

Book Review

Arran Stibbe. (2012). *Animals Erased: Discourse, Ecology and Reconnection with the Natural World*. Middleton: Wesleyan University Press.

Reviewed by Michelle Riedlinger

This book of nine essays, written by Arran Stibbe over 10 years, is a must-read for anyone interested in human-animal relationships, the complexities of representation, and the translation of discourse analysis into critical engagement and environmental advocacy. Stibbe is the founder of the Language and Ecology Research Forum, which brings together researchers focused on the field of ecolinguistics. *Animals Erased* is a recent contribution to the field that will appeal to academics, as well as others outside the academy who are interested in language and animal activism. Through these nine essays, focussing on corpus linguistic analyses of multiple texts (media, corporate, government, conservation, activist, research, creative and educational), Stibbe identifies three discourse themes associated with human-animal relationships: destructive, counter, and alternative. Stibbe's central argument is that those wishing to advocate for animals must locate and employ "alternative discourses" that broaden rather than narrow the Western world's conception of animals and acknowledge the intrinsic value of animals as a taken for granted assumption. He finds these alternative discourses in Japanese haiku and film, and in the lyrical science writing of Rachael Carson. He hopes that these alternative discourses may generate potential new languages, artworks, histories, sciences and philosophies that can transform the ideologies associated with destructive discourses of animals.

The strengths of this work lie in the detailed corpus linguistic analysis Stibbe conducts on a large body of material in each essay. His analyses are impressive and he draws thoughtful implications from his findings to help readers see the underlying ideologies infusing human-animal relationships. The analyses in this book rely heavily on the work of Norman Fairclough and other researchers steeped in Critical Discourse Analysis. These researchers have been attempting to understand the role of language in the oppression and exploitation of others through dominant power structures. Stibbe states, "animals cannot be empowered to resist the discourses that oppress them" (p. 22), and he takes up their cause by examining these discourses through the lens of ecosophy (the philosophy of the relationships between humans, animals and plants). In early essays

in the book, the author effectively demonstrates that linguistic clusters in dominant discourses support a destructive ideology of animals. He argues that dominant Western discourses relating to animals (produced by government, industry and the media) are “destructive” because they position animals as resources and distance humans from animal cruelty. He highlights collocations associated with collective rather than individual animals (e.g. herd health, swine industry, bird damage), noun phrases and nominalisations that hide animal and human agency (e.g. death loss, pork production enterprise, farm sustainability), and references to animals through metaphor (e.g. the machine metaphor of maintaining “sow durability”). Dominant discourses, Stibbe states, also prevent humans from acknowledging the individuality of animals because of the positioning of animals as other. This is a point I will take up later in this review.

Through studies involving texts written by conservation and animal activist groups, Stibbe argues convincingly that “counter discourses,” while useful for highlighting the implicit assumptions associated with animal exploitation, do nothing to transform destructive discourses. He points to attempts by activists to address destructive discourses associated with particular animal industries, for example activists who substitute terms for practices (e.g. “pig murder” rather than “pork harvesting”). He argues that these counter discourses, rather than transforming ideologies, are just as oppressive to animals because they can position animals as inferior and without agency. For Stibbe, representations of animals that position animals as necessary for human survival (for example, scientific research focussed on ecology and ecological interconnectedness) also do not challenge these exploitative discourses because humans are rarely acknowledged as part of these ecologies. In conservation texts, individual animals become representations of their species. He points to the preference for collective nouns (species, population) and mass nouns (save the Amur leopard) over count nouns (save the Amur leopards) as an example.

