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On Pigs, Political Correctness and Poetic Activism

by Arran Stibbe

The Vanuatu islanders in Melanesia have a particularly close relationship with pigs. Pigs are carefully nurtured, regarded as family members, and pig-caring can, on occasion, even take precedence over child-bearing (Miles 1997). And this close relationship lasts until the pig is caressed and sung to before being ritually clubbed to death. Although the ending may not be a happy one for the pigs, the relationship is symbiotic to a certain extent, and has some ecologically beneficial consequences.

The same cannot be said for the relationship between the inhabitants of the USA and the numerous pigs who share the country with them. Millions of these pigs are confined indoors on intensive farms, fed antibiotics, choke on ammonia from pools of waste, have their environment controlled by machines, and are driven across the country in trucks to a few central processing plants where they are messily slaughtered (Eisnitz 1997). The ecological damage done by such intensive farming is enormous (see Hawken et al 2000). The question is, why are things done this way? In a country with widespread obesity and heart disease, the answer clearly does not lie in the social benefits of cheap pork.

One of reasons for the troubled relationship between pigs and humans may be the long distance nature of the relationship. Pork industry executives in air-conditioned offices are isolated from the ecological damage and suffering that intensive farming entails. The financial equations the executives manipulate, the plans for farms they create, and the guides for farm management they write, constitute a particular discourse which mediates the pig-human relationship. Through its influence on human action this discourse has repercussions in the physical world, both on the lives of the pigs concerned, and on the eco-systems in which humans, pigs and all life co-exist.

The entire structure of the pork industry is based on the model of industrial mass production. However, there is a fundamental difference between a factory and a farm in that farms care for living beings while factories deal with inanimate objects. The discourse of the pork industry overcomes this important contradiction through metaphors which transform living pigs into inanimate objects.

The Pork Industry Handbook (PIH) is the main source of information for pig farmers, and within its pages, pigs are frequently depicted as objects through a variety of linguistic devices. These

include pigs-are-machines metaphors such as 'To prevent sow breakdown make sure the lactation ration is properly fortified...' (PIH 2002: 8) and 'boars remain structurally sound' (PIH 2002: 1). A metaphor with similar effect is pigs-are-resources, whereby pigs are 'produced' (PIH 2002:85), 'stocked' (PIH 2002, 55), 'used' (PIH 2002:83), and have 'salvage value' (PIH 2002:8).

The PIH sometimes manages to confuse living pigs with meat, for instance 'Some hogs have weak hindquarters, and they are more likely to fall down and split. The damaged meat has to be trimmed' (PIH 2002:116). Definitions such as 'A sow unit denotes a mature female in production...' (PIH 2002:15) further contribute to the objectification of pigs.

When pigs are treated as inanimate objects within a factory model, health and welfare concerns become obscured by financial considerations. As the Pork Industry Handbook points out, 'The success of a swine enterprise is measured in terms of profit' (PIH 2002:100). The PIH is full of equations where variables such as cage size and the average number of pigs dying in confinement are manipulated in order to maximise profit. Pigs become mere variables in equations which revolve around profit and do not include ecological or welfare concerns.

Health is an important consideration for pig farms, but the discourse of the PIH redefines the notion of pigs' health solely in terms of financial variables:

"Health is the condition of an animal with regard to the performance of its vital functions. The vital functions of the pig are reproduction and growth. They are vital because they are major contributors to the economic sustainability of the pork production enterprise." (PIH 2002:140).

Other health concerns, such as the damage to pigs' lungs caused by the ammonia they breathe, injuries to their legs from slatted floors, and the effects of not being able to move, can be ignored when health is defined only in terms of reproduction and growth. Disease is similarly defined in terms of damage to corporate interests rather than to the pigs themselves 'Disease is a major risk to farm sustainability, thus protection of herd health is a top priority' (PIH 2002:140).

Through the expression 'herd health', attention is diverted from the health needs of individual pigs. Individuality is completely obscured through reference to a flow of pigs: 'test-mating...can save dollars by avoiding lost time and interrupted pig flow.' (PIH 2002:1). Likewise, by referring to pigs in terms of volume rather than number of individuals, the PIH denies individuality: 'the volume of sows slaughtered in different time periods' (PIH 2002:132).

