



# A Linguistic Analysis of Discourse on the Killing of Nonhuman Animals<sup>1</sup>

**Jill Jepson**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, The College of St. Catherine,  
2004 Randolph Ave., Saint Paul, MN 55105, USA  
[jjepson@stkate.edu](mailto:jjepson@stkate.edu)

Sent 5 November 2007, Accepted 5 January 2008

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## Abstract

Human attitudes about killing nonhuman animals are complex, ambivalent, and contradictory. This study attempts to elucidate those attitudes through a linguistic analysis of the terms used to refer to the killing of animals. Whereas terms used for killing human beings are highly specific and differentiated on the basis of the motivation for the killing, the nature of the participants, and evaluative and emotional content, terms used for killing animals are vague and interchangeable. Terms for animal-killing often background aspects of the act, making it more palatable to humans. When a term is extended from use with humans to use with animals, it lends a connotation of compassion and mercy to the killing. When a term is extended from use with animals to use with humans, it gives the killing a connotation of brutality. These findings reflect assumptions about the human “right” to take animals’ lives while serving to ameliorate the negative feelings such killings evoke.

## Keywords

animals, language, critical discourse analysis, put to sleep, euthanasia, slaughter

## Introduction

The killing of animals is the most extreme and significant expression of human power over them. Animals are killed by human beings in enormous numbers and for a multitude of reasons: for meat, fur, skin, and other products, and for entertainment. Animals also are killed when they are deemed a danger or nuisance; when they are deemed to be in excess; when they are being used as experimental subjects; when they are ill; when their owners no longer have the means or desire to care for them.

Human beings’ attitudes about the killing of nonhuman animals are fraught with contradiction. The loss of a companion animal often elicits great grief—sometimes as much as a human death. Occasionally, the death of a well-known

“lovable” animal, such as a popular animal in the zoo, becomes an occasion of public mourning. However, the person who grieves over the loss of a companion dog might have no emotional response to the sport killing of a deer. One who affectionately strokes an animal at a petting zoo might eat the flesh of an animal of the same species the same day. A public outraged over the killing of a pair of swans at a lake in New York (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, n.d.) has no reaction at all to the daily slaughter of millions of chickens and turkeys. Clearly, the human ability to juggle such contradictory reactions requires skilled mental sleight-of-hand.

A number of researchers have used linguistic approaches to explore the relationships of humans and nonhuman animals (Morris, Fidler, & Costall, 2000; Silverstein, 2004; Talebinejad & Dastjerdi, 2005). Leach (1966) discussed the relationship of animal abuse and the verbal devaluation of animals, drawing on such words as *squabble* (from *squab*) and *ass*. Vance (1995) has touched on linguistic issues in her explorations of the human-focus of ethical narratives. Kheel (1995) has explored ways discourse surrounding hunting attempts to legitimize the killing of nonhuman animals, such as the lighthearted past-time that is implied by the word “game.”

Several researchers have discussed the use of metaphors in which supposed traits of nonhumans are attributed to humans: *Don't be a chicken*; *He's stubborn as a mule*. Baker (1975) has pointed out that most metaphors linking nonhuman and human animals refer to animals whose main relationship to humans is one of service. Dunayer (1995) and Todasco (1995) have discussed the use of such metaphors specifically in references to women, in terms like *shrew*, *cow*, and *bitch*. Dunayer and Stibbe (2001) also draw attention to the fact that those negative images of animals are generally distorted: Loons are not crazy; chickens are not cowardly; rats do not *rat* on others.

Two of the most systematic linguistic analyses of human/nonhuman relationships are those of Stibbe (2001) and Goatley (2002). Stibbe uses Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the language used by animal product industries, pointing out the linguistic means by which the exploitation of animals is legitimized or obscured: the tendency to use mass nouns in reference to animals; the use of the pronoun *it* instead of *he* or *she* to refer to animals; the tendency to refer to animals by their uses, such as *broilers* and *beef*.

Goatley (2002) uses Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the representation of nature on BBC World Service Radio (WSR). Following Halliday (1978) and Hasan (1996), he bases his analysis on a hierarchy of grammatical structures, in which certain structures are deemed as depicting more power than others. Applying statistical analyses to a corpus from the WSR, Goatley determines how frequently words representing animals and other natural enti-

ties such as weather, water, and plants, are used in the various types of constructions. He concludes that the WSR privileges the human, representing nature as either a powerless tool used by humans or an untamed threat to them. Goatley also collected interesting information on the common collocates of some animal words: the most common collocate of *bird* is *killed*; the most common collocates of *whales* are *killed*, *killing*, and *hunted*; and those of other animals often relate to human uses for them—for *horse*, *racing*; for *dog*, *trained* and *watch*; for *mice*, *diabetic*, *gene*, and *liver*.

