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Animal sentience: use and abuse of words Semantic and translational differences between "*bien-être*" (welfare) and "*bientraitance*" (good treatment) of animals

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*"In animals, there is neither intelligence
nor souls as ordinarily meant.
They eat without pleasure, cry without pain,
grow without knowing it; they desire nothing,
fear nothing,
know nothing."*

Nicolas Malebranche (*De la recherche de la vérité*, 1674)

*"The world is not a factory and animals are not products to be used for our needs, for animals and humans
are fundamentally the same."*

Arthur Schopenhauer (*Parerga & Paralipomena*, 1851)

Introduction

Above are the words written about animals by Nicolas Malebranche in the 17th century and Arthur Schopenhauer two centuries later. We have come a long way since the 17th century in terms of scientific discoveries in the field of animal behaviour. However, since Schopenhauer wrote those words, there has been little improvement in animals' conditions.

Yet, today it has been scientifically proven that there are not one but several forms of animal intelligence and sentience: animals cry out because they suffer or because they are scared, they express their welfare when they are happy or feel good.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the reality of practices in farming, slaughterhouses, some zoos and circuses for instance, there are processes and premises where animals are not treated like intelligent, sentient beings that experience emotions, and places where they may be mistreated or deeply unhappy.

For the past 40 years, the French Rural Code has stipulated that "each animal is a sentient ["sensible" in French] being that must be placed by its owner in conditions compatible with the biological imperatives of its species"

Too often the treatment of animals, and the places in which they are kept in farms or at entertainment facilities, do not take into account the biological imperatives of their species, the scientific progress made over the past half-century, or the current legislation (which still does not apply to wild animals).

Animal welfare, and how to generate it and have it recognised, has become an issue of paramount importance to prevent the suffering and mistreatment of animals.

There are several reasons for this suffering: the two most obvious ones are economic reasons and the absence of ethical awareness among some professionals. But another reason, never spoken of – given the very few linguists who study the notion of animal welfare – is the language, vocabulary and imaginary worlds associated with animals. The meanings of the words used and definitions related to the animal world remain vague. As well as being a matter for scientists and lawyers, animal welfare is also and above all an issue that concerns linguists because it is primarily through words that laws become more specific and adjust to new contexts and ethological discoveries. It is through words that we raise public awareness. And it is also through words that things remain ambiguous or not. Therefore, linguistics and more specifically lexicology have a crucial role to play over the years to come in clarifying terms or criticising them when they have been poorly chosen, misunderstood or used inappropriately.

"Bien-être" (welfare) versus "bienveillance" (good treatment)

The focus of this paper, before being a matter of science or law, is one of vocabulary, for words are often misused because of their definitions, which either do not take scientific progress into account, are inappropriate because no adequate term exists in French, or are so poorly defined that there is still ambiguity over the use of expressions as important as "*bien-être animal*" (animal welfare) or "*bienveillance animale*" (good treatment of animals), where each professional sphere has its own understanding depending on personal, practical or economic interests.

Choosing the right words can prevent animal suffering and abuse. But what do these words mean?

In French, the expression "*bienveillance animale*" (good treatment of animals) is mainly used by farmers to show that they *treat* their animals well. However, the idea of "*good treatment*" does not rule out animal neglect, because the words "*traitement*" (treatment), "*bienveillance*" (good treatment) or "*bons traitements*" (good handling) only hold responsible and depend on the person giving the treatment. They do not take into account the direct consequences on the animal receiving the treatment. "Treat well" can sometimes mean simply providing the animal with food, water and shelter and does not necessarily guarantee the welfare of the animal. It is also true of humans, which is why the term *bienveillance* first appeared in hospitals, specialised medical institutions and retirement homes that provide care to a client or patient.

With regard to animals, providing good treatment is one of the first duties of human beings looking after an animal, they must insure that the conditions of the animal's captivity are not causing the animal to suffer. Therefore the complexity of the good treatment of animals lies in assessing whether humans "treat animals well enough" to ensure their welfare. Animals need to feel good, which is seldom the case when they are held in captivity, in cramped conditions, in the dark or in cages. Denying the notion of welfare allows for this type of farming practices to continue.

Animal welfare: definitions

Animal welfare was defined for the first time as an area of priority action as part of the strategic plan of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). The OIE Working Group on Animal Welfare was officially set up in May 2002. Its founding texts include the following **definition of animal welfare**:

An animal is in a good state of welfare (as indicated by scientific evidence) if it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress.

In addition, Article 7.1.2 of chapter VII.1 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code sets out eight guiding principles for animal welfare, the second of which quotes **the “internationally recognised five freedoms”**:

- freedom from hunger, thirst and malnutrition;
- freedom from fear and distress;
- freedom from physical and thermal discomfort;
- freedom from pain, injury and disease; and
- freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour.

