This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document:

Stibbe, Arran ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3854-9854 (2001) Language, Power and the Social Construction of Animals. Society and Animals, 9 (2). pp. 145-161. doi:10.1163/156853001753639251

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Stibbe, Arran (2001). *Language, Power and the Social Construction of Animals.* Society & Animals, 9 (2), 145-161. ISSN 1063-1119

Language, power and the social construction of animals

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Language, power and the social construction of animals

Introduction

There has recently been what Fairclough (1992:2) calls a 'linguistic turn' in social theory, where language is 'being accorded a more central role within social phenomena'. Burr (1995:33), describing social construction, writes that 'language itself provides us with a way of structuring our experience of ourselves and the world'. The role of language in power relations, particularly, has come under close scrutiny (Chimombo and Roseberry 1998, Van Dijk 1997, Fairclough 1989, 1992, Hodge and Kress 1993, Fowler 1991).

Most of this work on language and power focuses on the role of discourse in oppression and exploitation. For example, the journal *Discourse and Society* is dedicated to 'power, dominance and inequality, and to the role of discourse in their legitimisation and reproduction in society, for instance in the domains of gender, race, ethnicity, class or world religion' (Van Dijk 2000).

However, with rare exceptions such as Kheel's (1995) discussion of the discourse of hunting, the role of discourse in the domination by humans of other species has been almost completely neglected. Power is talked about as if it is a relation between people only, for example, Fairclough (1992:64) describes the way that 'language contributes to the domination of some *people* by others' (italics added).

Despite the work of ecofeminists such as Adams (e.g., 1990) and Kheel (1993), whose aim is 'exposing the underlying mentality of exploitation that is directed against women and nature [including animals]' (ibid:243), sociology in general is only just beginning to consider domination as it applies to animals. Berry (1997:115) draws parallels between the 'oppression of human minorities and nonhuman animals', echoing

Spiegel (1997), who made what she called the 'dreaded comparison' between human and non-human slavery. However, such comparisons, while rare in sociological literature, form a fundamental part of the animal rights movement, and can be traced back at least to Singer (1990:6), who wrote 'the fundamental objections to racism…apply equally to speciesism'.

This paper attempts to apply theories of language and power which have been used in the analysis of racism, particularly Critical Discourse Analysis, to the issue of the domination, oppression and exploitation of animals by animal product industries.

Animals and Discourse

One of the main reasons that animals are excluded from discussions of language and power is that they are not, themselves, participants in their own social construction through language. Because of the Marxist roots of Critical Discourse Analysis, analysis focuses on hegemony, where oppression of a group is carried out ideologically rather than coercively, through the manufacture of consent (Fairclough 1992:92). In the case of animals, the power is completely coercive, carried out by a small number of people involved in organisations which farm and use animals. The animals do not consent to their treatment because of 'false consciousness' generated through ideological assumptions contained in discourse.

However, the coercive power used to oppress animals depends completely on the consent of the majority of the human population, who explicitly or implicitly agree to the way animals are treated every time they buy animal products. This consent can be withdrawn, as has been demonstrated through boycotts of veal, battery farm eggs, cosmetics tested on animals, and, by some, all animal products. It is in the manufacturing of consent within the human population for the oppression and exploitation of the animal population that language plays a role.

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Shotter (1993) uses the term 'rhetorical-responsive' to describe the way that social constructions exist not in the minds of individual people, but within the constant interaction and exchange of information in a society. Within American society there is what Kopperud (1993:20) calls 'a pitched battle for the hearts and minds of US consumers' taking place between the meat industry and animal activists. This ideological struggle occurs primarily through language and the media. Jones (1997:73), for example, found that 'Public opposition to both the use of animals in scientific research and the killing of animals for fur increased significantly following the high level of media coverage given…'

The way that animals are socially constructed influences how they are treated by human society: 'cultural constructs determine the fate of animals' as Lawrence (1994:182) puts it. These 'cultural constructs' are intimately bound up with language and discourse. According to Fairclough (1992:64), discourse 'is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.' From this perspective, discourse can be considered a way of talking and writing about an area of knowledge or social practice which both reflects and creates the structuring of the area.