These studies rest on the understanding that language, far from being merely a set of symbols used for communication, is a dynamic system that both reflects and shapes thought. Word meanings are not static or clear-cut but flexible, fluid, and ambiguous. Furthermore, human beings exploit the flexibility of language to create and maintain power; bolster identity; banish certain attitudes or beliefs; support untested assumptions; and blind entire communities to alternative ways of thinking.

This paper presents the results of research in the ways human beings speak and write about killing animals in North American English (NAE) vis-à-vis the way they talk and write about killing humans. This study involved the examination of two sets of words: one set commonly used to denote animal-killing; the other, commonly used to denote human-killing. Through an analysis of the semantic properties of these terms and the contexts in which they are used, this paper attempts to elucidate the ways humans employ language to ameliorate the ambiguities and tensions evoked by the killing of animals.

This study addresses several questions: In what ways does the use of language support the assumption that humans have the right to take the lives of animals? Does language shed light on the uncertainty or discomfort humans feel with regard to the killing of animals? Does it serve to alleviate such feelings? How do human beings frame the killing of animals in such a way as to make it less objectionable?

### *Linguistic Concepts and Terminology*

This article rests on a number of linguistic concepts and terms that require clarification. First, much of what will be said assumes that the meanings of words are complex and flexible and that those meanings are sensitive to the contexts in which the words are used. Most words have common, basic meanings that then may be extended metaphorically or metonymically to meet various linguistic needs. A simple example drawn from the word *red* can clarify this notion. Dictionary definitions<sup>2</sup> for the basic meaning of *red* read

something like the following: a color whose hue resembles that of blood; the hue of the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum

However, the term *red* can be extended in many ways. Examples of some of these extensions occur in Sentences 1-4:

1. I got pulled over for running a red.
2. Was my face red! (How embarrassed I was!)
3. Jane was seeing red over the firing of her associate.
4. Many Americans once believed the Reds were a threat to democracy.

Clearly, all of these uses are related to the more basic definition of *red* as a color (stop lights are red; embarrassment causes redness of the face). Yet, their precise meanings extend well beyond the color. These definitions are extensions of the basic meaning of *red*.

This paper employs the term *basic meaning* to refer to the original, unextended meaning of a word. The basic meaning is generally the one native speakers will give if asked for a definition without being given a specific context. It is also generally the form listed first in dictionaries. The term *extended meaning* refers to words that are derived from the basic meaning via metaphor, metonymy, and other means; *semantic extension* refers to the process by which those extended meanings are formed. Although it is sometimes difficult to demonstrate which meaning is the basic one and which the extended, in many cases it is quite transparent. In the case of *red*, for example, it can be easily shown that the meanings in sentences 1-4 are extensions from the basic meaning and not the other way around.

A second set of concepts used in this paper is that of *highlighting* and *backgrounding*. Words highlight certain aspects of the entities and events to which they refer and obscure other aspects. A telling example can be drawn from the terms *illegal immigrant* and *undocumented worker*. These phrases refer to the same set of people—noncitizens of the United States working in the country without permission. Both terms are accurate: They generally refer to people who are immigrants and workers and who are in the country illegally and without documentation. However, *illegal immigrant* highlights lack of legality and “foreignness,” whereas *undocumented worker* highlights economic contribution and backgrounds illegitimacy by replacing *illegal* (a reference to law-breaking) with *undocumented* (a reference to an absence of appropriate paperwork).

Many words deflect attention from one aspect of an event or entity to another and bring into focus certain qualities or features while blurring others. Often, this is done through *euphemism*: the use of a mild, indirect, or positive

term for an entity or event considered distasteful or repugnant (such as the use of the term *private parts* for genitalia).

Finally, this paper will use conventional semantic terminology when referring to elements of sentences. *Agent* refers to the entity who or which performs an action or event (in this case, killing), and *patient* to refer to the entity who or which is affected by the action or event (that is, who is killed.)

This paper deals with lexical choices—the selection of one word over another—to refer to killing. Humans also use a number of grammatical means to deal with the ambiguities and tensions surrounding the killing of animals. For example, the passive voice is often used to avoid assigning agency, as in *The dog was put to sleep* as opposed to *The veterinarian put the dog to sleep*. Although such uses are interesting and important, they are beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses instead on which lexical items are used to refer to killing of humans and animals in various contexts.

## Method

The initial phase of this study involved the collection of references to the killing of humans and nonhuman animals. Examples from electronic, print, and broadcast media and from conversation were recorded over a period of two years. From this initial set of data, eight terms were selected—four commonly used to refer to the killing of animals (*euthanize*, *put to sleep*, *destroy*, and *slaughter*) and four commonly used to refer to the killing of humans (*euthanize*, *execute*, *murder*, and *slaughter*). The selection of these terms was based on the fact that they are all nontechnical and frequently used. They are all terms a moderately educated English-speaking adult can be expected to understand and to have used, heard, or read. They also appear in a wide range of types of communication: scholarly articles, magazine articles, web logs, news broadcasts, and conversation. Furthermore, two of the terms—*euthanize* and *slaughter*—can refer to either animals or humans, thus providing a strong basis for comparison.

