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## Verbal Activism: “Anymal”

### ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of verbal activism and animal liberation, starting with a brief explanation of Wittgenstein's (1953) views on the nature and role of language. A discussion of lexical gaps, linguistic change, and verbal activism follows. The paper introduces the word, “anymal,” to fill a lexical gap and to provide a form of verbal activism.

Wittgenstein (1953) viewed language as a moral matter, “an activity, or a form of life,” (p. 23), the importance of which was not to be overlooked. For Wittgenstein, the job of philosophy was to clear up the conceptual confusions that arise through the unexamined use of language. He considered the problems arising from language as, “deep disquietudes” and philosophy as, “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (pp. 111, 109).

Wittgenstein (1953) viewed words as a series of games with their own rules, no meaning outside a certain context, and as having tremendous power to shape our understanding of the world. Communication, the use of language in a meaningful manner (inside

the game to which it belongs) is described as a, “speech act” because language is not simply a mirror of life, “it is the doing of life itself” (Gergen, 1999, p. 35). Language is an important force in shaping our understanding of the world around us.

Wittgenstein (1953) described language as changing: Language games change; new games emerge while others disappear (p. 23). We can see this change. New words such as “quark” or “black hole” describe our most recent understandings of the universe. Meanwhile, “whither” and “nigh” have become obsolete. For Wittgenstein, language

1. holds a moral element,
2. is important in forming our understanding of the world around us, and
3. is created and recreated.

### **Lexical Gaps, Linguistic Change, and “Animals”**

Language is not a perfect reflection of reality. It is not a phenomenon of the universe: We produce language, we give it meaning, and we maintain and change language. Inasmuch as language is created and recreated, there is no point in tolerating troublesome lexical gaps. Lexical gaps, concepts or concrete items in our world that do not have adequate (or any) verbal associations, hinder effective communication.

There is no word in the English language for any animal who is not a human being. This lexical gap is more and more problematic in a world of animal rights, animal ethics, and animal liberation. Several common ways of referring to this referent have evolved, such as “nonhuman animal,” “other animals,” and “animals other than humans”—all of which are cumbersome. A simple, one-word term would be preferable.

I propose “enē-mal,” (pronounced “ene-mel.”) This term refers to all animals, unique and diverse, marvelous and complex, who do not happen to be *homo sapiens*. Anymal is a contraction of “any” and “animal,” and is a shortened version of the concept, “any animal who does not happen to be the species that I am.”

I propose “anymal” because, although this term remains dualistic in the sense of dividing animals between human beings and all other species—a linguis-

tically important division—it avoids the fundamentally dualistic terms, “non” and “other.” It also is short, simple, and easy to remember.

Terms such as “nonhuman animal,” “other-than-human animals,” and “other animals” emphasize Western dualism through the use of “non” and “other.” The term, nonhuman, divides all animals into two, seemingly opposed categories: humans and everyone else. “With equal validity we could categorize all animals as giant squids and non-giant-squids” (Dunayer, 2001, p. 13).

Such changes are important because Western dualism generally has assumed that one category is the norm—superior, dominant, male, white, or, in this case, the human being—and is juxtaposed over and against its supposed opposite—black, woman, other animals, nonhuman animals, and animals other than human beings. Even today, “human” generally is assumed to transcend animality, and to be a human being is defined as “not animal” (Adams, 2003, pp. 39, 40). This dichotomy and the attitudes and behaviors it has fostered have been harmful to anymals.

### **Anymal: Biologically and Socially Correct**

Generally, we view ourselves as separate from wolves and trout; we have fallen into the habit of viewing ourselves as outside “animal.” But we are animals—mammals, primates, and great apes. Anymal is biologically correct. In addition, the term, “animal,” carries a social agenda: intent rooted in activism and anymal liberation.

How “we speak about other animals is inseparable from the way we treat them” (Dunayer, 2001, p. 9). We use animal in reference to “them,” removing us from their midst. We do not do so innocently, or harmlessly, but purposefully and to the great detriment of anymals. Instead of acknowledging shared animalian biology, we choose to denigrate and distance other species as “beasts” or “brutes.”

