



Why cartoons have animals 2

Description

Watching pet owners coach their pets to talk provides one of the more amusing diversions on YouTube. Apparently you can train a dog to say “hello” as a kind of vocalised yawn, or to growl out something like “[sausages](#)”. In a post in May 2012 I outlined [9 reasons why cartoons feature animals](#).

Here’s a 10th reason: **getting animals to talk**. It’s obvious: animals (non-human) respond to what we say some of the time, but don’t talk back in the same way, i.e. using our language. A dog can’t tell you in words why it wants to be let out to the backyard and what it enjoys most about long grass.



If I could talk to the animals

Jacques Derrida wrote about speech, talking, writing, meaning, and language. I'm drawn inevitably to his essay, "The animal that therefore I am." The title rolls off the French tongue a bit better than it does for English speakers, and parodies Descartes' famous phrase, "I think therefore I am" (*Je pense, donc je suis*).

Derrida indicates how Descartes and the moderns think "the animal is without language" (400). They concede that an animal can use signs, but philosophers "have always denied it the power to respond" to pretend, to lie, to cover its tracks or erase its own traces" (401).

Rather than dispute these assertions with contrary evidence, Derrida the language philosopher, tackles the assumptions that lead people to believe in the need for a fundamental difference between humans and animals, or any other fundamental distinction for that matter. Such metaphysical distinctions depend on language.

Derrida's tactic is usually to unsettle, challenge, disrupt and "deconstruct" any certainties to which scholars confidently lay claim. Famously, he does this with the distinction between speaking and writing, and any claim that one is superior to the other (i.e. Plato's suggestion that speaking is closer to thought, and is spontaneous and authentic, and that when you write things down they become ossified, derivative, distant and somehow less authentic).

In a nutshell, Derrida invents a third term, a kind of writing that underpins both. Every argument to support the idea that speaking is superior to writing in the end appeals to the attributes of writing. But it's a kind of writing that comes before either speech or writing. He calls this *protowriting*, and addresses its contradictory properties in various books and essays.

Animots

In the case of the distinction between humans and animals he also invents a third term: *animot*.

Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and rather than a double clone or a portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera waiting



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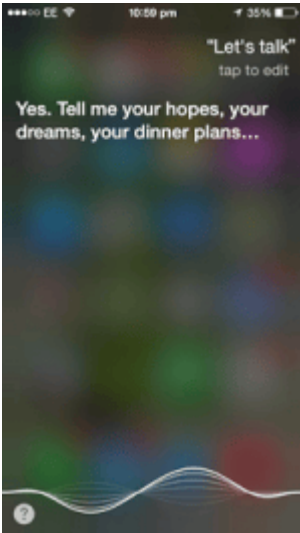
If you read French, you'll know *animot* combines *animal* (animal) and *mot* (word). The joke is that it sounds like *animaux*, the plural of *animal*. (You don't pronounce the *t* and the *x* at the ends of the words.) Derrida thinks this plural and ambiguous condition is important, especially as he characterises the *animot* as a "living multiplicity of mortals."

There are other tricks in Derrida's rich 51 page essay. "I think therefore I am," becomes "I think therefore I follow," which sounds similar in French. Hunters follow and stalk animals, which in turn leave and erase trails and traces. So there are many connections with Derrida's other themes (e.g. trace, erasure). In fact he presented this essay as a summary of his entire oeuvre and that of his intellectual adversaries. He identifies animals throughout: ants, silkworms, asses, animal sacrifice, suffering, shame, nakedness, etc.

Animals versus machines

Derrida joins the chorus of scholars such as Donna Haraway who seek to unsettle categorical certainties, and thereby bring about social change. She asserts the [cyborg](#) "as our ontology," a prototypic human-machine hybrid, a marginal entity that functions as a surrogate for minorities, the oppressed, women, and those without a key stake in the power structures. For Derrida the tactic is a bit different, and puts language at the centre of the critical discourse.

According to my reading of Derrida, it's not just that we say animals can't speak, but it's the way we speak about animals that's open to question and ready for renewal. At least Derrida helps explain our fascination with animals that talk, and machines that do something similar.



Bibliography

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- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: FAb.

Notes

- The blog post [Why cartoons have animals](#) ranks 5th for hit counts out of my 191 posts so far.
- Also see [Some wildlife](#), [Howling at the moon](#), and [Voices without bodies](#).
- It's impossible to do justice to any essay by Derrida in a short blog post. He also responds to the modernist Jeremy Bentham's question of whether animals can suffer. The obviousness of the answer leads Derrida to another contradiction: "Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish" (396).
- Here's a video of Derrida talking about animals: [YouTube](#)

Category

1. Body

Tags

1. animals
2. Derrida
3. language
4. nature

Date Created

April 19, 2014

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