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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discourses on the human–animal relationship in Finnish metalinguistic social media discussions

Salla Suotula

Tampere University, Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 Tampere University, Finland
Email: salla.suotula@tuni.fi

Abstract

This paper explores metalinguistic social media discussions on the variation of Finnish third-person singular pronouns in reference to nonhuman animals. Finnish uses two third-person singular pronouns: *hän* and *se*. In standardized Finnish, *hän* takes exclusively human and *se* nonhuman referents, but in colloquial speech, the difference between *hän* and *se* is not based on the human/nonhuman distinction. I examine the discursive construction of the human–animal relationship in social media discussions about the use of *hän* in reference to nonhuman animals, as well as the intersection between discourses on the human–animal relationship and language ideologies through a critical perspective. Two major discourses are identified: one centres on equality and the other emphasizes the differentiation and hierarchy of species. Both discourses are closely connected to language ideologies, which shape and are shaped by views on the status of nonhuman animals in human society.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; human–animal relationship; language ideology; sociolinguistics; third-person pronouns

1. Introduction

The constantly shifting societal relationships between humans and other animals frequently manifest in ideologically loaded language use, which connects the dynamics of the human–animal relationship to various forms of linguistic variation. This study[1] explores a metalinguistic debate concerning the variation between the Finnish third-person pronouns *hän* and *se* in reference to nonhuman animals.[2] In standard Finnish, *hän* is used for human and *se* for nonhuman referents, but both pronouns are frequently used for both human and nonhuman referents in colloquial language. I will demonstrate in this paper that the ideologies and discourses concerning pronoun variation are intrinsically linked to those surrounding the human–animal relationship.

Issues relating to the relationship between human and nonhuman animals have been widely studied, and the topic attracted increased attention in the first two decades of the 2000s (see e.g. Mitchell 2001, Stibbe 2001, Mondémé 2018). Animal-related issues in Finnish have also been studied from different perspectives (e.g. Peltola 2018, Peltola et al. 2021). Nonhuman-referent third-person pronouns have been studied most notably by Laitinen (e.g. 2009, 2021), Kaiser (2018), and Priiki (2021, 2023, 2024).

This paper has a novel perspective on the topic of nonhuman-referent third-person pronoun use in two ways. Firstly, previous studies on third-person pronoun use in Finnish have not adopted a critical perspective; this paper fills this gap by implementing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical and methodological framework. Secondly, this study incorporates an ecolinguistic approach to language ideology research and third-wave sociolinguistics (see Eckert 2012), which have not yet dealt extensively with animal-related speech or other ecolinguistic topics. The present study examines how the human–animal relationship is discursively constructed in social media discussions about the third-person pronoun *hän* in reference to nonhuman animals (hereafter 'nonhuman-referent *hän*') and how language ideologies intersect with discourses on the human–animal relationship in these discussions. The article is structured as follows. After this Introduction, Section 2 deals with the theoretical background of this study, namely third-person pronoun variation in Finnish, language ideologies, norms and indexicality, and CDA. Section 3 describes the data and analytical approach of this study, which is based on the principles of CDA and supported by Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Section 4 contains the results of the present study, consisting of the results of the QCA and a thorough critical analysis of the discourses identified in the data, while Section 5 discusses the strengths and limitations of the study and the broader implications of the results.

2. Background

2.1 Third-person pronoun variation in Finnish

The third-person pronouns in the Finnish language are *hän* and *se* in the singular, and *he* and *ne* in the plural (excluding variants used in some dialects). In standard Finnish, *hän* and *he* are used for human and *se* and *ne* for nonhuman referents. Nonetheless, the standard language norm differs significantly from colloquial use. The primary focus of this study is on the singular forms *hän* and *se*, but it is worth acknowledging that *he*, the plural form of *hän*, is used in distinct ways that partly differ from the ways the singular *hän* is used, and this also applies to pronouns referring to nonhuman animals (Laitinen 2021). The discussions examined in this study, however, focus mainly on the singular forms and therefore the data do not permit the in-depth analysis of the plural forms.

Although *hän* is used exclusively to refer to humans in standardized Finnish, in non-standard[3] language, *se* is the default third-person singular pronoun that is used more frequently than *hän* for both human and nonhuman referents. *Hän* is mainly used logophorically, i.e. to refer back to a referent whose speech or mental process or state is being reported; the logophoric *hän* typically occurs in reported speech

or when interpreting the referent's thoughts, perceptions, intentions, or feelings (Laitinen 2005:76, 80–83, 88–89; Priiki 2017a:344–347). It is used for nonhuman referents as well, as logophoric *hän* can refer to anyone whose actions can be meaningfully interpreted (Laitinen 2005:90–92). Logophoric *hän* also indexes the referent's status as a speech-act participant (Laitinen 2005:83). The colloquial uses of *hän* predate the norm of exclusively using *hän* in reference to a human, which became established in standardized Finnish at the end of the nineteenth century (Laitinen 2005:90, 2009:117–125).

