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Bias Against Other Animals: A Language Awareness Issue?

Introduction

Carter (2003, p. 64) defines language awareness as "the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language". Language awareness approaches have been advocated for many reasons, including as a means of enhancing students' autonomy, thinking skills, study skills, grasp of the target language, and understanding of how language intersects with socio-political issues. As Bolitho, et al. (2003, p. 256) note, "Very often, a broader 'language awareness' discussion brings in textual, contextual, socio-political, and attitudinal factors as well as semantic or syntactic ones".

Socio-political issues arise in regard to language because language both reflects and affects the way that people see and act towards others (Halliday, 1978). Examples of socio-political language issues include whether language reflects and promotes bias, for instance, bias against females in the use of generic *he*, i.e., the use of male proforms to represent females and males, e.g., "A doctor should take care of *his* patients".

The present article suggests that teachers bring students' attention to the link between language and bias against nonhuman animals. First, the social phenomena that have brought our attention to the issue of what is known as speciesism ("a failure, in attitude or practice, to accord any nonhuman being equal consideration and respect", Dunayer 2004, p. 5) are discussed. Second, speciesism in English is exemplified. Third, the wisdom of bringing the issue into ELT is discussed. Finally, brief suggestions are made as to how ELT teachers might include a focus on speciesism in their instruction.

Our Expanding Circle of Compassion

The history of the world over the past 200 years shows an increase in the percentage of the human population who have moved towards full membership in society, e.g., the ending of slavery in much of the world and the extension of the right to vote. Of course, this movement has not been a straight line, and much progress remains to be made. Fortunately, discrimination against humans who are homosexual, elderly, or members of other minorities is slowly being reduced, at least in some parts of the world.

While the above examples of change deal only with humans, movements have also grown up to include nonhuman animals within our circle of compassion. For instance, some people now spurn the use of nonhuman animals' fur in clothing (e.g., People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, retrieved 6 January, 2006) and the use of nonhuman animals as food (Vegetarians International Voice for Animals, retrieved 6 January, 2006). In a similar vein, laws have been passed mandating better treatment for other animals. For example, the European Union has enacted laws phasing out practices in which

humans confine egg-laying hens in battery cages, calves in veal crates, and pregnant sows in gestation crates (Tomaselli, 2003).

Language and Speciesism

Goodall (1990) recounts that in the early 1960s, when she started her research with chimpanzees in Africa, scientists gave numbers, not names to the chimpanzees who they were studying. This reflected a view which saw chimpanzees as objects to be studied, like so many rocks, rather than as fellow individual, thinking, feeling beings. When Goodall submitted her first scientific paper for publication, in every place where she had written *he* or *she* to refer to chimpanzees, the editor changed the wording to *it*. Similarly, every *who* was replaced with *which*. In an effort to rescue the chimpanzees from 'thing-ness' and restore them to 'being-ness', Goodall changed the words back.

Goodall's efforts to address speciesism in language, as part of an overall attempt to improve human treatment of other animals, have been followed by other work. Perhaps the best known book on the topic is *Animal Equality* by Joan Dunayer (2001). Dunayer (2003, p. 61) explains why she feels speciesist usage is wrong:

> Speciesist usage denigrates or discounts nonhuman animals. For example, terming nonhumans "it" erases their gender and groups them with inanimate things. Referring to them as "something" (rather than "someone") obliterates their sentience and individuality. Pure speciesism leads people to call a brain-dead human "who" but a conscious pig "that" or "which."

Table 1 presents some examples of speciesist usage with explanations of why that usage is considered speciesist.

Table 1. Examples of speciesist and nonspeciesist language usage (based on Dunayer, 2001)

Speciesist Vocabulary (with explanation)	**Nonspeciesist Vocabulary (with explanation)**	**Examples**
Anything (nonhuman animals [nonhuman animals] are seen as things)	*Anyone, anybody* (nonhuman animals are sentient beings)	There are many crows and other birds in that tree. If a bullet is fired into the tree, <u>anything</u> could be hit and die. There are many crows and other birds in that tree. If a bullet is fired into the tree, <u>anyone/anybody</u> could be hit and die.
Which (*which* is used for nonhuman animals, plants, and objects)	*Who* (*who* is used with sentient beings)	The monkeys <u>which</u> live near the temple are a gregarious lot. The monkeys <u>who</u> live near the temple are a gregarious lot.

Abattoir, meat-packing plant, processing plant (conceals the facility's main purpose)	*Slaughterhouse* (clearly names what the facility does)	The broilers were taken to the meat-packing plant for processing. The Tyson employees took the captive chickens to the slaughterhouse.
Passive voice to refer to what humans do to nonhuman animals (hides who is responsible)	Active voice to refer to what humans do to other animals (names those responsible)	The new-born male chicks were disposed of. The supervisor instructed the staff to kill the new-born male chicks, because males don't lay eggs.
Almost always placing other animals after humans in a sentence (implies they are secondary, lesser)	Sometimes placing our fellow animals before humans in a sentence (implies equality)	One person and 185 sheep were killed in the flood. One hundred eighty-five sheep and one human were killed in the flood.
Idioms that trivialize violence against other animals (make violence against nonhuman animals seem acceptable)	Non-speciesist idioms (promote language use that promotes respect for all animals)	Always remember that "there's more than one way to skin a cat". Always remember that "there's more than one way to eat a mango".

