Book reviews


Reviewed by: Tema Milstein, Department of Communication & Journalism, University of New Mexico, USA

Author Arran Stibbe argues that not only are we humans erasing animals and nature from the Earth through our actions as we bring them to extinction, but we are also effectively erasing them from our consciousness. This book offers something extremely valuable for anyone interested in discourse and environmental and animal issues – a rich and close breakdown of these issues using critical discourse analysis (CDA). Stibbe tackles an impressive range of discourse arenas from industrial animal agriculture to haiku; from media coverage of foot-and-mouth disease in Europe to English-as-a-second-language environmental textbooks in Asia; from discourses about wild salmon to animated film.

The book takes readers on an important journey, starting in Chapter 1 by developing CDA theory to show how it can move beyond purely human-to-human relations and making it more applicable to relations of humans with other animals and nature. Chapter 1, 2, and 3 examine what Stibbe terms ‘destructive discourses,’ those discourses that construct potentially inhumane and ecologically damaging human–animal relationships. Chapters 1 and 2 look at both general discourse about animals in everyday conversation (e.g. ‘flogging a dead horse’) and discourse in the animal product industries, including large-scale chicken and pig farming (e.g. discourses that construct animals as objects, parts, and machines). Chapter 3 looks specifically at British media discourse surrounding the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, discourse that converted a relatively harmless illness into the unnecessary widespread slaughter of at least six million farmed animals.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 turn to ‘counter-discourses’ within mainstream society that aim to oppose destructive discourses but also tend to reproduce some of the same problematic underlying assumptions and ideologies. In Chapter 4, Stibbe uses CDA to look at the counter-discourses of ecology and ecological economics, conservation, animal liberation, and animal rights. He finds that despite providing crucial opposition to dominant destructive discourses, these counter-discourses generally fail to decenter the human or to engage respectfully with animals’ lived realities. Chapter 5 uses CDA to look at salmon, examining a scientific ecological assessment of Atlantic salmon to show how
such environmental protection texts, though they aim to protect wild animals and nature, more often discursively deny animals’ and nature’s intrinsic worth in order to appeal to commercial and political interests. Chapter 6 explores the different discursive constructions of ‘biodiversity,’ locating the ways the term is used to serve a wide range of goals, from saving species from extinction to justifying actions that serve short-term economic interests at the expense of nature.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 turn to ‘alternative discourses,’ which promote different assumptions and ideologies to those of destructive and counter-discourses, such as humans being an interdependent and respectful part of natural systems. While the first sections of this book are largely grounded in the West, this section shifts its cultural and regional focus to Japan, where the author has done several ecoculturally comparative studies. Chapter 7 uses CDA to examine 26 environmentally oriented English-as-a-second-language textbooks in Japan to uncover the predominant use of shallow environmentalism, which addresses only immediate physical symptoms such as acid rain, and avoids underlying cultural, economic, political, and psychological causes. Stibbe contrasts this with ecological insights in Japanese culture such as *naikan*, which restrains consumerism by encouraging minimum necessary resource use and gratitude and appreciation for those disturbed, whether they be animal, plant, or river. Chapter 8 looks closely at haiku, observing how the alternative discursive qualities of haiku can help reconnect people with nature, using core haiku tenets such as appreciation of the ordinary, centering of animals and plants as agents and sensers, and empathy. Chapter 9 examines well-known animated film creator Miyazaki’s ways of representing nature. Stibbe identifies the Zen Buddhism-influenced techniques Miyazaki uses to make his human characters appear more embedded in nature, and compares the Disney English-dubbed version of Miyazaki’s film *My Neighbor Totoro* with the original Japanese version to show how the Disney version uses language that abstracts humans from their experience with a Western scientific gaze while the original Japanese language has humans verbalizing their direct sensual experience with nature.

In conclusion, in Chapter 10 Stibbe reiterates that, in ‘our engrossment in the symbolic world’ (p. 194), we have erased animals until they exist less for us in sensual reality and more in words, statistics, toys, nature programs, cartoons, aquariums, zoos, and museums. He argues for the pressing need both to critically examine discourses that support unsustainable ecological relations and to seek alternative discourses that provide sustainable and restorative models for our present and our future.

While the breakdown of the book into the categories of destructive, counter, and alternative discourses could at first glance be viewed as an oversimplification, Stibbe is nuanced and reflective in his framing. He is clear there can be ‘no fixed algorithm’ (p. 16) for deciding through analysis how a discourse is likely to encourage a person or society to act. However, he also clearly explains how CDA can be used to expose ways particular discourses assume and reproduce certain underlying models of the world and how the analyst can compare these models to her or his own ecologically embedded model in much the same way that many critical analysts use their own nonracist or nonsexist models.

Stibbe points out that ‘with rare exceptions, the role of discourse in the domination by humans of other species has been almost entirely neglected in the field of critical
discourse analysis’ (p. 19). Indeed, his theoretically grounded empirical use of CDA to study a spectrum of human–animal and human–nature relationships offers a broad and in-depth examination that heretofore has been lacking in book form. (While this book is largely a synthesis of his previously published articles, it reads like a well-crafted book.)

This type of CDA work can have influence beyond the academy, and Stibbe’s work is a testament to this. For instance, university scientist Croney and United States Department of Agriculture scientist Reynells (2008), in their article in the animal product industry journal *Poultry Science*, cite Stibbe’s work on factory farm discourse and conclude the industry needs to change not only the kind of language it uses about animals, but also the actual way it treats animals. This sort of reception shows how this kind of research, if done sensitively and accessibly, can encourage material-symbolic change.

I believe many have been waiting for a book like this. Stibbe effectively equips everyone, from student to seasoned scholar, with CDA tools and direction to examine human–nature relations. Also, due to its accessible style, the book would work particularly well for teaching. It would make an excellent case study addition to any course on CDA and chapters would work well even at the undergraduate level. I intend to incorporate it in my Master’s and doctoral level course on culture and environmental communication.

Reference


Reviewed by: Monika Sobejko, Jagiellonian Language Centre, Jagiellonian University, Poland

With the current rise of interest in the field of teaching academic writing to non-native speakers of English (NNS), both researchers and teachers will find Ramona Tang’s book, *Academic Writing in a Second or Foreign Language*, a source of inspiration. The book consists of a collection of studies by noted researchers who examine a number of issues related to texts written by NNS. The methodologies vary – from quantitative, through qualitative to ethnographic studies, while also documenting several new approaches to teaching academic writing to ESL/EFL (English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language) students. In addition to this, the research studies either significantly extend the existing research (e.g. Hilary Nesi and Emma Moreton’s work on cohesive devices) or point out new directions for further research (Jo Lewkowicz’s work on NNS dissertations). The book is divided into three main parts: Learning to Write for Academic Purposes, Features of ESL/EFL Learner Discourses, and Identity Work and Professional Opportunities in Academic Writing. These are preceded by an introduction by the author (The Issues and Challenges Facing Academic Writers from ESL/EFL Contexts) and followed by an afterword by Theresa Lillis (English Medium Writing for Academic Purposes: Foundational Categories, Certainty and Contingency).