

# Speaking Vegetarian: Toward Nonspeciesist Language

*Paper presented at the World Vegetarian Congress*

*8-14 November 2004*

*Florianopolis, Brazil*

© George Jacobs, Ph.D.  
Vegetarian Society (Singapore)  
[www.vegetarian-society.org](http://www.vegetarian-society.org)  
[george@vegetarian-society.org](mailto:george@vegetarian-society.org)

## **Introduction**

This paper has two main points. First, language is powerful – it reflects and shapes how we think and act (Crystal, 1995; Halliday, 1978; Whorf, 1956). Second, vegetarians can help to change language and, thereby, use the power of language to influence how we and our fellow humans act toward our fellow animals (Dunayer, 2001). This paper considers only the English language; however, parallel situations almost certainly exist in other languages.

### *The Power of Language*

Advertisers recognize the power of words to shape our thinking. To make us desire the products they are selling, they use *purr words*: words that make us as contented as a cat with a comfortable place to nap. Words such as *new*, *stronger*, *natural*, and *research-tested* are used to bring happy images to our minds and influence us to like what the advertisers are selling.

Politicians also use words to convince us to vote for them. Some politicians attempt to label their opponents with *snarl words*: words that make us as upset as a cat who has been awakened from a nap. Words such as *incompetent*, *flip-flopper*, *terrorist*, and *old* are used to bring negative images to our minds and influence us to dislike the politicians' opponents.

The point is that words shape our view of the world. Of course, words do not completely control our view of the world. We may refuse to buy particular products despite all the purr words the advertisers may use, or we may not support particular politicians despite all the snarl words they attempt to smear upon their opponents.

Language not only plays a role in shaping our thinking; it also reflects our thinking. We use purr words for that which we enjoy and snarl words for what we dislike. For example,

meat eaters might see a picture of a large fish being cooked on a barbecue and talk about “the succulent fillet laced with a tomato-based sauce full of herbs, spices, and bell peppers,” whereas a vegetarian might describe the same scene as “slices of a poor fish’s flesh being cooked, with plant food used to disguise the disgusting taste of seared flesh.”

At the same time, just as the words around us only influence but do not control our thinking, the words we use may only partially mirror what we think. Thus, vegetarians may due to ignorance of alternatives or for other reasons use language that is not in line with vegetarianism. One of the goals of this article is to help vegetarians speak in ways consistent with vegetarian lifestyles.

### *Language Changes*

Language shapes and reflects how we think about the world, but language is not static. Language changes. What is viewed as typical today may not have been the norm or considered correct 200 years ago and may change in another 200 years, or even two years. For instance, in the case of English, much of the grammar of Shakespeare’s day would not be acceptable today, nor would Shakespeare have any idea what a *disk drive* is or what *frequent flyer miles* are.

What leads to language change? The key force behind language change is change in society. Society changes, and language changes along with it in a kind of chicken and egg manner with each influencing the other. For instance, new inventions, such as airplanes and computers, change the way we live, and vocabulary related to these inventions comes into widespread use, such as *frequent flyer miles* and *disk drive* mentioned earlier. Similarly, the use of these new terms can accelerate the use of the phenomena they represent.

### *Another Example of Language Change*

In addition to inventions, another force driving social change involves changes in people’s outlook. A fairly recent case in point centers on changes in the relative role of females in society. In many societies, females have taken more equal public roles, and language has changed correspondingly (Nilsen, 1987; Rubin, Greene, & Schneider, 1994).

Language changes in regard to the relative place of females and males in human society include changes in grammar and vocabulary. A prominent grammatical change has been the move from generic *he* (use of male pronouns – *he, his* - and the male possessive adjective – *his* – in a way that implies males are representative of females and males), such as using “A doctor should take care of his patients” to include all doctors, female and male. Instead, people nowadays are more likely to use, “Doctors should take care of their patients,” “A doctor should take care of her/his patients,” “A doctor should take care of their patients,” and other alternatives that do not place males as representatives of all humans.

Similarly, in the area of vocabulary, alternatives have arisen for generic *man* (the use of male nouns to imply that males are representative of females and males). For instance,

instead of *fireman* and *policeman*, people nowadays are more likely to use *firefighter* and *police officer*. Instead of *man and wife*, we might use *husband and wife*.

These language changes in regard to the roles of the sexes have both reflected change and promoted change. However, this change has not been automatic or uncontroversial. Nor is the change complete. Generic *he* and generic *man* are still in use.