Also within Chapter VII, under article 7.1.3, of the **four scientific bases** and recommendations, the **third recommendation** states:

Some measures of animal welfare involve assessing the degree of impaired functioning associated with injury, disease, and malnutrition. Other measures provide information on animals' needs and affective states such as hunger, pain and fear, often by measuring the strength of animals' preferences, motivations and aversions.

Finally, again under Chapter VII among the 10 general principles listed in 7.1.4, the **10th principle** stipulates:

The handling of animals should foster a positive relationship between humans and animals and should not cause injury, panic, lasting fear or avoidable stress.

For defenders of the animal cause, words can be used to help promote recognition of animals' emotional experience and “sentience”, in order to avoid if not eliminate all forms of suffering and disrespectful exploitation. The OIE's definitions are particularly clear. The use of the expression “*bien-être animal*” in French should be favoured over “*bienveillance animale*” in texts, although it is often the term “*bienveillance*” that is used. It is easy to understand why: “*bienveillance*” does not take the animal's affective states or emotions into consideration at all. When taken literally, it too often consists in merely feeding, watering, sheltering and providing medical care to the animal so that the entire livestock does not need to be killed in the event of contamination.

This is also why people who see it as a constraint to provide more ethical care to animals prefer to use “*bienveillance*” rather than “*bien-être*”, which implies an obligation to achieve a visible result on animals and their behaviour.

Although a happy animal is necessarily a well-treated one, a well-treated animal is not necessarily a happy one. All ethologists agree on this.

The scientific progress has shown that animals are *sentient* beings, which justify the idea that, philosophically and ethically speaking, animals have rights and humans have duties towards them.

Linguistics and animal welfare

In addition, recognising the scientific progress that has proven animal *sentience* further accentuates the need to talk of “*bien-être animal*” (animal welfare) and not “*bienveillance animale*” (good treatment of animals).

It is here that the **seven areas of (zoo)linguistics** take on their full meaning:

- diachronic linguistics to understand the history of the word used;
- synchronic linguistics to examine its current use;
- zoosemiotics to understand the signs of animal welfare;
- semantics to interpret a meaning in connection with these signs;
- lexicology to make accurate definitions;
- terminology/neology to create new words currently not in a dictionary;
- translation studies to translate legal texts into the 27 European languages efficiently.

Translation studies also allows us to choose the right word that sometimes comes from other spoken or ancient languages, or even invent new words (*cf. zoocide* by Mathieu Ricard or *humanimality* to describe human-animal relations and has led on to a *humanimalism*). We need to understand the subtleties of translating these words in legal documents, and above all comprehend the signs made by animals (zoosemiotics) that express their well-being, where each species and each individual has its own ways of expressing its emotions, so that these can be described properly and therefore defined better.

While the two terms "*bien-être*" and "*bientraitance*" do not mean the same thing in French, their translation into Europe's 27 languages is still a subject of debate.

Even though linguistics has always been human-centred – it is not by chance that it is part of Humanities and Human and Social Sciences – it should now examine animals and the vocabulary related to their daily lives. Hence the need to create a cross-disciplinary working group with linguists, biologists, veterinarians and ethologists in order to think about the meaning of the words used and their translation, and even create new terms to better acknowledge animal welfare. This was achieved in 2018 with the creation of the [French Society of Zoosemiotics](#), which has a group of cross-disciplinary researchers who examine all forms of communication (intraspecific zoolanguages, interspecific zoolanguages, the expression of emotions) and reflect on what words need to be created in French and other languages in the fields of zoolexicology and zootranslation studies in order to qualify any behaviour discovered by ethological progress that cannot be expressed due to a lack of terms.

On the importance of the word *sentience* in French in animal welfare

One of the first solutions for avoiding any lexical confusion and, more importantly, the non-recognition of animal suffering, is to more systematically use the word "*sensible*" in French, but above all to use the word "*sentience*", which exists in French but is poorly recognised given that there are few people outside the spheres of science and veganism who know of its existence, and therefore few people understand its meaning in France, whereas it is regularly used in English-speaking countries and various publications on animal protection.

Page 110 of the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) states that:

The high contracting parties, desiring to ensure improved protection and respect **for the welfare of animals as sentient beings**, have agreed upon the following provision.

Les hautes parties contractantes, désireuses d'assurer une plus grande protection et un meilleur respect **du bien-être des animaux en tant qu'êtres sensibles**, sont convenues des dispositions ci-après.

Sentient beings is translated into French as *êtres sensibles* here. This is an analytical and translation error. It should be translated as "*les êtres sentients*". *Sentience* is not a synonym for *sensibilité* (sensitivity), and *sentient* is not a synonym for *sensible* (sensitive). Animals are admittedly "*sensible au*" (feel) heat and cold, and have emotional responses but also have feelings (joy, sadness, worry, nervousness, apprehension, trauma-related anxiety, etc.). Therefore, they are *êtres sensibles* (sensitive beings) but also and more importantly *êtres sentients* (sentient beings). Various experiments have also demonstrated that animals are aware of their emotions and initiatives, and for good reason; if this was not the case, they would not be able to hunt. Hunting requires the ability to plan a strategy and therefore project a situation in time and space.