Van Dijk (1997) considers the link between discourse and society to be through ideology and social cognition. The term 'ideology' has been used in many different ways by different authors. One of the classic senses of ideology is a mode of thought and practice 'developed by dominant groups in order to reproduce and legitimate their domination' (ibid:25). One of the ways this is accomplished is 'to present domination as 'God-given, natural, benign [or] inevitable' (ibid:25). In Van Dijk's more generalised sense, this is just one kind of ideology, where ideologies are 'shared self-definitions of groups that allow group members to co-ordinate their social practices in relation to other groups' (ibid:26).

Rather than explicitly encouraging oppression and exploitation, ideology often manifests itself more effectively by being implicit. This is achieved by basing discourse on assumptions which are treated as if they were common sense, but which are, in fact, 'common sense assumptions in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power' (Fairclough 1989:84).

Ideologies, embedded and disseminated through discourse, influence the individual mental representations of members of a society, which in turn influence their actions. These mental representations are part of what Van Dijk (1997:27) calls 'social cognition', since they are shared among members of a society through participation in and exposure to discourse. In the end, it is this social cognition which will influence which animal products people buy, how the meat industry treats animals, and whether people actively campaign against the oppression of animals.

Data

Animals play many roles in human society, including the roles of companion, entertainer, food item and commodity. There are therefore numerous discourses and ideologies which influence how they are socially constructed. The emphasis in this paper is on discourses which have a direct impact on the welfare of large numbers of animals, particularly discourses related to large-scale animal product utilisation.

A corpus of data was collected from a variety of different sources, all of which were publicly available and therefore potentially influential. The corpus consists of: a) articles from 'internal' meat industry magazines such as *Poultry* and *Meat Marketing and Technology,* b) articles written by the meat industry for external reading, e.g., justifying farming methods and c) professional articles written by interested parties such as veterinarians specialising in food animals, or lawyers involved in the defence of product manufacturers.

In addition to the specialist discourses which appear in the corpus, mainstream discourse is also discussed. The data for this comes from personal observation and consultation of general dictionaries, idiom dictionaries and grammar books.

Methodology

The method used to analyse the data is a form of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Chilton and Schäffner 1997, Van Dijk 1993, Fairclough 1992, 1989, Fowler 1991, Hodge and Kress 1993), combined with Potter's (1996) theory of fact construction.

CDA provides 'an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the (re)production of dominance and inequality' (Van Dijk 1993:282). It does this by performing detailed linguistic analysis of discourses to expose the ideologies embedded within them.

Chilton and Schäffner (1997:226) provide an explicit methodology for CDA, aimed at 'interpretively linking linguistic details…to the strategic political functions of coercion, resistance, opposition, protest, dissimulation, legitimisation and delegitimisation'. The methodology they present echoes that of Fairclough (1992,1989) in focusing on the analysis of linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, textual structures, and punctuation in order to reveal hidden ideological assumptions on which discourse is based.

This process of revealing 'common sense' assumptions can be important because, as Fairclough (1989:85) writes, 'If one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities at one's own expense, it ceases to *be* common sense, and may cease to have the capacity to sustain power inequalities.'

The following discussion, based on detailed analysis of the data mentioned above, is aimed at answering the following question: How does language, from the level

of pragmatics and semantics down to syntax and morphology, influence the way that animals are socially constructed, and hence treated, by human society?

Discussion

Mainstream discourse

Singer (1990:vi) describes the way that 'The English language, like other languages, reflects the prejudices of its users'. The example he gives is of the word 'animal' which, in contrast to its use in scientific discourse, often excludes human beings from its semantic extension. It is quite usual to talk about 'animals and people', or to say 'there are no animals here' when there are, in fact, people. This semantic classification can contribute to oppression by reproducing 'outgroup social psychology…which distances us from, and prevents us from seeing, animal suffering' (Shapiro 1995:671).

Other linguistic mechanisms which distance us from animal suffering occur at the lexical level: 'The very words we use conceal its [meat's] origin, we eat beef, not bull…and pork, not pig…' (Singer 1990:95). We also wear leather made from *hide*, not skin, and eat a *carcass*, not a corpse. As Shapiro (1995:671) points out 'We do not say "please pass the cooked flesh"': meat is meat, with quite different connotations from circumlocutions with the same meaning such as 'bits of the dead bodies of animals'. The shock value of such circumlocutions was exploited by the BBC news during the 'BSE crisis' when reporting the fact that cattle were being fed 'mashed up cows'.