How does an actual language change happen? Does some governing body of English (or some other language) meet to decide? In the case of the change in English just discussed, the change has been happening slowly as individuals make conscious decisions about how they speak and write. Some publications have changed their practices; dictionaries and scholarly descriptions of contemporary grammar first began to list what came to be called “nonsexist language” as an acceptable alternative and later as the desired option. The point is that we can all be factors in shaping language, just as language is a factor in shaping us.

To summarize the paper thus far:

- a. Language shapes and reflects thinking
- b. Societies change
- c. Languages change as to grammar, usage, and vocabulary
- d. People can play a role in changing language.

### **Making Language Fairer toward All Animals**

Does language need to change to become fairer for all animals, nonhuman and human? If so, what needs to be changed and how can these changes come about? Jane Goodall, the world-famous researcher of the lives of chimpanzees and other nonhuman animals, provides an example of needed changes and how they can be made. In her 1990 book *Through a Window*, Goodall recounts that in the early 1960s, when she started her research in Africa, scientists in her field gave numbers, not names, to the chimpanzees they were studying. When Goodall submitted her first scientific paper for publication, the editor returned it to her to be amended. Everywhere that she had written *he* or *she* to refer to a chimpanzee, the word had been replaced with *it*. Similarly, every *who* had been replaced with *which*. In an effort to rescue the chimpanzees from ‘thing-ness’ and restore them to ‘being-ness,’ Goodall stubbornly changed the words back, and, in the end, she won.

In the area of the connection between language and humans’ views of other animals, the key book is *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation* by Joan Dunayer (2001). This book presents a catalogue of changes that need to be made in many realms of language use, such as hunting, research using nonhuman animals, and, of course, using nonhuman animals for food. Table 1, presented later in this paper, is based on Dunayer’s work.

*Speciesist and Nonspeciesist Language*

Dunayer uses the term *speciesist* for beliefs and language and other practices that do not treat nonhuman animals with the same respect accorded to humans or that in other ways differentiate among species of sentient beings in a way that signals members of some species are lesser than others. Table 1 describes speciesist language use and alternatives. In the table, the first column contains speciesist language, the second column contains nonspeciesist alternatives, and the third column contains sentences that provide first speciesist and then nonspeciesist examples of the language element depicted in that row. Explanations accompany language items in columns one and two.

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

<b>Speciesist Vocabulary (with explanation)</b>	<b>Vegetarian Vocabulary (with explanation)</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<i>Anything</i> (nonhuman animals are seen as things)	<i>Anyone, anybody</i> (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.
<i>It</i> (nonhuman animals are sexless things)	<i>She, he, they, he or she</i> (NHAs have sexual characteristics, just like humans)	When an <u>animal</u> is ill, take <u>it</u> to a veterinarian. When a <u>nonhuman animal</u> is ill, take <u>them/her or him</u> to a veterinarian.
<i>Which</i> ( <i>which</i> is used for NHAs, plants, and objects)	<i>Who</i> ( <i>who</i> 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.
<i>Animals, dumb animals, lower animals</i> (separates humans from other animals and other animals from each other in a prejudicial or hierarchical way)	<i>Nonhuman animals, other animals, fellow animals, nonhuman persons</i> (links humans and other animals as one group of sentient beings)	Vegetarianism is better for human health and the health of <u>animals</u> . Vegetarianism is better for human health and the health of our <u>fellow animals</u> .
<i>Animal instinct</i> (suggests that useful behaviors of NHAs are not the result of intelligence)	<i>Instinct, intelligence</i> (stresses that some similarities exist between human mental capacity and that of other animals)	The clever behaviors of the crow are based on <u>animal instinct</u> . The clever behaviors of the crow are based on <u>intelligence</u> .
<i>Higher animals</i> (implies that some animals are superior)	<i>Mammals, vertebrates</i> (a physiological)	Gorillas are one of the <u>higher animals</u> which eat a vegetarian or largely vegetarian diet. Gorillas are one of the <u>vertebrates</u> who eat a

