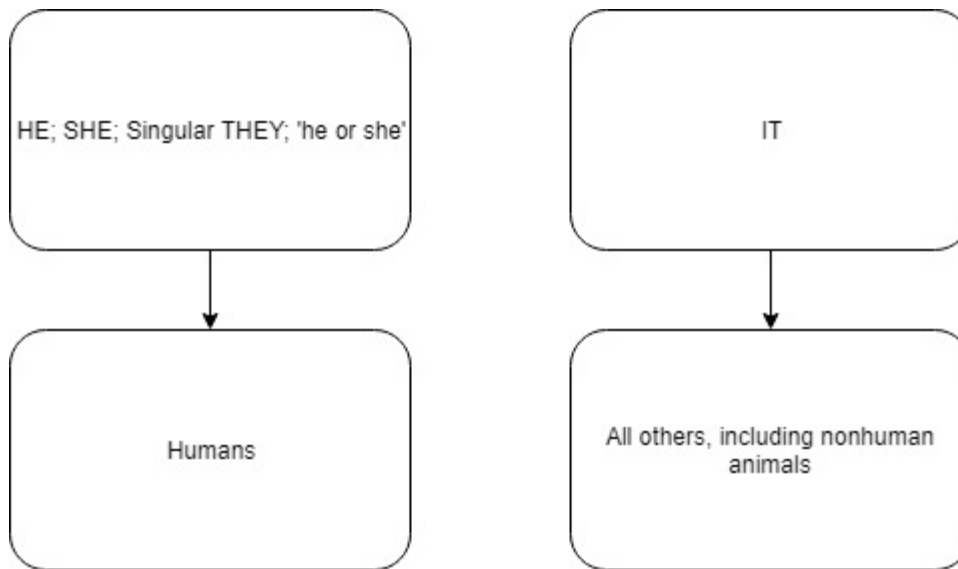


Figure 1: Traditional Dichotomy for third-person English pronouns

Such language practices harm sustainability efforts because language does not simply describe the world, it describes the world in particular ways. In other words, “language does not correspond; it construes” [6]. These patterns of construal influence our cognition and understanding of the world [16]. Language practices that construe a human-animal dichotomy in the world encode human-animal dualism, and human-nature dualism, into our thinking. This raises the likelihood of behavior that is destructive and unsustainable because it reduces our sense of unity with the rest of nature, constrains respect for the more-than-human world, and fails to accurately understand our roles in Earth’s ecosystems.

There are, however, linguistic alternatives. Ecolinguistics focuses on analyzing how language practices are implicated in ecological issues [14,15] and this paper takes an ecolinguistics approach to analyzing pronominal reference of nonhuman animals. Specifically, this paper describes findings from an animal welfare discourse corpus that showcase attempts to reject or resist human-animal dualism via pronoun choice. The ways that texts in the corpus construe nonhuman animals through pronoun choices demonstrate that language practices can be used to foster respect for other species and the more-than-human world. The dichotomy here is one that rejects human-other dichotomization in favor of a dichotomy of beings (including nonhuman animals) and things which recognizes animacy/sentience. This ‘alternative’ dichotomy is illustrated in Figure 2. This paper’s findings show that language, in this case the English pronominal system, can be used to promote a sense of unity between humans and other species, a sense that will be necessary to cultivate if humans are to live in sustainable ways that recognize human embeddedness in, not separation from, the rest of nature.