Killing, too, is lexicalised differently for humans and animals: animals are slaughtered, humans are murdered. Interchanging these two: *You murdered my pet hamster* is comical, *The refugees were slaughtered* means they were killed brutally, uncaringly and immorally.

Animals are not only represented in language as different, but also as inferior, the two conditions necessary for oppression. Conventional metaphors, which Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claim have a strong influence on our everyday thinking, are overwhelmingly negative to animals. Examples are: *you greedy pig, ugly dog, stupid cow, bitch, you are so catty, crowing over your achievements, you chicken, stop monkeying around, you big ape* (see Leach 1964, Palmatier 1995). These examples contain nouns, adjectives as well as verbs which have all become polysemous through metaphorical extension in ways negative towards animals. The use of animal names as insults is based on, and reproduces, an ideology in which animals are considered inferior.

Idioms which refer to animals also tend to describe negative situations, or contain images of cruelty. Consider dogs: *sick as a dog, dying like a dog, dog's dinner, it's a dog's life, working like a dog, going to the dogs*. And cats*: cat on hot bricks, not enough room to swing a cat, a cat in hell's chance, running like a scalded cat*. And larger animals*: flogging a dead horse, the straw that broke the camel's back, talking the hind legs of a donkey*. The only positive animal idioms seem to be idioms describing wild birds and insects, for example: *an early bird, in fine feather, feathering your nest, being as free as a bird, happy as a lark, wise as an owl*, and *snug as a bug in a rug, chirpy as a cricket, as fit as a flea, the bees knees*. There are exceptions to this pattern, but the pattern is clear: the closer the relation of dominance of a particular species by humans, the more negative the stereotypes contained in the idioms of mainstream discourse.

The ideological positioning of animals extends into syntax as well. When animals die they change from being objects to substance, count nouns to mass nouns, in a way that humans do not. It is quite possible to say 'some chicken', 'some lamb', or 'some chicken leg', but 'some human' and 'some human leg' are ungrammatical. Singer

(1990:95) is surprised that while we disguise the origin of pig meat by calling it pork, we 'find it easier to face the true nature of a leg of lamb'. However there is a clear grammatical difference here: we cannot say 'a leg of person', instead we say 'a person's leg'. Expressing the lamb example similarly (e.g., 'Tonight we are going to eat a lamb's leg'), does not hide the origin in the same way.

Another place where animals change from count nouns to mass nouns is on safari. Whether the participants are carrying guns or cameras, the way of talking about animals is the same: they say *we saw giraffe, elephant and lion*, instead of *we saw giraffes, elephants and lions*. Using mass nouns instead of count nouns removes the individuality of the animals, with the ideological assumption that each animal is just a (replaceable) representative of a category. Lawrence (1994:180) writes that 'If there are no differences among members of a group, their value and importance are greatly diminished so that it is easier to dislike them and to justify their exploitation and destruction.'

Pronoun use can lead to the kind of 'us' and 'them' division similar to that found in racist discourse, with 'us' referring to humans and 'them' to animals. Even in the animal rights literature the pronouns *we*, *us* and *our* are almost always used exclusively, i.e., referring only to humans. Perhaps the strongest animal rights campaigner of all, Tom Regan (1996:37), writes 'We want and prefer things…our enjoyment and suffering…make[s] a difference to the quality of our lives as lived…by us as individuals.' This appears to be an inclusive use of *us*, *we* and *our*, until the next sentence is read: '[T]he same is true of…animals…'

The common way of referring to animals as 'it' rather than 'him' or 'her' objectifies them. Objects can be *bought*, *sold* and *owned*, a lexical set used routinely used in everyday conversation when talking about animals. This reveals the 'common sense' assumption that animals are property. It is semantically deviant to talk about

someone 'owning' another human, unless the term is used metaphorically, when it refers to immoral and unfair domination.

Spender's (1998) book *Man Made Language* shows how mainstream discourse, evolving in a male-oriented society, both reflects and reproduces bias against women. In the same way, it is not surprising to find that discourse evolving in a predominantly meat eating culture reflects negative attitudes towards animals. The extent to which this influences people to condone exploitation is uncertain, but mainstream discourse is reinforced by the discourses of groups which have ideological interests in justifying the utilisation of animals.