Next, additional samples of the words' uses were collected through word searches on the search engine Google and on the periodical databases EBSCO and Infotrac. The texts from which samples were gleaned included journalistic articles and editorials, scholarly communications, web logs, television programs (both news and entertainment), personal communications, government publications, and e-mails. The collected examples included a variety of forms of each word. For instance, for the word *euthanize*, the set contained the following types of phrases:

1. X *euthanized* X
2. X performed/carried out *euthanasia* on X
3. The *euthanization* of X by X

For the sake of simplicity, the term *euthanize* will be employed here to subsume the terms *euthanasia*, *euthanization* and other terms derived from the same root. The same practice will be followed with respect to the other words analyzed here. The resulting set of data consisted of 1,587 examples (Table 1) distributed among the terms as follows:

**Table 1. Number of Examples Collected for Each Term From All Sources**

| Term                      | Patient                 | Number of Examples |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Euthanize                 | nonhuman                | 336                |
| Destroy                   | nonhuman                | 242                |
| Put to sleep              | nonhuman                | 117                |
| Slaughter                 | nonhuman                | 115                |
| <b>Subtotal</b>           | <b>nonhuman</b>         | <b>810</b>         |
| Euthanize                 | human                   | 122                |
| Murder                    | human                   | 312                |
| Execute                   | human                   | 238                |
| Slaughter                 | human                   | 105                |
| <b>Subtotal</b>           | <b>human</b>            | <b>777</b>         |
| <b>Total of all terms</b> | <b>human + nonhuman</b> | <b>1587</b>        |

The analysis of these examples involved examination of the following:

1. The nature of the agent and the patient. For example, in the killing of a human being, the agent might be a soldier, the state, or a doctor; and the patient might be enemy troops, a convicted criminal, or a dying person, etc. Similarly, in the killing of a nonhuman animal, the roles of agent and patient might be filled by a veterinarian and a dying animal, a hunter and a game animal, a farmer and a farm animal; or a variety of other entities.
2. The purported motivation for the killing, such as war, punishment of a criminal, or "mercy killing" for a human patient; and culling of herds, protection of human health, or the gleaning of food or other products for an animal patient.
3. The evaluative and emotional content of the utterance: the speaker's attitudes and feelings about the event, as expressed linguistically. Thus, a

phrase like *Sadly, my dog Charlie had to be euthanized*, carries different emotional content than *Chickens should be slaughtered young to ensure the best quality meat*.

4. The source of the term: whether it is being used in its basic meaning or is a semantic extension; and, if it is an extension, the relationship between the extended and the basic meanings.
5. The linguistic context of the utterance: in particular, the words that co-occur with the term under consideration, such as *unfortunate*, *tragic*, *brutal*, *humane*, and so on.

Dictionary entries also served as sources of data for this study. Four popular dictionaries were used: *World Book Dictionary (1991)*, *YourDictionary.com*, *Oxford English Dictionary (1989)*, and *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. As collections of information about current usage based on the examination of large corpora by professional compilers, dictionaries can be extremely helpful tools in determining the use and meanings of words. Dictionaries were especially useful to this study in providing information about basic meanings of words that could be used to supplement the textual analysis.

## Results

### *Basic and Extended Meanings*

Of the terms used for human-killing, three (*execute*, *euthanize*, and *murder*) have basic meanings that refer to the killing of human beings, and one (*slaughter*) is a semantic extension. The converse is true of the terms used for killing animals: three (*euthanize*, *put to sleep*, and *destroy*) are semantic extensions from other domains, and one (*slaughter*) has a basic meaning that refers to animal killing.

The basic meanings of *execute*, *euthanize*, and *murder* are as follows:

*Execute*: To put to death by carrying out a legal sentence.

1. He was given a couple of shots of whiskey, then the state executed him in front of thirty-two witnesses (Halperin, 2000 par. 24, n.p.).

*Euthanize*: To kill or permit the death of an individual suffering from a terminal illness or an incurable condition for reasons of mercy.<sup>3</sup>

2. Doctors working in hurricane-ravaged New Orleans reportedly euthanized critically ill patients rather than leave them to die in agony... (Baron, 2005, par. 24).

*Murder*: The unlawful killing of a human being, especially with premeditation; criminal homicide.

3. Three women—all of whom led “high-risk lifestyles”—... have been murdered in the past three months (Skipp & Campos-Flores, 2006, p. 13).