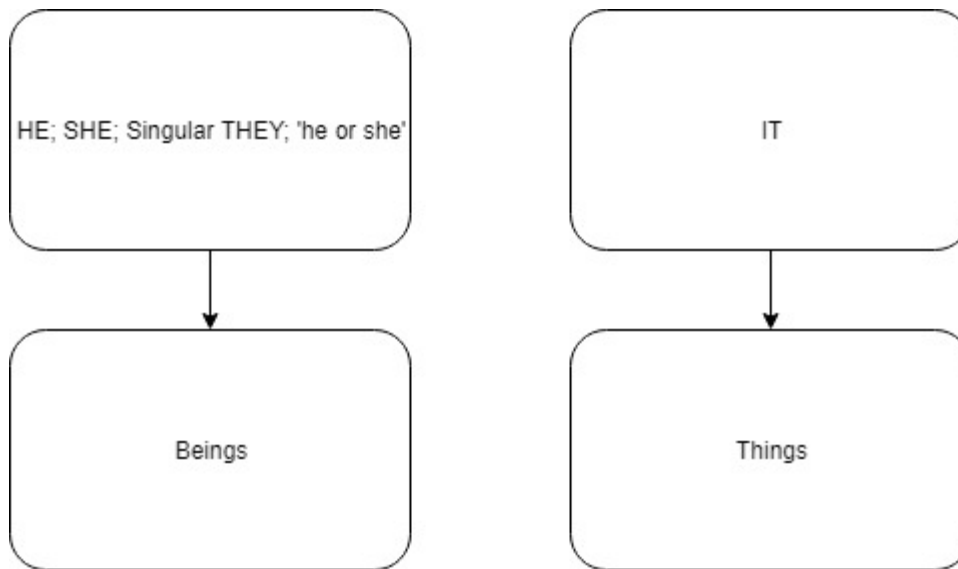


Figure 2: Alternative Dichotomy for third-person English pronouns

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper presents findings from a corpus of animal welfare discourse. Corpora are collections of texts that are usually stored in electronic format to facilitate computer-based analysis. The value of corpus-assisted language research is that a much higher volume of linguistic data can be analyzed than other methods allow. As such, corpus research is based on empirical analysis of language [10].

For this project, I collected 60 articles from the website of the Humane Society of the United States [7], an organization dedicated to animal welfare. Half of the articles contain advice for people to take better care of pets and companion animals, and the other half contain advice for people to live more harmoniously with wild animals they might encounter. Each article focuses on a specific animal, such as dogs, cats, bears, or bats. The corpus contains approximately 70,000 words.

The articles were analysed using AntConc [1], a corpus analysis and concordancing tool. All occurrences of third-person pronominal reference to individual, arbitrary or generic animals were extracted as concordance lines. These lines were then manually checked and analyzed. This analysis focused on determining which third-person pronouns are used to refer to individual animals, and at what frequency this happens. For instance, would an arbitrary or generic fox be referred to using HE, SHE, IT, THEY, or a “he or she” type of construction, and how often (frequency) would this happen?

The operating hypothesis is that an animal welfare discourse corpus would feature greater usage of gendered pronouns, singular THEY, and “he or she” types of constructions in reference to nonhuman animals than usage of IT. The former grouping of pronouns will hereafter be referred to as Type 1 pronouns, while the latter, IT, will be referred to as Type 2. The null hypothesis is that pronoun choice is random between the two types and thus there would be no difference in observed frequencies; in other words, the frequencies of Type 1 and Type 2 pronouns would be equivalent. Statistical testing was performed using the exact binomial test (exact goodness of fit).

3 FINDINGS

Throughout the corpus, there were a total of 444 third-person pronominal references to individual, generic or arbitrary nonhuman animals. Of these, 129 were HE, 34 were SHE, 266 were THEY, 2 were “he or she” types of constructions, and 13 were IT. The number of occurrences (raw frequencies) can be seen in Table 1. Furthermore, examples (extracted concordance lines) from the corpus illustrating each type of pronominal usage are in Table 2.

Table 1: Occurrences of Pronoun Types

			Occurrences
Pronoun Types	Type 1	He	129
		She	34
		They	266
		He or She	2
		<i>Type 1 Total</i>	<i>431</i>
	Type 2	It	13
		<i>Type 2 Total</i>	<i>13</i>
	<i>Overall Total</i>		<i>444</i>

Table 2: Example Sentences

Pronoun	Examples from the Corpus (Concordance Lines)
He	...wait as long as it takes for <i>him</i> to stop barking.
She	If you find a chipmunk indoors, <i>she's</i> there by accident.
They	...you bring your new hamster home, <i>they're</i> likely to feel...
'He or She'	...you can send the bat on <i>his or her</i> way safely...
It	...when a dog is off <i>its</i> leash...