The discourse of the animal products industries

One type of ideology, as mentioned above, presents oppression as being 'God-given, natural, benign, [or] inevitable' (Van Dijk 1997:25). Oppression of animals is often justified quite literally as 'God given' through the much quoted verse from Genesis (1:28) where God gives humans 'dominion' over animals. The animal products industry, however, does not use the discourse of religion. Instead the discourse of science, among others, is used to make oppression appear natural and inevitable (see Sperling 1988).

The discourse of evolutionary biology is often invoked to equate the intensive farming and slaughter of animals with the behaviour of predators in the wild, in order to make it appear 'natural'. Linguistic devices are used to accomplish this, as can be seen in the article 'The natural wrongs about animal rights and animal liberation' by Randall S. Ott, a specialist in the industry-relevant field of bovine reproduction.

After explicitly declaring 'people are animals', Ott's (1995) article uses collocations such as 'the human animal', and 'animals other than human beings' (p1023-4) to emphasise a semantic classification in which, unlike mainstream discourse,

humans are included in the category 'animals'. This goes as far as directly including humans in the semantic category of 'predator':

1) The natural relationship between predator and prey is congruent with neither an egalitarian or an animal rights viewpoint. (p1024)
2) Predator-prey relationships and a hierarchical utilisation of other beings, alive and dead, is essential to nature. (p1024)

This treats as 'common sense' the assumption that what applies to the (non-human) animal situation of predation is the same as that which applies to the human situation. However, prototypical members of the category 'predators' are lions and tigers, and humans are non-prototypical members (see Rosch 1975). This deliberate inclusion of non-prototypical members (humans) in general statements about prototypical ones (lions) hides important differences between the situation of the lion hunting its prey (which no-one would argue is unethical) and intensive farming of thousands of animals in cramped conditions. Differences, such as the fact that lions benefit the gene pool of their prey whereas selective breeding for meat quantity damages it, are conveniently hidden.

Potter's (1996:112-115) investigation of fact construction shows how claims to scientific objectivity are used to 'work up the facticity of a version'. This can be seen in Ott's case, where his claims are presented as 'biological principles', 'biological rules', and 'scientific knowledge' based on 'biological evidence' (pp1023-1025), while the animal rights movement's claims are 'beliefs', 'fantasies', 'philosophical musings', 'dogma', 'the wrong view' and 'false' (pp1023-1029). Hedges such as 'might be', 'probably' or 'can be seen as' are almost never used in Ott's article. Instead the modality throughout the paper is one which presents what is being talked about as, to use Potter's (1996:112) words, 'solid, unproblematic, and quite separate from the speaker'.

While the discourse of evolutionary biology presents animal oppression as 'natural' and 'inevitable', different discourses use different semantic classifications to make it appear 'benign':

> Modern animal housing is well ventilated, warm, well-lit, clean and scientifically designed…Housing protects animals from predators, disease and bad weather… *Animal Industry Foundation* (from Harnack 1996 p130)

Here the semantic extension of *predators* does not include human predators, such as the farmer, who the housing offers no protection from. This 'ontological gerrymandering' (Potter 1996:186) makes wild animals seem to be the enemy of animals, with humans their protectors. As Garner (1998:463) points out 'Agribusiness interests often disguise the grim realities of factory farming and proclaim their concern for animal welfare.' This can be seen in the language used in the quotation above. The euphemism 'housing' is used in place of cage, and the five positive qualities of the 'housing' are expressed directly after each other in a list, a grammatical pattern used by estate agents describing a desirable residence.

Like many of the properties described by estate agents, there are alternative, less euphemistic ways of describing the same accommodation. For example, compare 'Modern animal housing is…well-lit' with 'Crammed into tiny cages with artificial lighting…' (*Trans-species unlimited*, from Harnack 1996:136), and compare 'well ventilated, warm, …clean' with 'the heat mixed with the ammonia and dust in the houses causes incredible health problems.' (Bowers 1997a).

Even punctuation is used for ideological ends, as the example from a dairy industry journal below shows:

> people concerned about animal welfare…may have seen a sensational news story about the abuse of animals or about "factory farms." (Knowlton and Majeskie 1995:449)

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Here the use of inverted commas is intended to try to distance intensive farming from the image of a factory.