to others and have superior claim to rights)	classification, not a value judgment)	vegetarian or largely vegetarian diet.
<i>Inhumane</i> (implies that humans are the only typically kind animal and that cruelty is normal for other animals)	<i>Cruel</i> (doesn't accord humans special status)	Factory farm owners are <u>inhumane</u> to keep animals in cages so small that they can't even turn around. Factory farm owners are <u>cruel</u> to keep animals in cages so small that they can't even turn around.
<i>Sire, gestation, feed on</i> (separate terms for NHAs)	<i>Father, pregnancy, eat</i> (same terms for humans and NHAs)	Whether the mother is a Great Dane, or a tiny Chihuahua, the <u>gestation</u> period is the same, approximately nine weeks. Whether the mother is a Great Dane, or a tiny Chihuahua, the <u>pregnancy</u> period is the same, approximately nine weeks.
<i>Aquarium animal, zoo animal</i> (don't call aquariums and zoos what they really are)	<i>Aquaprison inmate, zoo inmate</i> (call aquariums and zoos what they really are)	One of the <i>zoo animals</i> , an orangutan, just gave birth. Will the baby be returned to the wild? One of the <i>zoo inmates</i> , an orangutan name Myrtle, just gave birth. Will the baby be returned to the wild?
<i>Euthanize, put down</i> (euphemisms; soft words for hard deeds)	<i>Kill, murder</i> (reflects what too often happens when NHAs are used in research)	After the experiment, the researchers <u>euthanized</u> the chimp, because it was in a great deal of pain, pain that the experimenters had caused. After the experiment, the researchers <u>killed</u> the chimp, because she was in a great deal of pain, pain that the experimenters had caused.
<i>Abattoir, meat-packing plant, processing plant</i> (conceals the facility's main purpose from an NHA perspective)	<i>Slaughterhouse</i> (from an NHA perspective, clearly names what the facility does)	The broilers were taken to the <u>meat-packing plant</u> for processing. The Tyson employees took the captive chickens to the <u>slaughterhouse</u> .
<i>beef, pork, giblets, foie gras, veal</i> (disguises the food's origins)	<i>Cow flesh, pig flesh, bird organs, goose or duck liver, calf flesh</i> (candid, out-in-the-open name)	Tender white <u>veal</u> lightly breaded and pan fried, served with a romaine onion salad and <u>foie gras</u> . Tender white <u>calf flesh</u> lightly breaded and pan fried, served with a romaine onion salad and <u>goose liver</u> .
Hedging when attributing emotions and thought to NHAs (implies NHAs don't have emotions and thoughts)		The pigs <u>appeared</u> to be scared, and they seemed to be thinking of a way to escape. The pigs <u>were</u> scared, and they were thinking of a way to escape.
Quotation marks when emotions and	No quotation marks when emotions and	The pigs were " <u>scared</u> " and " <u>thinking of</u> " a way to escape.

thoughts of NHAs are discussed (implies that NHAs don't have thoughts and emotions)	thoughts of NHAs are discussed (acknowledges that NHAs have thoughts and emotions)	The pigs were <u>scared</u> and were <u>thinking of</u> a way to escape.
Passive voice to refer to what humans do to NHAs (hides who is responsible)	Active voice to refer to what humans do to NHAs (names those responsible)	The new-born male chicks <u>were disposed of</u> . The supervisor <u>instructed</u> the staff <u>to kill</u> the new-born male chicks, because males don't lay eggs.
Referring to NHAs by the place they are held captive (treats NHAs as commodities)	Referring to NHAs themselves (suggests NHAs as beings)	The <u>pig farm</u> fouls the air for miles around. The <u>tightly-crowded, imprisoned pigs</u> create so much waste that the air is fouled for miles around.
Almost always placing NHAs after humans in a sentence (implies that NHAs are secondary, lesser)	Sometimes placing NHAs before humans in a sentence (implies equality)	<u>One person and 185 sheep</u> were killed in the flood. <u>One hundred eighty-five sheep and one human</u> were killed in the flood.
Theoretical, general, abstract discussion of NHAs (makes it less likely that readers/listeners will identify with NHAs)	Personalized, specific, concrete discussion of NHAs (encourages readers/listeners to identify with NHAs)	<u>Pigs</u> have committed no crime, yet they face life imprisonment on factory farms. <u>Alice</u> was born on Giant Agribusiness Farm in Pittsfield, Iowa. Her cell is 6'x2' with a steel floor and steel bars.
Idioms that trivialize violence against NHAs (make violence against NHAs seem acceptable)	Non-speciesist idioms (promote language use that promotes respect for all animals)	Always remember that "there's more than one way to <u>skin a cat</u> ." Always remember that "there's more than one way to <u>eat a mango</u> ."

*Political Correctness? Language Police?*

The use of nonspeciesist (vegetarian) language and attempts to convince others to move away from speciesist language will undoubtedly be met with some resistance. Four complaints and possible replies to them are presented in Table 2 (Cameron, 1995; Stibbe, 2004).