Relative frequency contrasts occurrences of Type 1 and Type 2 pronouns. In this corpus, the relative frequency of Type 1 pronouns to Type 2 is 431:13, or approximately 33:1.

A single-tailed exact binomial test (exact goodness of fit) was performed to ascertain the likelihood that the findings were the result of chance. That is, is the higher frequency of Type 1 pronouns, relative to Type 2, statistically significant? The statistical testing resulted in a p-value below 0.000001. Conventional critical values for statistical significance are conventionally set at $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$. Thus, by conventional criteria the findings here are extremely statistically significant, as the p-value indicates that the probability that the findings are due to chance, were the null hypothesis true, is less than one in a million. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

4 DISCUSSION

The extreme preference of usage for Type 1 third-person pronouns to refer to nonhuman animals in the corpus appears deliberate. My interpretation is that this intentionality reflects a desire to resist human-animal dualism. This resistance may, however, be described in simpler, more direct terms: An intention to avoid construing nonhuman animals as 'things'. This makes sense in the context of animal welfare discourse because the texts' authors have an obvious interest in securing good outcomes for nonhuman animals, and using language that portrays or classifies nonhuman animals as feeling, thinking beings increases the likelihood of readers considering and valuing the nonhuman animals' well-being. An adjacent perspective is that the texts' authors may be unaware of their pronoun choices, that the preference for Type 1 pronouns reflects unconscious understandings of nonhuman animals as feeling, thinking beings, and this is partly expressed via pronoun choices.

It is also noteworthy that singular THEY is the most common of all third-person singular pronouns used in reference to nonhuman animals in the corpus, accounting for nearly 60 percent of all occurrences. Singular THEY is not a new construction [2,4], nor is it rare [9,11,12], but it has generally been observed as an option for gender-neutrality in human reference [17]. Although this is not a research focus here, its usage with nonhuman animals represents an interesting extension of the construction worth further exploration. In the future, a more sophisticated methodology may provide valuable insights. This might include enlarging the corpus, but also refining the descriptive statistics collected. This paper reported raw and relative frequencies, however adjusted frequencies, which take into account where in the corpus (i.e., in which articles) Type 1 and Type 2 pronouns occur, may be worth calculating. As corpus-based research is primarily a distributional science [5], a more sophisticated analysis utilizing adjusted frequencies could provide deeper, or at least different, insights into third-person pronoun usage with nonhuman animals.

There are a couple of limitations to this study. The first is that although the null hypothesis is rejected, that does not mean that my interpretation regarding intentional use of Type 1 pronouns is accurate. There may be other interpretations that align with the observed data. Second, corpus findings are snapshot-like: we can understand a lot about language in the corpus, but care should be taken not to over-extrapolate to other situations (look beyond the borders of the snapshot) without justification. For example, if the corpus is not accurately representative of animal welfare discourse broadly, then it might only represent discourse of the Humane Society of the United States, or even only the website of the Humane Society of the United States. Fortunately, this is an empirical matter and a corpus can be enlarged and/or compared with similar, representative corpora.

A final, practical matter is that usage of Type 1 pronouns to refer to nonhuman animals is not the goal, *per se*, but a means among many means to improving human relationships with the rest of the natural world. Simply altering pronoun choices does not necessitate that there will be more eco-minded or sustainable behavior from humans. Instead, these findings about third-person pronouns should be seen as a single point in a vast constellation of language practices that encode human-animal and human-nature dualisms into our thinking and illustrate that alternative practices which reduce the likelihood of destructive behavior need to be found across the entire constellation.

5 CONCLUSION

In the animal welfare discourse corpus analyzed, there is a strong preference for using the gendered pronouns HE and SHE, singular THEY, or “he or she” types of constructions when referring to individual, arbitrary or generic nonhuman animals rather than using IT. This preference is likely due to a desire to characterize nonhuman animals as thinking, feeling ‘beings’, and not merely as ‘things’. In doing so, human-animal and human-nature dualisms are rejected, or at least resisted, in favor of a sense of unity. This sense of unity will need to be cultivated for humans to live in more sustainable ways in the future. Alternatives to language practices which are implicated in ecologically destructive and unsustainable behavior need to be found and encouraged.

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