Concerns about Introducing Language and Speciesism

Table 2 presents some concerns that may arise when teachers introduce the issue of language and speciesism in ELT class (Cameron, 1995; Stibbe, 2004). After each concern are responses.

Concern	A Response
Words are much less important than actions, i.e., "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me".	Yes, actions do speak louder than words, but words themselves are a form of action.
We can talk about better treatment for other animals without changing the words we use.	True, however, non-speciesist language might more accurately reflect changed attitudes towards our fellow animals.
Attempts at increasing students' awareness of speciesist language amounts to enforcing	Teacher demands that everyone use the same language forms go against the spirit

a form of political correctness on students, with teachers acting as language police.	of language awareness, which seeks to help students understand the contextual nature of language, enabling them to make informed choices about their language use.
By introducing yet-to-be-widely-accepted forms of English, we are setting up students to fail exams and to be seen as unskilled language users.	The language choices we make depend on context. The use of non-speciesist language is a means of making a statement; students need to choose the appropriate time for such statements.

Table 2. Concerns about the use in ELT class of topics related to language and speciesism, and responses to those concerns

Classroom Implications

The issue of language and speciesism can be introduced in different ways by different ELT teachers depending on the day's news headlines, as well as their students. Below are some ideas for how this might be done.

1. A matching vocabulary activity in which students match words for meat with pictures of the animals who are killed to produce that meat, e.g., veal, mutton, sweetbread, veal, drumstick, beef, pork, foie gras, bacon.

2. Animal welfare organizations produce print and electronic materials for children of various ages and the general public. Some of these materials are distributed at no charge. The increase awareness gained from the materials may lay foundation for students to understand why change, including language change, may be important. Indeed, many children, not to mention adults, still believe that most animals who are raised for human use, such as for food or clothing, or forced into zoos and circuses live rather pleasant lives, similar to those in idyllic pictures of farms found in many children's books. Here is a short list of organizations that provide education materials (beware – videos can be gory):

a. Captive Animals Protection Society (CAPS):
http://www.captiveanimals.org/merchandise/index.htm

b. Compassion in World Farming: http://www.ciwf.org/education/educational.html

c. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA):
http://www.teachkind.org/humaneEducation.asp

d. Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA):
http://www.rspca.org.uk/servlet/Satellite?pagename=RSPCA/Page/TeachersPortalHome&cid=1086091844592&page=TeachersPortalHomepage

e. Vegetarians International Voice for Animals (VIVA): http://www.viva.org.uk/youth

3. Projects are a popular activity type in second language instruction. For example, Cates and Jacobs (in press) report a project done by English classes at a university in Indonesia in which students investigated local fishing practices and attempted to educate themselves and others about alternatives to current practices, including the use of plant-based nutrition so as not to kill fishes for food. Language plays a role in how the fishes are portrayed.

4. One technique for helping students focus on particular points is to contrast two texts. This is similar to the well-known language teaching technique Spot the Difference (Ellis, 2005). To bring out the link between language and views toward nonhuman animals, two texts on the same topic could be contrasted in terms of content, vocabulary, and grammar. For example, a text in support of fox hunting could be contrasted with one that opposes the practice. Some of the points in Table 1 may be useful here, such as whether or not *who* is used to refer to nonhuman animals. When preparing this activity, we teachers may want to enable students to better comprehend found texts by such means as simplification, glossing or pre-teaching.

5. Food is a topic in which everyone is interested. Unfortunately, tens of billions of our fellow animals are killed every year to provide food for humans. Students can look at cookbooks to see the language used in vegetarian and non-vegetarian recipes.

6. Medical research, as well as research on cosmetics, sometimes uses nonhuman animals. Scientists are of different opinions as to whether doing research on other animals is necessary, ethical or even useful. Vivisectors euphemistically use words such as ‘put down, ‘put to sleep’, ‘discarded’ and ‘dispatched’ to describe what happens to many of the nonhuman animals when they are no longer useful to the researchers.

7. Idioms are a favourite focus of some ELT teachers. Many English idioms reflect negative views of and harsh treatment towards nonhuman animals. Examples include “make a pig of yourself” and “kill two birds with one stone”. Students can consider the accuracy of the former idiom and what the latter idiom says about human treatment of other animals. Other examples are “more than one way to skin a cat”, “let the cat out of the bag” and “cook someone’s goose”.

Conclusion

Readers of this newsletter will likely recognize that concern for our fellow animals fits with a global issues orientation to English teaching. The purpose of the current article has been to perhaps foster greater thought and discussion on how we ELT teachers can raise our students’ awareness of what we humans are doing to the animals with whom we share the planet and the role that language plays in this. As a result, students’ English may improve at the same time that their understanding of how to use the language increases. Please contact me at george@vegetarian-society.org if you would like to continue this discussion.

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