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ON SPECIESIST LANGUAGE **by Joan Dunayer**

Just as sexist language demeans women, speciesist language denigrates non-human animals

"A noun is a person, place, or thing," we obediently recite as children. What, then, are nonhuman animals? They aren't people or places, so - convention tells us - they must be things. Current English usage is speciesist. It glorifies the human species and belittles all others. Just as sexist language demeans women and excludes them from full consideration, speciesist language demeans and excludes nonhuman animals. When we consign other animals to the category thing, we obscure their sentience, individuality and right to autonomy.

Standard pronoun use also "thingifies" other animals. We say "the person who" but "the squirrel that." Reserving who for humans and relegating other animals to that or which falsely suggests that only humans are thinking, feeling beings. The consciousness of any animal merits who: "The bird who flew past." Similarly, an animal's gender warrants she or he, not it. With rare exception (for example, hermaphroditic worms), animals are female or male. A hen or mare is obviously she, a rooster or stallion he. In cases of unknown sex, she or he avoids both speciesism and sexism. If you quote someone who refers to a nonhuman animal as that, which, or it, consider inserting [sic] to mark this pronoun use as speciesist.

More overtly speciesist than standard pronoun use, many common expressions invoke other species as a way of insulting a human: Sly as a fox, crazy as a loon, bull-headed, chicken-hearted, catty bitch. Ironically, such comparisons slight nonhuman animals, onto whom we project our own negative traits. No pig, for example, sweats like a pig. Possessing few sweat glands, pigs . scarcely perspire at all. No wolf philanders like the human wolf. Throughout life, wolves are steadfastly monogamous.

Applied to a human, the mere name of another animal acts as invective: "You rat, skunk, weasel, snake." Why? Other species are assumed to be lower. In evolving, however, species move toward greater adaptiveness, not greater humanness. Rats are not deficient to the degree that they differ from humans. Rats have remained adaptive far longer than humans have existed.

In addition to supporting an arbitrary hierarchy with humans at the top, speciesist language asserts a false dichotomy between animal and human. Much as some people hate to admit it, all of us are animals. Yet "animal" serves as an epithet for a person who has committed a particularly brutal act (toward another person). In contrast, we say "fully human" with a throb of reverence. Our eyes mist over at our unique humanness and our self-approval rating soars. At such times, we forget that "gorillaness" is more peaceable, "owlness" more keen-sighted, and "beenness" more ecologically benign. Other species have powers and graces we lack, however much we may analyze and invent.

Perhaps you're thinking, "All right, so English is speciesist. But it doesn't hurt other animals. They can't understand the words that disparage them." The words, however, foster the attitude that only human experience has reality or importance. If a dancing bear amuses humans, what does it matter that captivity has robbed the bear of freedom and happiness? Or that beatings "taught" the bear to dance? Like sexist language, speciesist language legitimizes exploitation and violence.

Pets are bred and sold as customized merchandise - including our "best friend." Through selective breeding (inbreeding), humans have transformed the dog into a grotesquely unnatural variety of types, from giant breeds to toys. Inherited disorders afflict purebred dogs far more often than mixed breeds. Yet, "purebred" connotes superiority, "mutt" inferiority. "Purebreds" remain in demand while millions

of homeless dogs are killed in U.S. shelters each year. Among those dogs who do find homes, many are abused by owners who see themselves as the master or mistress.

Not exploited for their fur, dogs at least escape the category "fur-bearer", which tags an animal as a potential pelt. A fur ranch or farm may sound idyllic, but such ranch-raised animals as minks, foxes and rabbits experience neither open space nor greenery; they live confined to small wire cages. Turning nonhuman animals into a coat consumes far more fossil fuel than producing a synthetic "fur." Still, to appear environmentally sensitive, the fur industry calls these animals renewable resources. The phrase completely negates each animal's individual being.

Like trappers, hunters kill other animals under the guise of wildlife management. This euphemism reveals the speciesist assumption that humans have the right to manage other creatures. (Wildlife "management" has destroyed numerous species and ecosystems.) Game species, by definition, are preordained targets in the hunter's sport. Predatory animals, whose habitats have been appropriated for the exploitation of cattle and sheep, are slaughtered in programs deceptively labeled "damage control". They are varmints to be poisoned, trapped, or shot.

In laboratories, nonhuman animals experience even more brutal treatment. To dismiss the suffering they inflict, vivisectors refer to their coerced victims as biomachines, research tools and disposable preparations. Avoiding use of the emotionally charged word fear, researchers instead report that their subjects urinated, defecated, trembled.. jargon shrouds the most systematic and nonchalant cruelty. Terminal food deprivation replaces forced starvation. Aversive stimuli encompasses repeated electric shocks, blows, burns and other forms of torture. Each year, researchers sacrifice - that is, kill - millions of mice, rats, dogs, cats, monkeys and others who lack protective membership in the human species.

Among animals bred for food, the yearly U.S. death toll exceeds six billion. Termed production units and converting machines (converting feedstuffs into meat, milk, or eggs), the vast majority of these animals are mass-produced on a factory farm. The "farm" is , a windowless building. Here the animals spend their lives, crowded wall-to-wall or restricted to crippling cages or pens. At the slaughterhouse - now called a processing plant - the gentle, patient cow becomes beef. The sensitive, intelligent pig becomes pork. The four-month-old anemic calf, who has lived in darkness, chained by the neck, becomes milk-fed veal. Such language masks the misery and pain in which these animals live, and the fear in which they die. Happy not to remove the mask, consumers eat their flesh without compunction.

Every sentient being is a someone, not a something. By concealing this truth, speciesist language sanctions cruelty. Soon, I hope, children will learn, "A noun is an animal, place, or thing." With non-speciesist language, we can teach respect for all creatures. Just, compassionate words can help free our wordless kin.

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