

*Is Language a Form of Animal Communication, or Something Different?  
Implications for Ecological Identities*

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The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2020  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

For many, saying humans are a kind of animal might seem to be an uncontroversial truism. It follows that human communication systems, including language, are animal communication systems. Some linguists, however, describe language as categorically distinct from, rather than as a unique or rare form of, animal communication (e.g. 'language vs animal communication' rather than 'language vs other forms of animal communication'). This could be a product of, for example, descriptive imprecision, merely repeating a conventional formulation, or of explicitly endorsing a philosophical view that humans are non-animals. I argue that, regardless of motivation, such descriptions can reify an ideology of human exceptionalism in ways that are both scientifically suspect and ecologically problematic. This paper will discuss how the discipline of linguistics and certain claims of the radical uniqueness of human language, and by extension humanity, can be vehicles for an ideology of human exceptionalism with disastrous ecological consequences. Additionally, this paper argues that linguists should care about how the relationship of human language to animal communication is framed for reasons pertaining to both descriptive accuracy and broader ecological concerns.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Ecological Identity, Relational Identity, Ecosophy

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## **Introduction**

In conventional zoological taxonomy, humans are known by the species name *Homo sapiens*, and are of the genus *Homo*, the family *Hominidae*, the order *Primate*, the class *Mammalia*, the phylum *Chordata*, and the kingdom *Animalia*. Humans are animals. This seems simple. Yet, we humans often describe ourselves as distinct from animals. That is, we do not merely describe ourselves as unique or special animals, but as non-animals. We write of ‘humans and animals’, use expressions such as ‘animal welfare’ which usually do not include humans in their scope, and, in linguistics, often refer to language as something to be contrasted with animal communication rather than as a form of animal communication. It is these formulations in linguistics, such as ‘language vs animal communication’, which are focused on in this paper.

Frames are the mental structures that shape the way we reason (Lakoff, 2006) and framing is the set of processes, often linguistic, in constructing and activating frames. Frames may be thought of as a kind of cognitive story for organizing some aspect of experience of life and how a concept is framed can impact the way the concept is structured in the minds of readers/listeners (Stibbe, 2015). When language is framed as being distinct from animal communication as in the manner above, linguists are being descriptively inaccurate because it implies that humans are not animals. Furthermore, I argue that to the degree that the discipline of linguistics frames human communication systems, including language, as distinct from animal communication systems in general, then the discipline of linguistics is not only perpetuating a descriptive inaccuracy but also tacitly contributing to an ideology of human exceptionalism that can have disastrous ecological consequences.

## **Human Exceptionalism**

Plumwood (1993; 2002; 2007) describes human exceptionalism as positing a discontinuity between humans and other animals and between humans and nature writ large; a human/nature dualism which radically excludes the two from one another. That which is human is not animal or of nature. Humans are defined, at least in part, by their disconnection to other animals and nature, and human identity takes a form alienated from the other-than-human in which humans can externally control nature and other animals.

Human exceptionalism is usually covert or unexamined. The ideology is often taken for granted in ways that reify it, or make it seem ‘natural’. That we so casually and confidently speak of ‘humans and animals’ in English and many other languages as if humans were not in fact a kind of animal is testament to this. To many, this may seem benign and be considered no more than ‘everyday’ language, a frequent and convenient way to refer humans and/or other animals. However, it is exactly the perceived innocence of ‘everyday’ language patterns which masks assumptions which are problematic and the frequency of the patterns in turn reifies the problematic assumptions so that they go unquestioned. Human exceptionalism constructs humans as being apart from or above nature and consequently justifies attitudes and behaviors that are at the root of ecological crises such as climate change and loss of biodiversity. Therefore, by positioning humans as outside of nature, by which I mean independent of ecological relationships, human exceptionalism contributes to conditions that will

result in widespread human suffering as ecosystems in which humans are entangled break down.

Ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015), in some strains at least, analyzes language practices from a normative ecosophical stance: Are the practices ecologically helpful or harmful? That is, in what ways may language practices contribute to ecological problems, or alternatively, support life sustaining ecological understanding and practices. Language practices that reify human exceptionalism and that portray humans as apart from or above nature should be resisted because they ignore, obfuscate, or deny the ways that humans are members of ecological webs and are entangled with all other entities in a given ecosystem. In doing so, they raise the likelihood of we humans holding attitudes or behaving in ways that are ecologically destructive. The ways that many English users (and users of many other languages) constantly refer to humans and other animals in ways that construe humans as non-animals is, I argue, such a language practice.

### **Linguistics and Human Exceptionalism**

Of course, language practices that reify human exceptionalism may be found not only in linguistics, but nearly anywhere. Nonetheless, the ways that the discipline of linguistics sometimes describes language is the focus here. The main reason is that, since language (or linguistic capacity) is often described as a trait that distinguishes humans from other species (e.g., Hauser et al., 2002), the ways that specialists who study language (i.e. linguists) frame the relationship of language to animal communication in general may have an especially strong influence on how non-specialists understand the relationship. It is difficult to imagine changes to ‘everyday’ language regarding the relationships of humans and other animals if the relevant scholarly and scientific disciplines tacitly maintain language practices that set humans out as non-animals. A secondary reason is that the matter of when linguists frame this relationship in terms such as ‘language vs animal communication’ provides a stark example of how the unexamined ideology of human exceptionalism can infiltrate scientific discourse and result in inaccurate descriptions. Put more directly, the language that linguists use to describe language and animal communication is important as a narrow matter of terminology and as a broad matter of resisting the reification of human exceptionalism.