While the 'external' discourse of animal industries presents the treatment of animals as benign, 'internal' discourse has a different ideological objective. Here the aim seems to be to encourage workers to neglect suffering and focus on profit. Fiddles (1991:200) describes the way that the meat industry 'regards care for their animal raw materials as little more than a commercial oncost'. An indication of this can be found in the archives of the industry magazines *Poultry* and *Meat Marketing and Technology* (available at *http://mtgplace.com/meatingplace/Archives*). Within these archives, items in the lexical set 'pain, suffering, hurt(ing)' [with reference to animals] are mentioned in 3, 2 and zero articles respectively. On the other hand, items in the lexical set 'money, financial, profit' are mentioned in 224, 101 and 90 articles respectively.

Hidden assumptions which make the suffering of animals appear unimportant can be found in the linguistic devices used in the discourse of the meat industries. One of these devices is metonymy, which is, according to Lakoff (1987:77) 'one of the basic characteristics of cognition'. Examples are as follows (emphasis added):

(a) Catching *broilers* is a backbreaking, dirty and unpleasant job. (Bowers 1997a)
(b) [there is] susceptibility to ascites and flipover…in the female *breeder* (Shane 1995)
(c) There's not enough power to stun the *beef*…you'd end up cutting its head off while the *beef* was still alive. (Slaughterhouse worker interviewed in Eisnitz 1997:216)
(d) Exciting times for *beef* practitioners (written by veterinarian, Herrick 1995:1031)

In (a) live birds are named and referred to by a cooking method, in (b) by their function, in (c) cows are referred to by their dead flesh, and in (d) veterinarians specialising in bovine medicine are called 'beef practitioners' rather than 'cow practitioners'. All of these ways of referring to animals focus attention away from their individuality, and contribute to what Regan (1996:35) calls 'the system that allows us to view animals as *our resources.'*

The discourse of resources is frequently used in direct reference to live animals as well as dead ones. Examples are the word *damage* instead of *injury* in the expression 'bird ***damage***' (Bowers 1997b), product instead of *bodies* in '***product*** is 100 percent cut-up and hand deboned' (Bowers 1997b), and *destruction* and *batch* in 'Isolation of salmonella will result in the ***destruction*** of the flock…[or] slaughter of the ***batch***' (Shane 1995). The discourse of resources includes metaphors too, from dead metaphors such as 'live***stock***' to novel metaphors such as the ANIMALS ARE PLANTS metaphor evident in 'an automatic broiler ***harvesting*** machine' (Bowers 1997a) and 'How hogs are handled before stunning and ***harvesting*** has plenty to do with the quality of meat' (*Proper* 1995, emphasis added).

Since inanimate resources cannot suffer, the discursive constriction of animals as resources contributes to an ideology which disregards suffering. When events which include suffering *are* described and talked about, nominalisation is frequently used to hide agency (see Fairclough 1989:124). An example of this is:

(e) Catcher fatigue, absenteeism and turnover can effect broken bones and bruises that reduce processing yields. (Bowers 1997a)

This sentence describes incidents where animals are injured. But the actual animals are not mentioned at all. This is accomplished through the nominalisations *broken bones* ('X breaks Y's bones') and *bruises* ('X bruises Y'), which allow the patient, Y, to be deleted. The agent, X, in this case the 'catcher', is also deleted, appearing only indirectly as a modifier in the noun phrase 'catcher fatigue', which forms part of the agent of the verb 'effect' rather than 'break'. This distances deliberate human action from animal injuries. In addition, the results of the injuries are not mentioned in terms of pain or suffering, but in terms of 'yields'. The same pattern can be seen in sentence:

(f) Carcass damage from handling and bird struggle during the kill does occur in broilers (Bowers 1997b).

There are three nominalisations here: 'damage' (X damages Y), 'handling' (X handles Y) and 'the kill' (X kills Y). These three hide both the agent and the patient, who appears only as a modifier in the expressions 'bird damage' and 'bird struggle'. In addition, the resultant injuries to what are clearly live, struggling animals are expressed in terms of damage to the dead 'carcass'.