“*Webster’s* defines *brutish* as ‘relating to animals as opposed to man’ and ‘utterly without sensitivity’” (Dunayer, p. 37). Sometimes, “aggressive sexual behavior is referred to as ‘bringing out the beast,’ ‘wolfish behavior,’ or ‘animal passions’” (Adams, 2003, p. 44). We generally exclude anymals from the terms, “person” and “individual,” and we do not treat anymals as individuals

or persons but, more often, as commodities. Legally, animals commonly are viewed as little more than property.

Ethics helps to expose the link between biologically correct language and social activism. Many ethicists contend that our personal preference for benevolent, compassionate, sympathetic treatment is the basis for willingness to be kind to others (Telfer, 1996, pp. 75, 76). "Thus my very natural concern that my own interests be looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the interests of others" (Singer, 2000, p. 16).

We extend personal self-interest to those we recognize as having interests similar to our own. Using animal to set humans apart from animals ignores shared similarities and has "resulted" in falsely distancing ourselves from rhesus monkeys and geckos. Language that clearly acknowledges humans as animals reminds us of morally relevant similarities and helps us maintain rightful relations with swallows and piglets, rattlesnakes and mice.

### **Verbal Activism**

Language is a moral matter that affects how we understand the world around us. Linguistic conventions emerge from struggles for power and power relations; language legitimizes and is made legitimate by the status quo, contributes to domination, and is an important medium for social control (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 2, 3). Consequently, language is an important tool for those working for social change, including those struggling for animal liberation.

Verbal activism, using language with intent to bring social change, has proven effective. Consciousness has been raised with regard to how terms that refer to particular groups of people—such as ethnic groups—unintentionally can be discriminatory. Alternative terms have been suggested, and terms viewed as harmful or disrespectful have fallen out of use—Negro, cripple, or deaf and dumb—and are seen no longer as appropriate in most contexts. Feminists also employ verbal activism, and many authors and speakers now choose to avoid gendered English words: fireman, chairman, mailman. Similarly, the pronoun ("he") no longer is used as if it were the only option, as if there were no females on the planet—as in sentences such as, "If a patient wants medical advice, he must see a doctor".

Verbal activism does not always result in widespread change. Neither “Ms” nor “nonhuman animal” have become commonplace. Nonetheless, these terms remain important forms of verbal activism.

By calling traditional usage into question, reformers have, in effect, forced everyone who uses English to declare a position in respect to gender, race, or whatever. There is a choice of possible positions: You can say, “Ms. A. is the chairperson)” and convey approval of feminism, or you can say “Miss A. is the chairman” and convey a more conservative attitude. What you no longer can do is to select either alternative and convey by it nothing more than, “a certain woman holds a particular office.” Choice has altered the value of the terms and removed the options of political neutrality. (Cameron, 1995, p. 119)

## Conclusion

Language is a moral matter that affects how we view the world around us. “Anymal” offers a one-word alternative for the referent, “any animal who does not happen to be the same species that I am,” an option that fills a lexical gap and is biologically correct. The term—*anymal*—creates conversations, opens dialogue, and provides an opportunity for activism. This term encourages people to think about how they use the word, *animal*, and why and perhaps even about how our actions affect rats and rabbits, cattle and chickens—the rest of the animal world.

When we encounter a new word, or an alternative word, our interest is sparked; we are likely to pause and inquire. Ultimately, we must decide whether we will accept or reject the suggested change.

Perhaps a handful of activists and scholars will use *anymal* to replace more cumbersome alternatives and/or to spark dialogue. In my experience, the use of “*anymal*,” as one might expect, brings mixed responses but never goes unnoticed. Several colleagues have rejected the term, while others have been thrilled with the option. Students, I have found, are more interested in why the word is important than in the word itself, opening dialogue about factory farming and animal rights. The dialogue it generates, the thought processes that follow, and any resultant change that improves the plight of *anymals*

will measure—as with any form of verbal activism—the success of the term “anymal”.

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