There are many other aspects of the discourse of the pork industry which influence the treatment of pigs and the ecological impact of farming (see Stibbe forthcoming), but the examples

above illustrate an important pattern. Analysis of the discourse of the pork industry suggests that it uses metaphors, pronouns, definitions, presuppositions and other linguistic techniques to represent pigs as objects, machines, inanimate resources, variables, and as a mass rather than as individuals. As Adams (1993:2001) points out: 'someone who has a very particular, situated life, a unique being, is converted into something that has no distinctiveness, no uniqueness, no individuality.'

Reconstructing pigs as objects paves the way for people to treat them in ways which go against their nature, for example, confining huge numbers of pigs indoors in the same room, or stacking pigs into trucks and driving them to distant slaughterhouses. As the PIH itself admits 'In confinement, the high animal density allows for rapid transmission of respiratory and enteric pathogens from pig to pig' (PIH 2002: 145). The treatment of animals against their nature causes them immense suffering, and can incubate diseases which can spread into the human population. Bird-flu is the most recent example, and intensive pig farms provide the ideal location for diseases like this to mingle with human flu (which pigs are also susceptible to) and to mutate. Ultimately, treating animals in ways that go against their nature contributes to ecological destruction. The discourse of the pork industry, to the extent that it influences the actions of farmers, plays an important role in this destruction.

Moving away from ecological 'political correctness'...

What makes Critical Discourse Analysis critical is that it explicitly aims to challenge the discourses it analyses. The reason for analysing racist discourse is not because it contains particularly interesting uses of the passive voice, but in order to expose and oppose the ideology embedded within it. Which brings us to the thorny issue of verbal hygiene, one of the traditional ways of attempting to challenge ideology in discourse.

The term 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995) refers to deliberate attempts to change language through proscription of disfavoured forms and prescription of alternatives. It is easy to think of examples in our everyday life, ranging from the mail deliverer who brings our letters, to our former pets who have now been promoted to companion animals. Over the last few decades, verbal hygiene has been applied extensively to sexism, racism, able-ism and, more recently, speciesism. Goatly (2000:278) suggests that 'Similar campaigns might be launched ecologically.' One of the examples he gives is the substitution of the word cancer for growth in cases like:

The lesson for Singapore was never to take things for granted, he said, since it only had 25 years of cancer compared to 200 years for the Swiss, and half the Swiss population. (Goatly 2000:278)

Using cancer as a metaphor for growth 'draws attention to the fact that growth in an already mature economy threatens the life-support systems of the planet' (Goatly 200:278). Indeed, cancer seems to be a particularly appropriate metaphor for economic growth. However, fully fledged verbal hygiene would go beyond pointing out the similarities between economic growth and cancer, towards proscribing the word 'growth' and prescribing 'cancer'.

The question of the appropriateness and effectiveness of applying verbal hygiene to ecological issues is an important one, particularly now because ecolinguistics is at an early stage in its development. To get an idea of what the application of verbal hygiene to ecological issues might look like, this article discusses a major exercise in verbal hygiene conducted in the related area of speciesism and published in the book *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation* (Dunayer 2001).

The central thesis of *Animal Equality* is that 'Deceptive language perpetuates speciesism, the failure to accord nonhuman animals equal consideration and respect' (Dunayer 2001:1). This is backed up by hundreds of examples of the language of those who oppress animals, including: science writers who 'balk at attributing emotions to nonhuman individuals' through hedging, such as 'she seemed afraid' (ibid:3), hunters who claim gut-shot nonhumans only 'feel sick' (ibid:47), sportfishers who 'subdue' rather than bludgeon fish (ibid: 65), zookeepers who call cages 'habitats' (ibid:72), and vivisectors who 'stimulate' animals rather than giving them electric shocks (ibid:109).

