

Talking about Veganism: Language and Vegan Advocacy
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The use of words has effects and consequences.

I'm interested in the use of word choices used by advocates of veganism and animal rights. The language that vegans and non-vegans use to talk and write about veganism is important. Even the fact that the word "veganism" exists is significant and meaningful.

There is no "ism" for the concepts of compassion, ethics, or happiness, or caring. There are no words "compassionism" or "compassionatism." There is no "ism" for being ethical. There are no words "ethicism" or "ethicalism." There is no "ism" for being happy. There is no word "happyism." There is no word "caringism."

The word "vegan" didn't exist before 1944 when Donald Watson formed The Vegan Society and coined the word from the first three and the last two letters of the word "vegetarian." For centuries before that the word "vegetarian" meant vegan.
<https://www.vegansociety.com/go-vegan/definition-veganism>

There are certain words, probably in every human language, that are offensive to some people when those words are used to describe characteristics about them. For example, some words used to describe a person's color, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Vegan and animal rights advocates are offended by the use of certain words and phrases that reference and describe animals of other species in inaccurate and violent ways because the use of those words and phrases perpetuate inaccurate information about and violent behavior by humans towards those individuals. The animals of those other species don't get offended by those words because they don't understand them. But vegans and animal rights advocates do, and get offended on behalf of the animals.

"In 1970, [Richard Ryder] coined the term speciesism to describe the exclusion of nonhuman animals from the protections available to human beings."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_D._Ryder

"[Ryder] defined it as 'a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour [sic] of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species.'"
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speciesism>

Since then, people have written and spoken about speciesism and "unlearning speciesist language." Advocates for animals commonly explain the word "speciesism" as being similar to the words "racism" and "sexism," which describe biases against other races and sexes from one's own.

More people are becoming aware of speciesist language, and "unlearning speciesist language" has been written and spoken about frequently. Listed below are a few references and links to online resources for learning about what speciesist language is

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and suggestions for replacement words and phrases to communicate the same information.

After that I will describe some other word choices that I think adversely impact the effectiveness of vegan and animal rights advocacy, and that I think have not been addressed.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=speciesism>
<https://www.google.com/search?q=speciesist+language>
<https://www.google.com/search?q=unlearning+speciesist+language>
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=unlearning+speciesist+language

The late Karen Davis, author, speaker, and founder of United Poultry Concerns (<https://upc-online.org/>) wrote and talked about unlearning speciesist language and suggested replacement language for commonly used speciesist expressions. For example, she suggested replacing “kill two birds with one stone” with “feed two birds with one scone.”

<https://www.google.com/search?q=unlearning+speciesist+language+karen+davis>
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=unlearning+speciesist+language+karen+davis
<https://www.facebook.com/karen.davis.35728466>

Colleen Patrick-Goudreau, author and speaker, recorded videos about unlearning speciesist language. She used the word “animalogy” to discuss speciesist language.

“Animalogy was a limited-run podcast about language, the animal-related words and phrases we use every day, and the ways in which they reflect and affect our relationship with animals.”

<https://www.google.com/search?q=unlearning+speciesist+language+colleen+patrick-goudreau>
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=unlearning+speciesist+language+colleen+patrick-goudreau
<https://www.facebook.com/colleenpatrickgoudreau>
<https://colleenpatrickgoudreau.com/animalogy-podcast/>

Jeremy Hess (“Jeremy the Ape”) has written and spoken about the topic.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=jeremy+the+ape+hess+unlearning+speciesist+language>

Jeremy is an administrator of the Facebook group “Unlearning Speciesist Language”
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/unlearningspeciesistlanguage/>

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Some of Jeremy's writings:

<https://veganinteractions.com/advocacy-resources>
<https://www.facebook.com/VeganInteractions/>
<https://www.youtube.com/@JeremyTheApe/videos>

Jeremy made two humorous videos of him having conversations about veganism with Alexa in which he plays devil's advocate.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNfYEDO14oE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAPkFPwU4E>

Another resource: Challenge Speciesism:
<https://www.youtube.com/@ChallengeSpeciesism/videos>

A wonderful in-depth web page about speciesism and speciesist language:
On Morality: Why Not Use Speciesist -And Other Kinds Of- Oppressive Language?
<https://legacyofpythagoras.wordpress.com/2018/08/16/speciesist-oppressive-language/>

Now my thoughts about other uses of language in vegan and animal rights advocacy that I think undermine the effectiveness of advocacy.