In contrast, to these terms for killing humans, three of the four terms used for the killing of animals are semantic extensions. *Euthanize*, as indicated earlier, refers in its basic meaning to the “mercy killing” of human beings. The basic definitions of *put to sleep* and *destroy* are also extended from other domains:

*Put to sleep*: (a) to induce slumber, such as by means of a drug or a soporific activity; (b) to cause unconsciousness by means of anesthetic drugs; and (c) to help someone get to sleep.

4. It’s important for babies to get used to ... being put to sleep. (Thirty-one ways, n.d., n.p.). Vampire flicks come and Vampire flicks go, but this is the first that ever put me to sleep (McMullen, n.d., n. p.). How will my child be put to sleep (for surgery)? (Children’s Memorial, n.d., n.p.)

*Destroy*: To cause the destruction of, to damage irreparably, to do away with.

5. The accounting firm Andersen acknowledged Thursday that it destroyed a “significant” number of documents related to its audit of Enron Corp... (Simon and Gerstenzang, 2002, n.p.).
6. Fire destroyed a historic landmark in the Androscoggin County town of Leeds Friday (News 8 WMTW, n.d., par. 1).
7. In the foster home, George destroyed his toys and was angry and defiant (Bondy, Davis, Hagen, Spiritos, & Winnick, 1990, p. 2).

Only one of the terms discussed here is used in its basic meaning for the killing of animals:

*Slaughter*: To kill animals for the use of their bodies as food, fabric and other products.

8. We slaughter pigs and cattle to sell the meat in our region (GPU Nakotne, n.d., par. 1.).

*Slaughter* is also the only term out of the six examined in this study that is used in its extended meaning for human beings. The implications of these findings about basic and extended meanings will be discussed later. It is first necessary to look more closely at the semantics of these terms.

### *Specificity in Terms for Killing Human Beings and Animals*

#### *Terms for the Killing of Human Beings*

Terms used for the killing of human beings are highly particularized. Each term refers to a specific type of killing, distinguished by contextual features,



including the nature of the (a) agent, (b) patient, (c) motivation for the killing, and (d) speaker's attitudes about the killing—that is, the speaker's ethical evaluation and emotional response.

The clearest and least complex term in this regard is probably *execute*. This term carries implicit information about the agent, the patient, and the motivations for the killing. It refers to the killing of a human being by the state as punishment for a crime or by carrying out a sentence. Thus, agent, patient, and motivation are all incorporated into the term.

*Euthanize* also carries information about the patient and motivation, although not the agent. Thus, the agent may be a doctor, a family member, the state, and possibly even a stranger, but the patient must be a very ill, disabled, or dying person and the motivation for the killing must be to end the person's suffering.

9. In the Netherlands, Groningen University Hospital has decided its doctors will euthanize children under the age of 12, if doctors believe their suffering is intolerable or if they have an incurable illness (Smith, 2004, n.p.).
10. An assisted suicide advocate in New Zealand who euthanized her mother and wrote a book about it will go to jail (Ertelt, 2004, par.).

The term *murder* refers to a deliberate killing of a human being, and it provides information about the agent, patient, and reasons; however, for the most part, it does so negatively by what it eliminates, such as battlefield or self-defense killings. Murder also contains a strong evaluative and emotional component. Thus, in a sentence like 11, the killing is assumed to be not only intentional but illegal and immoral, even if no other information is provided about the agent, motivation, or any other aspect of the context:

11. He spoke outside his family's home just feet from a private security booth in Belle Haven, close to the spot where Moxley was murdered (Christoffersen, 2003, par. 8).

As discussed earlier, *slaughter* is the only one of the terms that refers to the killing of human beings in a meaning that is semantically extended. In its usage with human beings, *slaughter* is defined almost entirely by its evaluative and emotional content: to kill (people) in large numbers; massacre; to kill in a violent or brutal manner.

Although the term often implies a large number of patients, as in 12 and 13, that is not a necessary component of its meaning, as 14 indicates. What examples 18-20 have in common is that they all indicate a belief on the part of the speaker that the killing was especially brutal or horrifying:

12. The tribunal reached its nadir in July 1995, when Serb forces led by General Ratko Mladic slaughtered some 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in the UN “safe area” of Srebrenica (Bass, 2003, p. 83).
13. If we saw the deep psychological scars of slaughter, the way it maims and stunts those who participate in war for the rest of their lives, we would keep our children away (Hedges, 2003, p. 16).
14. An emotional cry for justice continues to echo through Harlem and other communities across New York City in the wake of last week’s brutal slaughter of an unarmed 22-year-old Guinean immigrant, Amadou Diallo, by four white cops (Browne, 1999, p. 11).