After detailed analysis of a wide range of discourses implicated in animal oppression, Dunayer (2001:178ff) moves beyond description to full-scale verbal hygiene, presenting a 23-page section of style guidelines for countering speciesism. These guidelines consist of terms and structures to use and to avoid. Thus, syntax that 'buries nonhuman animals inside a ... dependent clause' should be avoided (ibid: 180), and instead, syntax 'that makes nonhuman animals the grammatical subject' should be used (p179). Likewise: beast, aquarium and dairy farmer should be avoided and replaced with nonhuman animal, aquaprison and cow enslaver respectively (ibid: pp.188, 191,194). Other terms which Dunayer suggests are free-living nonhumans instead of wildlife (ibid:189), genocide by hunting for overhunting (ibid:190), torture a fish for play a fish (ibid:191), food-industry captive for farm animal (ibid:193) and cattle abuser for cowboy (ibid: 194).

These alternative phrasings provide stark reminders of the horrors inflicted on other animals at the hands of humans. However, there are several problems associated with verbal hygiene.

The main problem is the conservative reaction to verbal hygiene in the form of an effective weapon against overt attempts to change language: the charge of 'political correctness.' As Fairclough (2003:21) points out, 'political correctness' and being 'politically correct' are 'identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents', providing 'a remarkably effective way of disorientating sections of the left'. The media frequently create absurd examples mocking attempts to change language, such as 'vertically challenged', 'personhole cover' (Mills 2003:89), and 'coffee without milk' - supposedly used to avoid the racist term 'black coffee' (Fairclough 2003:25). And along similar lines, respondents in a questionnaire about anti-speciesist guidelines were adept in creating absurd examples. One respondent wrote 'You mean at a fast food counter it would list "murdered bovine with brutally massacred swine strips" when all I want is a bacon burger? What a JOKE!'. Overt attempts to change the language related to ecology may receive a similar reception, as the following spoof suggests:

In callous disregard for the well-being of the environment, and this one tree in particular, he [a fireman rescuing a cat] thrust the disabled-unfriendly means of ascent known as a "ladder" carelessly up against the tree, marring its bark, and unfeelingly climbed it, unconcerned how his display of physical prowess might injure the self-esteem of those differently abled (PC 2004)

A second problem is the piecemeal way in which verbal hygienists criticise specific words or grammatical constructions and, to paraphrase Goatly (2000:280), 'tinker' with vocabulary and 'rejjig' grammar. There is no guarantee that swapping bits of sentences for other bits of sentences will provide a consistent and effective overall discourse for expressing ecological issues. Anti-speciesist writing ends up with a mixture of terms borrowed from discourses such as slavery, crime, torture, murder and genocide, with awkward circumlocutions thrown in such as other-than-human-being or even non-"domesticated" nonhumans. The result, when applied strictly to texts, is a discordant discourse with conspicuous ideology. This has already happened in areas such as sexism and racism, where, as Fairclough (2003:25) points out, 'some (but only some)...discursive intervention smacked of the arrogance, self-righteousness and Puritanism of an ultra-left politics, and [has] caused widespread resentment even among people basically committed to anti-racism, anti-sexism, etc.'

Another area of concern is that when suggesting an alternative word, the alternative itself may have problems associated with it. The word 'environment' is problematic because it separates humans from everything else. We could suggest 'ecology', but as an 'ology', this word also refers to a scientific discipline, and has the potential to connote a distant relationship between observer and

observed. Because words are limited, all alternatives have their limitations; plurality and awareness of limitations may be more appropriate than prescribing 'correct' terms. The prescription of a single environmentally correct alternative closes down the space for new alternatives, and rules out the possibility of using 'incorrect' terms in creative and effective ways.

When it comes to political correctness, we can learn from anti-sexist campaigns, which 'have been made problematic...because of...ridiculing of any attempts to reform or call for change to sexist language...' (Mills 2003:90). Now, 'any anti-sexist language campaign...has to define itself in contradistinction to what has been defined as 'political correctness' by the media.' (ibid: 90).

Whatever direction ecolinguistics takes in the future, it may be wise to maintain a little distance from 'political correctness'.

Towards poetic activism...

Each of the many discourses which construct the social spheres in which we live may, by influencing our actions, contribute to ecological destruction or to ecological harmony. Toward achieving the goal of ecological harmony, Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to resist destructive discourses by raising awareness of the ideologies hidden within them. The next logical step is the replacement of destructive discourses by alternative ways of thinking, talking and writing. The question is, how is this to be achieved?