Table 2. Objections to efforts to promote nonspeciesist language and responses to these objections

Objections to the Use of Nonspeciesist Language	Responses
Language is not important – “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”	Yes, actions do speak louder than words, but words too are a form of action. Additionally, words are inseparably tied to thinking, and thinking is inseparably tied to action.
We have been speaking and writing this way for a long time. Why go through a lot of trouble to change?	Language has changed before and is constantly continuing to change. We cannot stop this process, but we can influence what changes take place.
You can talk about being vegetarian without using nonspeciesist language.	True, but we can more accurately, forcefully, and succinctly present our views via nonspeciesist language.
You should not try to control how people speak and write. You are not the language police.	<p>We are not telling people how to speak or write. We are making them aware of options.</p> <p>We are saying that speciesist language hides the truth about the suffering of many nonhuman animals and promotes bias toward nonhumans. We are changing our language use to align it more closely with our vision of a better world.</p> <p>If you do not want me to tell you what is correct or incorrect, please realize that I, too, am free to make language choices.</p>

### Where to from Here?

We can change language to make it more respectful to other animals, as Goodall did in such areas as the use of *who* with nonhuman animals. Furthermore, in regard to the use of *who*, some of the larger dictionaries, such as the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (<http://www.m-w.com>), and larger scholarly works on grammar state that *who* can be used with nonhuman animals (Jacobs, 2004). For example, the Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, states that *who* can be used with sentient beings.

Future actions to popularize language that promotes equality among animals include research (see Jacobs, 2004 for suggestions), language use, and educational efforts. Research involves studying what it means to speak Vegetarian, i.e., what changes in vocabulary, grammar, usage, and other language areas might promote vegetarian lifestyles. Research also involves finding out what people are already writing and saying in magazines, novels, textbooks, radio shows, conversations at birthday parties, etc. Language use can also be compared across time, place, and language.

Language use to promote change toward means that every time we write or speak as members of vegetarian organizations or as individuals, we should give some thought to

our language to see whether we are using Vegetarian. Here, the Style Guide and Thesaurus chapters of Dunayer's (2001) book, ideas from which appear in Table 1, will be especially useful. The language we use should be consistent with the ideas we are expressing about concern for our fellow animals.

At times, speaking Vegetarian may mean using language that appears unusual, perhaps even incorrect, to others. For instance, *nonhuman animals* and *humans and other animals* may sound strange, but such language use makes the point that we humans are animals too, rather than standing separate from and above our fellows. Furthermore, nonsexist terms, such as *firefighter*, also sounded strange at first. Similarly, in some cases, when we use the pronoun *who* with nonhuman animals, we may be accused of being grammatically incorrect. Such objections provide excellent opportunities for explaining why we believe that other animals merit *who*, not *which*, just as humans do. Indeed, the whole topic of nonspeciesist language can be seen as just one more way that we can encourage our fellow humans to examine their beliefs and practices regarding food and other aspects of human-nonhuman interaction.

In addition to doing research on the use of Vegetarian language and using such language ourselves, vegetarian organizations can also seek to educate members and the general public about Vegetarian language. This education can take the form of articles about Vegetarian language in our publications and on our websites, as well as workshops on the topic. Key audiences for such education include people who use language as a main aspect of their work, such as teachers and writers.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to make two main points. One, we should appreciate the power of language as a medium that mirrors and manipulates how we view the world in which we live. Two, vegetarian organizations should seek to utilize this medium as we strive for a healthier, happy world.

However, changing a language is a huge task. Is it too huge a mountain to move? Not at all! If we do research to understand the current situation, use Vegetarian language every chance we have, and educate others about why and how to speak Vegetarian, little by little we can succeed. Language is an inseparable part of everyday life, and modern technology brings us even more ways to use this vital tool. Let's use this tool to improve our lives and those of all our fellow beings.

## References

Cameron, D. (1995). *Verbal hygiene*. London: Routledge.

Crystal, D. (1995). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dunayer, J. (2001). *Animal equality: Language and liberation*. Derwood, MD: Ryce Publishing. ISBN 0-9706475-5-7.

Fairclough, N. (2003). 'Political correctness': The politics of culture and language. *Discourse & Society*, 14(1), 17-28.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.

Jacobs, G. M. (2004). *Research project on the use of who with nonhuman animals*. Available at <http://www.ecoling.net/who.html>. Retrieved October 24, 2004.

Nilsen, A. P. (1987). Guidelines against sexist language: A case history." In J. Penfield (Ed.), *Women and language in transition* (pp. 37-64). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Rubin, D. L, Greene, K., & Schneider, D. (1994). Adopting gender-inclusive language reforms: Diachronic and synchronic variation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13, 91-114.

Stibbe, A. (2004). Moving away from ecological 'political correctness'... *Language & Ecology Online Journal*, 1(2). Available online at <http://www.ecoling.net/feb3.htm>.

Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. J. B. Carroll (Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wikipedia. Retrieved August 1, 2004, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who\\_%28pronoun%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who_%28pronoun%29)

Acknowledgments: The author very much appreciates the feedback given by Arran Stibbe and Joan Dunayer on earlier drafts of this paper.