Aspects of some of these terms—most notably *execute* and *euthanize*—are contentious in North American culture; thus, their meanings may, for certain speakers and audiences, have strong emotional and evaluative components. It is not unusual to hear sentences like 15 and 16.

15. No matter what justification a nation state makes: execution is murder. (Execution is murder, n.d., n.p.).
16. Euthanasia is murder (Roberg, n.d., n.p.).

However, the negative evaluation of these types of killings is not implicit in the terms *execution* or *euthanasia* themselves. Instead, the speaker must make an explicit evaluation. In 15 and 16, the speaker does so by use of the term *murder*. Without use of that word, or some other explicitly evaluative term, neither *execute* nor *euthanize* provides information about whether the speaker considers such acts to be immoral. Thus, in 17 and 18, the use of *execute* and *euthanize* provides no evidence of the speakers’ views of those acts:

17. Peterson might not be executed for decades—if ever—given the protracted appeals process and the backlog of death row executions (Kilborn and Atkin, 2004, p. 14).
18. A Dutch study on the occurrence of euthanasia and assisted suicide among patients with ALS . . . found that one in five opts to die by either euthanasia or assisted suicide (International Task Force on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, 2002, par. 1).

In short, these terms for the killing of human beings are highly specific and carry large amounts of information about various aspects of the context for the killing. Further support for this contention can be drawn from the fact that the terms are non-interchangeable. Thus, sentences like 19-22 below

are semantically anomalous:<sup>4</sup> It is conventional in linguistic articles to mark ungrammatical or anomalous sentences with an asterisk.

19. \*The soldier euthanized five enemy troops.
20. \*The dying patient was mercifully executed by the physician.
21. \*The politician was euthanized by one of his rival's henchmen.
22. \*The soldiers humanely slaughtered all the men of the village.

Table 2 summarizes these findings with respect to the four terms used for killing human beings.

**Table 2. Semantic Properties of Words Used For the Killing of Human Beings**

| Term      | Agent  | Patient   | Motivation                                      | Evaluation/<br>Emotional<br>Content                  |
|-----------|--|---|---|--|
| murder    | excludes certain agents (such as soldiers in battle) | excludes certain patients, (such as enemy troops) | excludes some motivations, such as self-defense | strongly negative                                    |
| euthanize |  | sick, dying, or severely disabled person          | eliminate patient's suffering                   |  |
| execute   | state  | criminal  | punishment or political reasons                 |  |
| slaughter |  | innocent, vulnerable; may imply large numbers     |   | strong implication of brutality, cruelty, bloodiness |

#### *Terms for the Killing of Animals*

In contrast to the terms discussed above, all but one of the terms used for the killing of animals are used interchangeably, and they carry little information about the agent, the reason for the killing, the patient (except that the patient is an animal), or the speaker's attitudes.

The term *euthanasia* is most telling in this respect. In recent years, the term *euthanize* has come into the veterinary vocabulary in place of *put to sleep* for

the killing of a sick companion animal. In these cases, the use of *euthanize* is analogous to its use with human patients:

23. Because the prognosis was poor, the cat was euthanized at the request of the owners (Willis, n.d., par. 5).
24. A horse was euthanized after breaking her leg at the PRCA Wild West Stampede (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA], n.d., par. 1).

However, when applied to animals, the use of *euthanize* is not restricted to the sick or dying.

25. Animals are normally euthanized at the end of a study for the purpose of sample collection or post-mortem examination (Research Animal Resources, n.d., par. 1); Pit Bull Euthanized After Attack On Girl (NBC 10, 2006, n.p.).
26. The numbers of unwanted pet animals euthanized each year are staggering (Rendering euthanized animals, n.d., par. 3).
27. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) said today it will euthanize about 129 cattle in Washington state because of a risk that some of them were raised in Canada with the cow that was recently found to have bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) (Roos, n.d., n.p.).
28. It is probably more cost-effective... to euthanize some pigs up front after ranking them on body size rather than trying to squeeze too many pigs onto too few functional nipples (Dos and don'ts, 2001, p. 40).

In these cases, *euthanize* is used to refer to killing animals for research purposes, because of overpopulation, because they are perceived as dangerous, to prevent the spread of disease, and to cull a herd. Unlike the use of the term with human beings, when *euthanize* is extended to animals, it is drained of information about the agent, the patient, and the motivation for the killing. Examining uses of *put to sleep* and *destroy* are also instructive with respect to the lack of specificity of terms for killing animals.

29. Each year, about 950 Black Bears and 50 grizzlies have to be destroyed to protect the public (Don't attract bears, n.d., n.p.).
30. ... outbreaks of bubonic plague have been controlled by destroying rats and other rodents that can carry the plague bacteria (United States Coast Guard, n.d., n.p.).