According to Stibbe, denying the intrinsic worth of individual animals (seeing them as human resources and markers of their species, and humans as disinterested observers) appeals to economic and political interests. In Chapter 5, in a wonderful demonstration of author awareness of rhetorical motive, Stibbe actually sends his linguistic analysis of the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (2005) report to the authors of the report for comment. He receives a response in which the authors confirm his analysis—they acknowledge that their framing of animals (as passive and as resources) is not ideal, but also state that this is appropriate in order to appeal to corporate and financial bodies. This response is published on p. 100 of his book. I particularly appreciated his insight that even explicit statements that declare the environment (and animals and plants) to have intrinsic value are not rhetorically powerful enough on their own to compete with destructive ideologies because they assert rather than presuppose knowledge. Drawing on van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough (1989), Stibbe indicates that explicit statements that assert

rather than presuppose alternative ways of knowing will always legitimate a dominant discourse if the surrounding linguistic clusters continue to contradict their message. He finds these explicit statements, asserting the intrinsic value of nature and animals, in the Earth Charter, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report, and the UK Sustainable Development Commission. He contrasts this discourse with Rachel Carson's (1962) lyrical science writing, an alternative discourse that continually presupposes salmon as agents and conscious beings. Stibbe shows that Carson consistently uses count nouns (fishes) and "they" to talk about particular individual salmon, uses active verbs in relation to salmon (e.g., moving, feeding), and recognises salmon as conscious (e.g., knowing). I would recommend chapter 5 of Stibbe's book for any upper level or graduate environmental science writing, advocacy, or rhetoric class on this basis.

In the book's later essays, Stibbe identifies "alternative discourses," focussing on non-Western creative endeavours (Japanese haiku and animated film) that not only reflect the complexity of human relationships with animals but also, according to Stibbe, encourage humans to develop personal relationships with animals and help people "reconnect with the reality of animals" (p. 163). While I admire the author's attempts to open up possibilities for the representation of animals, the idea that alternative discourses can access "the reality of animals" marks an inconsistency and takes away from the focus on developing more complex and beneficial understandings of animals. Human-animal relationships will always be mediated through subjective experience and textual representation so, while alternative discourses may contribute to creating more complex representations of human-animal relationships, these alternative discourses cannot be privileged as "engaging with the lived reality of animals themselves" (p. 85) any more than other discourses. Stibbe uses examples from haiku poetry in an attempt to show that "identification with nature" in haiku could help readers gain greater connection with animals than they can in Western texts. However some of his examples under the theme of "identity" could be considered anthropomorphic:

first summer rain
 the monkey seems to wish
 for a little straw cloak
 (Basho qtd. in Stibbe, 2012, p. 158)

Nevertheless, I appreciate the author's point that creative works can reflect an "appreciation of the ordinary" (p. 148) and may inspire those searching for alternative views of animals to look for new ways to displace destructive Western discourses:

crouching
peering up at the clouds
a frog
(Chiyo qtd. in Stibbe, 2012, p. 148)

Many of Stibbe's examples emphasise this focus on "ordinary nature." I see this as an important theme running through the book. He calls for animal advocates to search for these kinds of alternative discourses and employ them in their own oral, written and visual texts.

Stibbe does not set out to give a nuanced account of genre, and readers will not find one in this book. He refers to the genre of shallow environmentalism found in English-language textbooks written for Japanese university-level students (pp. 123-125). He identifies four elements that make up this "genre"—the phenomenon, the cause, the damage, and the solution. This suggests opportunities for new rhetorical genre theorists to engage with and build on Stibbe's work. For me, this book meets its aim of using corpus linguistic analysis (from pragmatics and semantics to syntax and morphology) to identify discourses that could be evaluated against ecosophical principles. Stibbe reveals the ideologies and implicit assumptions that are harmful or beneficial for animals. He hopes that this book will also be useful for modelling ecological discourse analysis and I think he has been successful in this. He has started an important conversation.

Notes on Contributor

Michelle Riedlinger is an Assistant Professor at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV). Her research focuses on discourses of environmental risk and genres of risk assessment. She was awarded a PhD (Communication) in 2005 from the University of Queensland in Australia for research that explored the boundary communication practices of interdisciplinary environmental science and community collaborations. Michelle has a background in environmental science research and worked in Australia as a professional science communicator for 15 years before moving to Canada in 2010. She is an elected member of the Scientific Committee of the International Network for the Public Communication of Science and Technology. At UFV, Michelle teaches academic and workplace writing, science communication and advocacy from a rhetorical genre studies perspective.