The political correctness approach, of portraying specific words or grammatical constructions of ecologically damaging discourses as false or deceptive, and prescribing expressions one-by-one in the form of rules, narrows the range of alternatives to a singular 'correct' formulation, with no guarantee that strict application of the rules will produce a consistent, persuasive or even acceptable discourse. Compare this with the opening up of alternatives afforded by poetic activism.

Poetic activism is based on the appreciation of 'the power of language to make new and different things possible and important - an appreciation which becomes possible only when one's aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than The One Right Description' (Rorty 1989:39-40). While verbal hygiene represents its prescribed alternatives as more accurate, truthful or 'correct', poetic activism promotes 'provocative, glamouring, and compelling ways of talking and writing, ways that unsettle the common sense, taken for granted realities, and invite others into new dialogic spaces' (Gergen 2000).

A compelling example of the power of discourse to unsettle our perceptions of otherwise taken-for-granted realities is to be found in Japanese haiku. Haiku are poems of three lines restricted to the syllabic pattern 5-7-5. The restrictions demand an economy of expression which leaves much to be filled in by the readers' imagination, general knowledge, and cultural insight. The following haiku is by Uejima Onitsura:

gyozui no / sutedokoro naki / mushi no koe

No place / to throw out the bathwater / sound of insects (in Bowers 1996:38)

To make sense of this poem, readers rely on their general knowledge: they know that old Japanese houses did not have plumbing, so Uejima would have had to throw his bathwater outside. But what about the connection between 'sound of the insects' and Uejima's dilemma about where to throw his bathwater? To understand this connection, the hearer must be aware that the genre of haiku contains the ideological assumption that life is important, and that all life, including the commonest of insects and plants, is to be treated with consideration. When readers supply the unstated, cultural link respect for all life, they realise Uejima is concerned that he may disturb the insects he hears by dousing them.

Requiring 'gap-filling' (Fairclough 2001:71) of the reader in this way is a variation of the technique used in many ecologically destructive discourses, here turned to the opposite effect because the reader of the haiku has to bring a positive assumption to mind. And respect for all life is one of the key elements of deep ecology (Devall and Sessions 1985).

Poetic activism in ecolinguistics involves the careful analysis of discourses such as Japanese haiku, and the active promotion of such discourses on the grounds that the ideological assumptions they contain have the potential to contribute to ecological harmony. Goatly's (2000) analysis of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* comes close to this form of activism.

Among the many aspects of Goatly's analysis of the discourse of *The Prelude*, he points to Wordsworth's representations of animals as Experiences, which suggests 'they are worth observing and noticing for their own sake' (ibid 298), and to the representations of nature as an Actor, or a Sayer (a river murmuring, brooks prattling, torrents roaring etc) (ibid 292,293). Goatly explicitly contrasts Wordsworth's representations of nature with the currently destructive discourses of technology, and he hopes for better:

The idea that nature can speak to us and that we should be receptive to its messages as Experiencers can, of course, give us another trajectory for our scientific and technological

advances, perhaps a more positive one than when technology is used to enhance our power as Actors. (Goatly 2000:293)

Probably for the first time ever, *The Prelude* is compared with constructions of nature in *The Times* newspaper. Goatly (ibid, 301) criticises *The Times* for presenting 'a domesticated, processed and relatively passive nature', and his compelling conclusion is that 'the view of the natural world represented by Wordsworth, along with aspects of his grammar, provides a much better model for our survival than that represented by *The Times*' (ibid: 301).

Of course, the 'view of the natural world' presented by Wordsworth and the 'aspects of grammar' are not separate entities. As Fairclough (1992b) points out, form is an integral part of content. Now, an approach based on political correctness would concentrate only on form, prescribing the use of grammar on Wordsworth's model (eg, we should represent nature as an Actor or Sayer, animals as Experiences). The power of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, however, derives from an organic whole which cannot be broken down into a list of rules for vocabulary and grammar. Linguists, more than anyone, should realise how much is lost when complex linguistic phenomena are reduced to technical rules. There is no guarantee that a new discourse based on such rules would be ecologically beneficial. In addition, rules close down the possibility of creating equally ecologically-beneficial discourse along new grammatical lines.