31. Riccardo, an 8-month-old baby elephant, was destroyed on August 5, 2004, after suffering severe and irreparable fractures to both hind legs.... (PETA, n.d., par. 3).
32. One Sunday, my mother-in-law said her dog was very sick and she was going to have to put it to sleep (Cheap).
33. When (performer) Roy (Horn) was attacked... he didn't let them put the tiger to sleep (Tiger).
34. A considerable number of... animals are put to sleep because a family member was unable to tolerate his or her allergies (Martin, 1998, p. 32).

Like *euthanize*, *destroy* and *put to sleep* are used for many types of killing. They carry little or no information about the patient (whether the animal is sick, is dangerous, is being killed for food); the motivations for the killing; or the speaker's attitudes or emotions about the killing. These terms, unlike those for killing humans, are interchangeable. Any of the terms can be used in sentences 29-34 without altering the meaning.

### *Backgrounding and Highlighting*

Important concomitants of the fact that so many of the terms for killing animals are semantic extensions from other domains is that each of them carries connotations from its basic meaning into the domain of animal killing and that these connotations serve to background significant aspects of the event.

*Euthanize* is the most revealing case in this regard. As discussed earlier, this term, when used with humans, is primarily defined by the *motivation* for the killing. That the killing is done in order to alleviate the pain and suffering of the patient lends the term connotations of compassion, mercy, and even selflessness on the part of the agent. When used with animals, however, *euthanize* loses its reference to a specific motive and refers instead to the supposedly kind *manner* in which the animal is killed. In this way, the term deflects the focus of the discourse away from motivations for the killing—which is often for the benefit of human beings—and toward the supposed compassion of the agent. Thus, the human agents of the killing are cast in a benign light, regardless of their reasons for taking life.

These suggestions are borne out by two pieces of evidence. First, there are many cases in which “inhumane” methods of killing animals are juxtaposed to “humane” methods, with the latter termed *euthanizing* (or *euthanasia*):

35. [Using anti-freeze to kill a dog] is awfully brutal man. There's more humane ways of euthanizing the little guy (How to dispose of a dog (a) n.d., n.p.).
36. I have witnessed dogs being destroyed with carbon-monoxide at an animal shelter. It was terrible!... [Carbon monoxide] should not be used when their (sic) are very humane ways of euthanizing a dog. (How to dispose of a dog (b), n.d., n.p.).
37. I saw this [furriers killing cats and dogs] on TV and was absolutely appalled... I can't see the reason for such cruelty when there are humane ways of euthanizing animals (Yes, Michael, 2006, n.p.).
38. Traditionally, the "solution" to the feral cat problem was eradication of the colony, sometimes by grossly inhumane methods. Even when more humane euthanasia is used, however, eradication simply does not work (Walker, n.d., par. 4).

In each of these examples, two types of killing are compared: a method deemed "brutal," "terrible," "cruel," or "inhumane," and a method deemed "humane" and labeled *euthanasia*. The motivations of the agent are essentially ignored in these examples, and the humane manner of the killing is brought to the fore.

The second piece of evidence that supports the suggestion that the function of *euthanize* is to focus attention on the method of killing and its presumed lack of cruelty is the very frequent use of the terms *humane* and *humanely* with *euthanize* or *euthanasia* in reference to the killing of animals. Sentences 35-38 are not the only examples of *humanely* co-occurring with *euthanize*. In 200 of the 336 examples (59%) of *euthanize* use for the killing of animals, the term was preceded by *humane* or *humanely*:<sup>5</sup>

39. I have been called to attend more of the downed cows to provide veterinary assistance and to humanely euthanize the hopeless cases (Bauston, 2002, par. 21).
40. During the nineteenth century, physicians encouraged to prescribe narcotics for the dying were said to engage in "obstetrics for the soul"; today lawyers and doctors more typically argue over how much more humanely we euthanize dogs and cats (Betts, 1998, 64).
41. For instance, in national parks throughout the world, park officials will not usually intervene humanely, either with veterinary care or euthanasia, in situations where wild animals are suffering or dying from supposedly "natural" causes (Croke et al., 1995, 25).

The term *put to sleep* also obscures aspects of the killing of animals, but in this case it backgrounds not the motivations of the agent but the reality that the

agent's actions result in death. It is euphemistic: Not only does the term refer to the benign and temporary state of sleep—rather than to death—but being put to sleep has associations with nurturance, as when children are lulled to sleep by their parents. Thus, when used to refer to the killing of animals, this term highlights images of gentleness and caring and backgrounds the reality of the animal's death—even when the killing is done for reasons that are utterly humanocentric:

42. The coyotes who bite people are called “the bad guys.” These bad guys are trapped and put to sleep (University of California Los Angeles n.d., n.p.).
43. ... the researchers reproduced alcohol abuse in rats. After a bout of “binge drinking,” the drunken rats were put to sleep and their livers removed (Maltin, n.d., par. 4).

