Translation Matters
https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tmid202602

ON AVOIDING ANTHROPOMORPHIC LANGUAGE

Alison Sealey •
U. Lancaster

Of the several topics raised in Marais' stimulating position paper, the one I highlight here concerns the language available to us humans as we discuss questions such as whether the dog featured in the original anecdote intentionally misled its companion. Marais suggests that "we must find a way to talk about differences between humans and other living organisms without othering the Other into non-existence" (p. 9). My focus is on the very issue of the ways differences – and similarities - between humans and other living organisms are in fact talked about. In that sense, my contribution is a metalinguistic one.

Firstly, I was struck by Marais' discussion of the term 'hierarchy'. With reference to the fact that complex life forms have emerged over time from simpler organisms, he wants us to bear in mind that "hierarchical biological accounts are not accounts of value but historical accounts" (p. 5). An appeal to the concept of 'higher' and 'lower' rungs on the evolutionary ladder has a long pedigree. It occurs in C. Lloyd Morgan's Canon (1903, p. 53), to which much science writing has faithfully adhered since:

> In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands lower in the psychological scale.

As Marais argues, such 'scales' are intended descriptively, but nevertheless, 'humanities scholars', he maintains, run the risk - without warrant – of "unilaterally impos[ing] a value judgement on the notion of hierarchies" (p. 5). Yet, as we know from extensive research into the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008), it is very hard to set aside the positive and negative connotations of entities labelled 'higher' or 'lower' respectively, however advisable this may be. Indeed, it is easy to forget that the description of the evolutionary processes that give rise to more complex organisms as a 'hierarchy' is itself metaphorical, not unrelated to the ancient image of the 'Great Chain of Being', which placed 'Man' on an elevated rung, just below God and the angels. As an advocate for alternative conceptions of the 'tree of life' has noted, we humans seem to have 'some deep psychological need to see ourselves as the culmination of creation' (Nee, 2005), so that the terms we use imply our superiority, even as we seek to eschew teleological notions of us as the pinnacle towards which evolution has been leading.

The contrast between 'historical', 'biological' and evaluative senses of a term is not confined to 'hierarchies': it represents a challenge that permeates much discourse about non-human animals. Thus, when researching how people in different contexts speak and write about animals (Sealey, 2026), I found numerous examples of admonitions by animal

• a.sealey@lancaster.ac.uk

behavioural ecologists such as the following, in my view quite optimistic, claim: "Researchers can avoid unintended implications by carefully choosing the terms they use to interpret animal behavior" (Andrews and Huss, 2014, online). Similarly, a team concerned with communication among primates argues that colleagues are wrong to pose their research questions in terms of 'meaning' and 'information', precisely because such questions "reflect a natural but loose casting of animal communication systems in linguistic or informational terms" (Rendall et al., 2009, p. 238). Yet as I researched the patterns to be found in language about animal communication, I saw clearly how impossible it seems to be for ethologists - and commentators who mediate (translate?) scientific findings in natural history broadcasts - to find alternatives to the vocabulary routinely used to denote human communication. Examples include sonar 'conversations' among whales; pups and fledglings 'begging' for food, birdsong broken down into 'syllables', and so on. Conversely, while 'bark' is a sound associated with dogs, it may also be used to convey how a human delivers an order to a subordinate. Likewise, pigs are said to 'squeal', but so are some humans, typically excited young females. Attempts to erect barriers between different senses of the same word or phrase – with reference to humans and non-humans respectively - rarely succeed.

Marais believes that "[d]enying more-than-human organisms their specificity is ... as unethical as arguing against differences and for similarities" (p. 10). Yet as we seek to navigate a path between over-emphasising one or other position, we cannot but be entangled in the terminology available to us, and this can exert its own influence. One of the most fundamental examples is how to denote what Marais refers to as "more-than-human organisms".[1] On the one hand of course, humans are animals, and so are included, in biological taxonomies, within the category. On the other hand, there are obvious contexts in which the distinction between us and all other living creatures is important.

One discursive domain where supposed similarities are emphasised is (perhaps paradoxically) that which seeks the othering of members of particular human groups by drawing on zoonyms – the labels accorded to non-human animals. So women become 'bitches' (a technical, biological label for female canids); migrants become 'cockroaches'; traitors and informers become 'rats' and 'moles', and so on. And this is a two-way traffic: perceptions of the actual creatures are influenced by their association with stigmatised categories of humans. In another context, we find adjectives used by scientists to describe animals' characteristics. Examples from my research, applied to individual animals from a wide range of species, include 'obedient', 'aggressive' and 'friendly', adjectives that can hardly fail to absorb and reflect the connotations familiar from their use about humans. In our interview with the naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough,[2] he defended his use of 'angry' to describe a (non-human) animal: "If an elephant comes at you with ears flapping and trumpeting, it's angry, and the only reason we say it's angry is because we know what anger is ourselves" (Sealey, 2026, p.56). Such examples illustrate not only the permeability of descriptive terms, but also how language that alludes to supposed similarities between humans and animals can be deployed in different contexts for quite different purposes.