The noun *sentience* and its adjective *sentient* have only very recently become part of the scientific vocabulary. Their current translations from English into French are still overly simplistic because they go from "*sensibilité /sensible*" (sensitivity /sensitive) to "*émotion /émotif*" (emotion /emotional), words which obscure their original meaning.

Until now, “[sentient being](#)” and “animal sentience” have largely been translated into French as “*être sensible*” or “*sensibilité animale*”; there is however a single word in French, “*sentience*”, which covers both an animal's sensitivity and its conscience.

There is an argument, depending on the context, for using this English word of Latin origin in French with knowledge of its various meanings and definitions. Firstly, because it would help with the translation of texts from English into French; then because it would avoid ambiguities and semantic voids; also because the word covers various emotional stages such as sensitivity, emotions and consciousness; and finally, and more importantly, because there is no single word in French that encompasses this semantic spectrum.

The definition of the word *sentience* covers a very wide spectrum; it includes at least five emotional degrees.

If we refer to the work of Professor [Donald M. Broom](#), an eminent biologist at the University of Cambridge, author of *Sentience and Animal Welfare* in 2014 and the 2017 European report “[Animal Welfare in the European Union](#)”, a “sentient” being is one that has some ability: to evaluate the actions of others in relation to itself and third parties, to remember some of its own actions and their consequences, to assess risk and benefits, to have some feelings and to have some degree of awareness.

These five degrees of emotion mean the word *sentience* presents an interesting polysemy that extends well beyond the French terms *sensible* (sensitive) and *conscient* (conscious), which are often used to translate *sentience*. While *sensible* and *conscient* do hold meaning when we are actually talking about sensitivity and consciousness, the two terms are reductive when attempting to translate all the nuances of the English word *sentience* into French.

Depending on the area of speciality, the word *sentience* in French is associated with various issues.

In biology and veterinary medicine, the word is used to show sensitivity associated with animal consciousness.

In Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism, *sentient being* is used to qualify most non-human animals; it is deeply rooted in the notion of non-violence because these religions prohibit the use of violence against a sentient being.

In the philosophical and phenomenological world, the word *sentience* is mainly used to qualify the fact of having subjective experiences.

Today, antispecists, who postulate that there is no hierarchy between the species, have added the term to [their vocabulary](#) in the context of animal protection:

"Once humans see animals as sentient beings [...] they will no longer be able to commit barbaric acts against them coldheartedly."

The word is therefore already being used. It has yet to be used more widely in practice, with a better-known meaning for all that welcomes various areas of society in its polysemy.

The words *sentience* and *welfare* raise the issue of ethics, to which certain animals have access, largely due to their altruistic behaviour. Denying interspecific and intraspecific animal languages, the emotions expressed by animals and their (hyper)sensitivity, on the pretext that we don't understand them, means turning our backs on a semantic and semiotic treasure worth exploring. There are still many scientific discoveries to be made about animal sentience, whether human or non-human. Using the right words will lead to the development of a new scientific field, zoosemiotics, where semantic accuracy is vital.

Since Antiquity and through the Middle Ages, we have known the extent to which naming animate beings, things, acts and ideas allows them to exist, but inversely, they only exist because they have been named. Refusal to name something means denying its existence. Here, denying the

existence of the word *sentience* means refusing to use and translate a word that lexically acknowledges the scientific progress made during more than 50 years of research into the existence of animal emotions; it means disregarding the scientific arguments put forward by ethologists and zoosemioticians and denying animals the very existence of their emotions. At the same time, it allows for the mistreatment of animals without guilt as it is wrongly believed that they do not have any feelings (*cf.* various scandals reported in French slaughterhouses in recent years).

Recognition and understanding of the adjective *sentient* and the noun *sentience* has already raised public awareness of the intelligence and emotional capacity of animals and can only have a positive impact on their treatment and welfare.

Conclusion

In the beginning there was the Word. Life is scattered with words that create both joy and suffering. The same goes for the lives of animals.

In order to enter the French dictionary, the word “sentience” first needs to become part of our daily lives and vocabulary. The use of “sentience” in French with full awareness of its meaning will help further the recognition and understanding of the faculties of the animals around us, as we are able to better speak and write about this sentience that we share with them.

Above all, animal welfare also comes from the words we correctly use to qualify and describe it. The words currently used in French are often inaccurate or no longer suitable in the face of scientific progress. They need to be (re)defined more accurately, making sure we systematically speak of animals with these definitions (*cf.* the definition of *sensible/sensibilité* in most online dictionaries still only refers to humans and musical instruments, with no mention of animals). New words need to be (re)invented and translated as well as possible in order to spread awareness that animal *sentience* exists, and with it a true *animal welfare* policy.

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