Like *ethanize* and *put to sleep*, *destroy*, when used with animals, is a semantic extension. Unlike the previous terms, however, *destroy* derives from a basic meaning that refers not to human beings but to inanimate objects. Although *destroy* is sometimes used with human patients, in those cases, it generally refers to (a) some aspect of the individual's life: financial ruination, the destruction of a reputation, or damaged health; or (b) a specific body part (as in “Smoking is destroying his lungs”). *Destroy* is not used to refer to the killing of a human being.

When *destroy* is extended to refer to the killing of animals, it backgrounds another aspect of the event: the status of the animal as a living being. Using a term that—in its basic sense—applies only to objects or abstract entities places animals in the category of *thing* and robs them of their nature as living entities.

### *A Unique Case: Slaughter*

Of the terms analyzed here, the word *slaughter* is the only one whose basic meaning refers to the killing of animals and that is semantically extended to refer to the killing of humans. Unlike the other terms for killing animals, *slaughter* does not obscure any aspect of the killing: The motivation for the killing is the use of animals' bodies; the agent is anyone who kills an animal for that reason; and the patient is any animal so killed.

The most telling aspect of the term *slaughter* is what happens to its evaluative and emotional content when the meaning is extended from animal killing to human killing. When used with animals, *slaughter* is almost completely devoid of such content:<sup>6</sup>

44. It [a book under review] begins by describing the cells and tissues of the body, then applies this information in techniques of slaughter... (Review of Wilson's, 2006, n.p.).
45. People involved in the slaughter and preparation of meat appear to be the most at risk [of bird flu] (Liao, 2006, p. 3).
46. Here [in Argentina], the time between the slaughter of an animal and the moment the animal appears on the table is much shorter than in the northern countries, where it can extend to weeks, even months (O'Mara, 2006, 1).
47. When you use an antibiotic, you're not allowed to slaughter the animal for a certain period of time (Weise, 2006, par. 3).

These uses clearly entail no expression of emotion and no ethical judgment on the part of the speaker. However, when *slaughter* is extended to the killing of human beings, the connotations of the term shift dramatically, taking on a very strong evaluative and emotional component:

48. Insurrections began in 1835 and were answered with brutal slaughter by Santa Anna, whose take-no-prisoners policy sometimes shocked his subordinates (Eichenwald, 2003, p. 23).
49. The international community withdrew its peacekeeping forces, carefully avoided using the term "genocide," and shut its eyes to the brutal slaughter of hundreds of thousands of defenseless children, women, and men (Uvin, 1996, 17).
50. Several of the most notable massacres that took place in the 100 days of slaughter that took the lives of between 800,000 and 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994 occurred in churches. (Priest trial, 2005, 3).

In 47-49, *slaughter* suggests an egregiously malevolent agent, an innocent patient (and often a large number of patients), and a context of exceptional brutality. It carries a strong implication of social unacceptability and a clear ethical judgment on the part of the speaker/writer. In 48 and 49, it is explicitly equated with *genocide* and *massacre*.

Furthermore, when *slaughter* is used in reference to human beings, it frequently co-occurs with *brutal*—as it does in 47 and 48. Just as *humane* is often used to reinforce the positive connotations of *euthanize* when it is semantically extended to uses with animals, *brutal* is frequently employed to buttress the negative connotations of *slaughter* when it is extended to uses with humans.



## Discussion

The findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. Terms used for killing humans are highly specific and carry information about several salient features of the act of killing.
2. Terms used for the killing of animals are very general, carry little information about the act, and are, in many cases, interchangeable.
3. Several terms used for killing animals—*euthanize*, *put to sleep*, and *destroy*—are semantic extensions that carry connotations that obscure significant aspects of the act of killing, such as the agent's motivations, the reality of the death resulting from the act, and the status of the animal as a living being.

One term—*slaughter*—carries as its basic meaning a reference to killing animals and is applied to humans only in its extended meaning. When referring to the killing of animals, *slaughter* is devoid of emotional content or ethical evaluation; when it is used with human beings, it takes on strong emotional and evaluative connotations.

What do these findings tell us about how human beings—at least speakers of NAE—think about the killing of animals?

First, it is likely that NAE terms for killing humans are so specific and carry so much information because the killing of humans is at the forefront of human ethical and social thinking: Nothing is more troublesome to societies, governments, and the human psyche than the killing of one human by another. On the other hand, societies face situations in which the killing of humans appears necessary (or at least advantageous), such as in the killing of criminals, enemies, or people dying in pain. Because every aspect of the killing of a human being must be taken into consideration for humans to determine, for example, whether it is to be deemed justified, acceptable, or criminal—the language around human killing must capture a wide range of subtle and complex dimensions. We need to carefully classify, characterize, and differentiate disparate types of killing in order to preserve our horror at some of them, while allowing others to be socially (and emotionally) acceptable.