Compounding the challenge of maintaining a (metaphorical) barrier between terminology to denote human and non-human animal behaviour is the polysemy of so much of human language. The vocabulary available in English to denote the senses through which we perceive our own *Umwelten* is saturated with metaphorical connotations. For example, we may 'smell' a rat, 'hear' from a colleague via text message, 'see' what an interlocutor means, or be 'touched' by a piece of music which accords with our 'taste'. Our interview with Sir David Attenborough brought up an example of the ambiguities in words for sensory perception. We asked him about his observation that mountain gorillas and humans 'see the world the same way', and whether it could be that gorillas conceptualise the world in the same way as we do. He explained that he had intended a strictly biological, optical similarity (Sealey, 2026, p. 93). Yet evidence from a general corpus confirms that to 'see the world in the same way' typically indicates socio-cultural alignment between individuals or groups, illustrating again the challenge of separating the idiomatic from the strictly literal senses of such common terms. And many of our interviewees told us that a key challenge was how to convey accurate scientific information in accessible but non-anthropomorphic language.

A key concern for Marais is "whether we have evidence of intention in the dog" (p. 3) and "the problem [of] deducing intention in the communication of someone from a different species" (p. 3). And on this point I propose shifting our attention from vocabulary to grammar. Like Marais, with his reservations about attributing intention to Idris Donut the dog, Attenborough told us that he aims to avoid "giv[ing] the idea that the animal is directed to doing something with a purpose". However, in an earlier study (Sealey & Oakley, 2013), we identified a pattern in his commentaries where two frequent grammatical items, which are superficially incapable of anthropomorphism, suggest purpose and intention in accounts of animal behaviour. One is *so*, as in this observation: "Now the fish find that they are under attack, and *so* group together *for safety*'" The apparently even more innocuous *to* in the infinitive form of verbs also turns out to have an anthropomorphic role to play in accounts of animal behaviour. An example from the series *Life* is: "*To complete* his disguise [cuttlefish] he changes colour *to appear* even more like a female". This description might have been expressed as 'with the result that ...', but as some scientists acknowledge, keeping terminology "free of teleological, anthropomorphic overtones" leads to texts that are "usually clumsy and prolix because they are inevitably strained compared with our everyday speech" (Kennedy, 1992, p. 158).

We humans sometimes congratulate ourselves on the liberation that being the only symbolic, "loquacious" (Merrell, 2003, p. 154) species affords. Yet perhaps that very affordance is also a constraint. So that however convinced we may be of the merits of avoiding anthropomorphic language, our linguistic resources themselves often have – metaphorically - something to say about that!

References

Andrews, K. & Huss, B. (2014) 'Anthropomorphism, anthropectomy, and the null hypothesis', *Biology & Philosophy*, 29(5), pp. 711-729.

Kennedy, J. S. (1992) *The new anthropomorphism*. Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (2008) *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Merrell, F. (2003) *Sensing corporeally: toward a posthuman understanding*. University of Toronto Press.

Morgan, C. L. (1903) *An introduction to comparative psychology*, 27. W. Scott.

Nee, S. (2005) 'The great chain of being', *Nature*, 435(7041), pp. 429-429.

Rendall, D., Owren, M. J. & Ryan, M. J. (2009) 'What do animal signals mean?', *Animal Behaviour*, 78(2), pp. 233-240.

Sealey, A. (2021) 'Response to Viewpoint article ''Applied linguistics, language guidelines and ethical practices: The case for the use of 'who' with nonhuman animals''', *Int J Appl Linguist*., 31(2), pp. 304-305.

Sealey, A. (2026) *How we talk about animals, and why it matters: the power of discourse*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sealey, A. & Oakley, L. (2013) 'Anthropomorphic grammar? Some linguistic patterns in the wildlife documentary series Life', *Text and Talk*, 33(3), pp. 399–420.

About the author: Alison Sealey is Professor Emerita of Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University UK. Her extensive publications mostly explore the role of discourse in representations of the social world, including the practical implications of the ways we talk about the non-humans with whom we share the planet.

[1] For a discussion of the many suggestions various writers have proposed, see Sealey 2026, pp 5-6. And, on a related topic, see Sealey, 2021.

[2] *'People', 'Products', 'Pests' and 'Pets': The Discursive Representation of Animals* funded by the Leverhulme Trust (RPG 2013-063)