1. We speak of human "races" but when we talk about other species of animals we speak of "breeds" rather than "races." We don't speak of "breeds" of humans.
2. I don't like the use of the word "slaughtered" to describe the killing of animals. It's overused, and it's only used when referring to the killing of animals and war and mass killing of humans and killing without the victims being able to resist. "Slaughter" means a particularly egregious way of killing. But the word has lost its impact because it's overused. For example, it's also used as a metaphor in describing the outcome of sports games, as in "Team A slaughtered team B in that game."
3. I don't like the phrase "go vegan" because it sounds like "going over to the dark side" or going mad or going crazy. We say "go insane," "go crazy," "go mad." We don't say "go healthy" or "go ethical" or "go compassionate" or "go kind," or "go happy." We say "be healthy" and "be ethical" and "be compassionate" and "be kind," and "be happy," so we should say "be vegan," not "go vegan."

In addition, asking people to "go vegan" is asking for a sudden and radical change of identity, which is difficult and creates an obstacle to the behavior change we want other people to make, whereas "be vegan" connotes asking for gentle changes of behaviors that may result in a change of identity but does not require it. We are just

asking people to change their behaviors to align with the values that they most likely already hold as part of their identity.

4. The phrase “whole foods plant-based” was coined by T. Colin Campbell in the 1980s.
<https://www.google.com/search?q=who+coined+the+term+whole+foods+plant-based>
I don't like the phrase “whole foods plant-based” (WFPB) because it implies that you can start with a base of plants and add dead animals and their secretions on top. I prefer “whole plant foods only” (WPFO). I think that phrase more accurately describes what we mean.

5. I dislike the phrase "animal products" because it sounds like animals of other species have manufactured or handmade a product for human consumption, as when we might use the terms “foreign products” or “Native American products.” When people buy a product, the person or company who made or produced the product is given something in return by the person who the product is given to, in other words, buying and selling.

But that is not the case with so-called "animal products." Animals are given nothing for the "products" that humans create from their dead and mutilated bodies and the secretions that are taken from them, except a very short lifetime of extreme suffering and a premature death. They do not voluntarily and willingly give or sell these "products" to humans. Even acknowledging that "animal products" means products made from the secretions and body parts of animals does not sit well with me because it trivializes and depersonalizes and commodifies these once-living beings.

6. Similarly I do not like the phrase "animal cruelty," because it sounds as if it's the animals who are being cruel. Actually, that is somewhat true. When humans confine hundreds of thousands of individuals of the same species in one building, whether they are in individual cages or not in the cases of domestic fowl like chickens and turkeys, they will peck each other and cause harm, so to prevent that when they are very young, the humans who confined them cut off the tips of their beaks with a searing hot iron. However, that not only prevents them from doing harm when they peck each other, which they continue to do because of their extreme overcrowding, it also makes it difficult for them to eat.

Even replacing the phrase "animal cruelty" with the phrase "cruelty to animals" is not a good choice, because it leaves out the subjects who are being cruel to the animals of a different species, that is, humans. I thank author Carol J. Adams for her elucidation of the concept of the “absent referent” for that insight. So a phrase that better describes the truth of the situation is "human cruelty to animals," or just "human cruelty."

7. The phrases "processed food" and “whole food” are problematic. The word “processed” does not have a specific meaning; it's vague. For example, chopping

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an apple is processing it, and it starts to oxidize and turn brown as soon as you cut it. Making grains and vegetables into flour is processing them. Cooking food is processing it. Drying plants to make dried herbs, spices, and teas is processing them.

For “processed” one might say “minimally processed,” and maybe I can't define “processed,” but as has been said about pornography, I know it when I see it. And the word “minimally” is also vague and has no specific definition. It's a relative term, not an absolute term. Is the word “manufactured” a better description than “processed?” Food that is manufactured rather than grown?

And conversely “whole foods” is not true. A blueberry is not the whole plant. An apple is not the whole tree. Without the greens on top a carrot is not the whole plant. For “whole foods” one might say “plants with nothing removed and nothing added.”