Singer (1990:50) points out that 'detachment is made easier by the use of technical jargon that disguises the real nature of what is going on'. This can be seen in the following quote:

(g) Perdigo's Marau plant processes 4.95-pound broilers at line speeds of 136 bpm, running 16 hours per day… Perdigo previously used a stunning method more similar to US standards: 45 mA/bird (60hz) for a seven second duration with water bath. However, these stunning parameters induced pectoral muscle contraction that resulted in blood splash. (Bowers 1997b)

Here birds become units in the mathematically expressed parameters '136 bpm' (birds per minute) and 45 mA/bird. And it is these 'stunning parameters' which are the agent of the verb 'induced'. Thus responsibility for causing convulsions so strong they cause bleeding is being placed on parameters rather than on the electrocution itself, or the people instigating it.

One final linguistic device which can be used to encourage the disregard of animal suffering is extended metaphor, which, as Johnson (1983) shows, can influence reasoning patterns. The following is a famous example of a meat industry metaphor:

(h) The breeding sow should be thought of as, and treated as, a valuable piece of machinery whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine (in Coats 1989:32)

This encourages metaphorical reasoning along the lines of 'machines do not have feelings' therefore 'pigs do not have feelings' and 'valuable machines should be utilised as much as possible' therefore 'pigs should be utilised as much as possible'. The

results of this reasoning pattern can be seen in Coats's (1989:34) description of pig farming: 'the sow must produce the maximum number of live piglets in the shortest time…No regard is paid for the distress and suffering caused by these continual pregnancies.'

Conclusion

This paper analysed a number of materials using the methods of critical discourse analysis in an investigation of the connection between language, power and the oppression of animals. The ultimate aim of analyses such as this is, of course, not simply to describe relations of domination and exploitation, but also to challenge them. Fairclough's (1992) *Discourse and social change* describes the way that dominant ideologies which reproduce and maintain oppression can be resisted, and social change can come about through opposing discourses.

The animal rights movement, as it exists today, does provide a discourse which opposes oppression. Animal rights authors frequently counter the classifications of mainstream discourse by using terms such as 'non-human animal', 'other-than-human animal', and inclusive terms such as 'being' in 'If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration' (Singer 1990:8). This is the same 'humans are animals' semantic classification used in biological discourse to argue against animal rights. However, in this case the similarities drawn out are different, focusing on animals' ability to suffer and feel pain in the same way that humans can.

The animal rights movement is aware of the power of language, and makes deliberate attempts to change language, as the following examples show:

> We chose [pets] and most likely bought them in a manner similar to the way in which human slaves were once…bought and sold…Keeping the term pets recognises this hierarchy of ownership… (Belk 1996)

> The blade is electrically heated and cauterises the blood vessels as it snips off about one fourth of the beak. The chicken industry characterises this procedure as "beak trimming" as if it's *little more than a manicure.* (Marcus 1998:103, emphasis in original)

> [when animals are considered to be 'tools'] a certain callousness towards them becomes apparent. Consider, for instance, Harlow and Suomi's mention of their "rape rack" and the jocular tone in which they report on the "favourite tricks" of the female monkeys…(Singer 1990:50)

> [about the term 'road kill'] I do not believe that humans…should refer to innocent, defenceless victims…in such an insensitive, impersonal way…I believe that the term "road-kill" should be stricken from our vocabulary. (Appel 2000:8)

However, these are all focused on individual words. This paper has attempted to show that it is not just individual words which contribute to the domination and oppression of animals. Instead language at all levels, from the morphological changes which create the metonymy 'broiler' from 'broil', through punctuation, semantic classification schemes, grammatical choices, pronoun usage, to metaphor are systematically related to underlying ideologies which contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression.

The external discourses of animal product industries contain hidden ideological assumptions which make animal oppression seem 'inevitable, natural and benign'. The internal discourses encourage pain and suffering to be disregarded for the sake of profit. It is not, therefore, just at the level of words that animal activists can attempt to oppose discourses of oppression, but at all linguistic levels that make up discourse.

Van Dijk (1993:253) describes the way that critical discourse analysts take the perspective of 'those who suffer most from dominance and inequality…Their problems are…serious problems that effect the wellbeing and lives of many.' In terms of the sheer number of sentient beings suffering, and the impact that intensive farming has on their lives from birth to slaughter, non-human animals also fit into this group. This paper has

attempted to show that language is relevant to the oppression of animals, and can be an

appropriate area of research for critical discourse analysis.

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