In contrast, humans pay very little attention to the question of animal killing. Humans feel no need to differentiate between sanctioned and condemned forms of killing, because the taking of animal life is not generally a violation of morality or law. Because animals are *property* that can be disposed of at human will, there is no need to categorize types of animal killing on the basis of their motivation or other aspects of their context; nor do humans feel the need for language that implicitly carries ethical evaluation. The structure of

language surrounding the killing of animals in NAE is based largely on the assumption that the taking of animal life is a human right.

The fact that humans take for granted their right to kill animals does not mean, however, that the taking of animal life is devoid of discomfort. Human-animal relationships are complex and ambiguous enough to leave humans with underlying uneasiness about animal killing. The use of the terms *euthanize*, *put to sleep*, and *destroy* all testify to that discomfort. By obscuring the actual motivations for killing animals, blurring the reality of the animals' deaths and placing animals in the category of "object," human beings avoid confronting the fact that they regularly kill living beings for the convenience and benefit of humans. All of these terms serve as linguistic means of alleviating the unease humans feel at the killing of animals.

The difference between attitudes about killing animals and attitudes about killing humans is most clearly revealed by our use of the term *slaughter*. The bluntness of *slaughter* appears to be related to the fact that the killing of animals for food is less troubling to human beings than killing animals for other reasons. Meat eating is such a firmly established custom in Western society that most people take for granted the morality of killing animals for meat. Thus, when used in reference to animals, *slaughter* is devoid of evaluative or emotional content.

The application of *slaughter* to human patients, however, puts it into a situation of unambiguous moral revulsion. Paradoxically, this revulsion seems to stem from the very fact that *slaughter* is so devoid of evaluative or emotional content when used for animals. The one who slaughters animals for food is expected to do so without sentiment. The detached, impassive killing of cows, chickens, turkeys, or pigs is accepted as business and survival. However, applying that impassivity to the killing of humans is despicable. It is the very suggestion of indifference on the part of the agent that makes *slaughter* a term of such strong evaluative content when it is used for human beings.

## Conclusion

The detailed analysis of language use can provide significant insights into the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. In this study, an analysis of one language community—speakers of NAE—has been applied to the most dramatic manifestation of human power over animals: the power over their lives.

This research should be seen as only a first step in using language analysis to uncover human attitudes and feelings about killing animals. For one thing, some aspects of animal killing were absent from this study. Most nota-

bly, none of the terms referred to the killing of animals for sport. This was an unintentional result of the selection of the terms, none of which were found to be used in hunting terminology. Additional research on the language of hunting could yield important evidence about human views of the taking of animals' lives.

More important, this research focuses on only a single set of dialects of one language. More extensive work on a wide variety of languages could yield significant insights into culture-specific and universal aspects of human attitudes toward the killing of animals.

## Notes

1. Requests for reprints should be sent to Jill Jepson, Department of English, The College of St. Catherine, 2004 Randolph Ave., Saint Paul, MN 55105, USA.

2. The dictionary definitions presented in this paper are composites intended to capture the essential facets of definitions from a set of well-known dictionaries. The dictionaries used as a basis for the composition of these definitions were: *YourDictionary.com*; *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*; *The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition*; and the *World Book Dictionary*.

3. The *Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition*, gives as its most basic definition of *euthanasia*, "gentle and easy death." The other three dictionaries used in this study all present definitions that incorporate the notion of "mercy killing" for the most basic meaning of *euthanasia*. I found no textual examples from NAE in which *euthanasia* was used in that way, however. This may represent a difference in British and North American usage. As the other dictionaries used in this study are likely to represent NAE usage more accurately, this analysis assumes that for NAE speakers, the term *euthanasia* refers primarily to killing in order to put a dying or severely sick or disabled person out of his or her agony. Furthermore, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the verbal form of the word as *euthanatized*. In this study, the form studied was *euthanized*, in accordance with NAE usage.

4. It is conventional in linguistic articles to mark ungrammatical or anomalous sentences with an asterisk.

5. This should not be thought of as representative in a statistical sense, as the method of collection used here was not random. However, it does suggest a very frequent co-occurrence of *humane* and *humanely* with *euthanize* in respect to the killing of animals.

6. There are rare instances in which *slaughter* is used with evaluative/emotional content in reference to animals, such as with reference to the slaughter of baby seals. In these cases, the slaughter is considered exceptionally cruel and brutal. Furthermore, in none of the cases I found of this use were the animals considered typical farm animals, such as cattle, pigs, chickens, and so on. In short, the use of *slaughter* as a term carrying great emotional weight with respect to killing animals is both rare and highly specialized.

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