To be clear, I am not arguing that linguists (or others) in general support an ideology of human exceptionalism when they write things such as ‘language vs animal communication’ when a formulation such as ‘language vs other forms of animal communication’ is available. It could be a simple matter of linguistic imprecision or the underlying assumptions being rendered invisible rather than an outright endorsement of a humans-are-not-animals thesis. In other words, the motivation for language practices that reify human exceptionalism may be genuinely innocent. Unfortunately, the consequences may be the same regardless of motivation.

Pennycook (2018) summarized many critiques of how the discipline of linguistics has, wittingly and unwittingly, been critical in justifying and/or maintaining an ideological story of human exceptionalism. These include that language is often invoked to divide humans from other animals, it is anthropocentrically defined to exclude other animals, and it is posited by some to be radically discontinuous with other forms of animal

communication (i.e. it did not evolve or develop from earlier forms of communication that our species may share with others). These are serious critiques that illustrate how particular conceptions of language can be vehicles for human exceptionalism and it seems that these particular conceptions need to be challenged to disrupt the reification of human exceptionalism in linguistics.

However, my argument does not rely on such critiques; in fact, they are non-issues in my argument. As a matter of terminology, my critique of formulations like ‘language vs animal communication’ is rooted in the idea that such formulations are inaccurate because humans are animals and therefore language is a form of animal communication. This argument can be expressed as:

I: If humans are animals, then all forms of human communication, including language, are forms of animal communication.

II: Humans are animals.

III: Thus, all forms of human communication, including language, are forms of animal communication.

The ideas that language divides humans from other species or that language is defined in a way that excludes other species are not in themselves problems; the capacity for language can be a solely human trait without reifying human exceptionalism as long as language is understood to be a form of animal communication because humans are animals.

The idea that language is evolutionarily discontinuous with other forms of animal communication is not one I am sympathetic to, but neither is it an issue in my general argument. Even if linguistic capacity in humans were the result of a single, recent, random mutation that enabled a communicative ability wholly independent from forms in other species, it would not inherently be an argument for human exceptionalism because humans would still be animals and thus the communicative ability which arose from such a mutation would still be a form of animal communication.

### **Humans are Animals**

The main question for my argument is: Are humans in fact animals? Obviously, I think the answer is ‘yes’. This may seem like I am endorsing Animalism (Olsen, 2007; Snowdon, 2014)). I am sympathetic to Animalism, but that is a different issue. Animalism is question of personal identity. My argument is not about personal identity, but ecological identity.

Ecological identities are a kind of relational identity. Relational identities are based on roles and relationships with others rather than essential traits, and their level of analysis has been described as being at the interpersonal, rather than the individual, level (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Roles and relationships do not only exist between persons, however, they also exist among members of ecosystems. Both biotic and abiotic entities in ecosystems play specific roles based on their relationships to one another. Thus an ecological identity is similar to the idea of a relational, interpersonal identity, but extended to the roles and relationships we have as members of ecosystems. Holding an ecological identity does not require the specific, personal

identification of the self with being an animal (i.e. Animalism), but it does require understanding humans collectively to be animals that are part of, not apart from, ecosystems.

Biologically, this is not controversial. Although we often focus on our cognitive differences with other species, they are ultimately products of the same processes that have shaped all life on Earth. Human/nature dualism is untenable because there is no method through which humans and human traits can be disentangled from ecosystems or the processes that sustain life on Earth. De Waal (2016) refers to the tendency to avoid thinking of or describing the animality of humans as anthropodenial, and eloquently repositions humans as but one of many animal species that does not reject the unique traits of humanity: “Instead of a gap [between humans and other species], we face a gently sloping beach created by the steady pounding of millions of waves. Even if human intellect is higher up on the beach, it was shaped by the same forces battering the shore.” We humans can accept that being animals does not make us less human, in fact it is partially that which defines us. Our language practices can reflect this, including the matter of how we describe language: as a unique form of animal communication.

## **Conclusion**

Human exceptionalism is not the only story we can tell about ourselves. We do not have to see ourselves as apart from, or above, nature. We do not have to consider it beneath us to be animals, nor indulge the fantasy that we have transcended animality or are exempt from ecosystemic relationships. Ecological identities are key to these potential stories. Our language practices are where these stories can be first realized, or in some cases remembered. Different stories are not the end goal, but they raise the likelihood that we might adopt perspectives that are more ecologically healthy and sustainable.

For linguists, describing language in terms that portray humans as linked to other animals and to the more-than-human world is both a matter of terminological accuracy (language must be a form of animal communication if humans are animals) and an entry point to reconsidering language practices in many contexts which could be contributing to ecological unsustainability as well as an entry point to promoting language practices which could have positive influences on ecosystemic health for humans and others.

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