An approach based on poetic activism would promote Wordsworth's writings as exemplars of an ecologically beneficial discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis which exposes ecologically beneficial ideologies in poetry, art, photography, film and convention-breaking prose can be used to stimulate thinking along new, ecologically-beneficial lines. But no discourse is perfectly 'beneficial' - all have beneficial aspects and drawbacks, and limited ranges of application. The language of haiku would be hard to apply to instruction manuals for photocopiers, but other alternative discourses may be applicable. The suggestion that a single discourse is the 'correct' one immediately ends further poetic activism.

To conclude: it is time to be critical of hegemonic discourses which have destructive ecological consequences, time to point out that there are alternatives, and to promote these alternatives, but without falling into the trap of simply creating new hegemonic discourses. Time for a little poetic activism perhaps...

Poetic Activism and Pigs

This article started by describing how the discourse of the pork industry devalues the lives of pigs and contributes to a form of farming with damaging ecological consequences. This makes pork industry discourse a fine target to challenge with a bit of poetic activism. William Hedgepeth's *The Hog Book* provides an example of a discourse which poetically challenges pork industry discourse and powerfully reconstructs the image of pigs. For Hedgepeth, pigs are not machines, objects, or resources, they are 'creatures of boundless charm and enchantment' (Hedgepeth 1998:160).

The creativity of Hedgepeth's counter-discourse can be seen right from the start of the book:

- DEDICATED...to the millions of porkers who've gone to their final resting sites inside us...I'd like to call them all by name, but the list is long and I cannot remember. (Hedgepeth 1998)

The human-body-is-pig-grave metaphor here resists the industry's 'To be a pig is to be pork' ideology, and the dedication provides a very unusual way of emphasising the individuality of pigs. *The Hog Book* challenges mainstream and pork industry discourses through the use of parody and a good dose of humour:

- "Hog," to many people means any obscenely rotund beast with a tropism for mud who trundles filthily along oinking (Hedgepeth 1998, 21)
- [In an artificial insemination system] sows are viewed as simple pork machines and boars are vaguely undesirable characters who happen to make sperm...[the system has] the aim of turning out germ-free, computer-recorded pieces of living pigmeat. (ibid :99)

To provide a 'new definition of hogness', Hedgepeth uses intertextual borrowing (Fairclough 1992:101) to apply discourses from other domains to the human-pig relationship. One of these intertextual borrowings makes use of the discourse of psychology:

- Cultural Hogrophobia...is a socially institutionalised fear of hogness (ibid: 6)
- We rely upon the hog in many ways for support and for a sense of definition - definition of ourselves, for instance, as presumably superior, handsomer and all-round more legitimate creatures. It's in this way that we subconsciously employ the hog (ibid 200)

Paralleling self-help psychology, Hedgepeth claims that in coming to terms with hogophobia you can develop a 'new hog consciousness' (ibid: 197) and 'eventually emerge as a changed and better person' (ibid: x). This change is constructed not just as psychological growth but spiritual growth too, through intertextual borrowings from the domain of spiritual discourse:

- True 'hogitude' - the mystical essence and condition of being an actual hog - demands extended periods of meditation. (ibid: 173)
- The all-pervasive essence of Hog had resonated across time and insinuated itself deep into...our collective mind. [We are] awaiting some hopeful opportunity to transcend ourselves...[and pigs provide]...an ideal agent for inducing us to break our narrow containments...and thereby scale new heights of enlightenment and psychic liberation...(ibid 198)

In this way, Hedgepeth resists mainstream discourse and replaces it with an entirely new way of constructing pigs. There is no hint in Hedgepeth's works that this new way is somehow 'correct', or the only possible way of reconstructing pigs. The Hog Book therefore forces open the door of limited mainstream discourse, takes some bold steps out to create new alternatives, but, crucially, leaves the door wide open to other novel ways of constructing pigs. This is the mark of poetic activism.

And the reason why poetic activism is so necessary in the case of pigs becomes clear on reading the following from The Hog Book:

- And so we go on about the routine exploitation of our hogs in the name of Agriculture or Industry & Commerce or Better Pork; and in the end it all contributes to the vast-scale devaluation of life itself, for one cannot deny the legitimacy of another creature without diminishing one's own (Hedgepeth 1998:199)

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