Even though logophoric use is the most typical kind of use for *hän* in colloquial Finnish, the use of third-person pronouns varies considerably: *se* is frequently used in contexts where logophoric *hän* could be used, and *hän* is also used non-logophorically. The non-logophoric use of *hän* is most common in the southwestern and southeastern dialects (e.g. Siitonen 2008:3–4). Third-person pronoun use is also affected by the formality of the situation, the topic of conversation, and the participants' relationship with each other (Lappalainen 2010:296–297), and it is susceptible to priming (Priiki 2016:119, 123–130). In certain contexts, *hän* can be used to express dismissiveness or ignorance (Laitinen 2005:96–100).

Hän is frequently thought to be associated with polite speech (Seppänen 1998:91–92; Laitinen 2005:83–84; Priiki 2017b:52, 56). The origins of the politeness function are multifaceted (Seppänen 1998:91–92), and it seems to stem partially from logophoricity (see Seppänen 1998:91–92 and Laitinen 2005:83–84 for further discussion). Seppänen (1998:91), along with Priiki (2017b:52), states that the standard language norm of separating human- and nonhuman-referent third-person pronouns may be another factor contributing to the association between *hän* and politeness; in some contexts, *se* could be interpreted as implying that the referent is a 'non-person' who is excluded from the conversation (Seppänen 1998:91). Non-linguists also link the politeness function of *hän* to the separation between human and nonhuman referents (Priiki 2017b:52).

Conversely, *hän* is also associated with negative affect and ironic speech (Siitonen 2008:104; Priiki 2014). This is connected to the function of *hän* in expressing dismissiveness (Laitinen 2005:100; Priiki 2014:196, 198), but ironic use of *hän* can also be a form of humorous hypercorrection (Priiki 2014:198). Ironic use is linked to logophoricity as well, as irony commonly involves an element of echoing another voice in discourse (Priiki 2014:197–198, 205–208, 214).

Non-linguist perceptions of third-person pronoun use in Finnish partially differ from the results of linguistic research, but certain aspects of their use are widely recognized. Non-linguists rarely bring up the logophoric use of *hän* when describing third-person pronoun use (Priiki 2014:199, 2016:131; Siitonen 2016:387). On the other hand, dialectal and situational variation in third-person pronoun use and the politeness function of *hän* seem to be well recognized (Siitonen 2016:386–391; Priiki 2016:131, 2017b:52).

Priiki (2021) has examined metalinguistic online discussions about nonhuman-referent third-person pronouns using discourse analysis. This analysis has shown that there is a tendency to associate nonhuman-referent *hän* with the appreciation of nonhuman animals (Priiki 2021:326–328). However, attitudes toward nonhuman-referent *hän* are also influenced by the standard language norm as well as beliefs and attitudes toward language use in general (Priiki 2021:329–333).

According to Priiki (2021:333–335), the association between *hän* and humorous speech also extends to nonhuman-referent *hän*, and it is also described as 'playful' (*leikkisä*). Additionally, the evaluation of nonhuman-referent *hän* is frequently linked to perceptions of speakers: people who use nonhuman-referent *hän* are described as uneducated or unintelligent, or alternatively as lonely people whose pets are replacements for human relationships (Priiki 2021:335–336).

2.2 Norms, language ideologies, and indexicality

In this study, linguistic norms are understood as discursively constructed expectations of meaningful and appropriate linguistic practice (see Piippo 2012:122–128, 204–235). Norms are always mediated by language ideologies (Piippo 2012:204–235), i.e. complex sociocultural systems that consist of shared beliefs, evaluations, and ideas about language and shape metalinguistic discourses, language use, and the social realities around them (Silverstein 1979:193; Irvine & Gal 2000:35). Norms are here understood as being both shaped by and encompassed by language ideologies: language ideologies influence the discursive production of norms, which in turn become part of language ideologies. Three linguistic concepts that can be conceptualized as language ideologies are relevant in this study: the standard language ideology, heteroglossia, and appropriateness.

The standard language ideology encompasses the ideological mechanisms and norms that promote an ideal of an invariant, unchanging language and suppresses linguistic variation and change, elevating the standardized variant of a language to a superior position over non-standard variants (Milroy & Milroy 2012:19–22). It also commonly involves prioritizing writing over speaking, and as a result the norms of written language are applied to speech, despite the differences between written and spoken language (Milroy & Milroy 2012:55–56).

Heteroglossia refers to the multiplicity of voices inherent in language use, which involves the stratification and dynamic interaction between linguistic varieties (Bakhtin 1981:263, 271–272). Heteroglossic views on language regard variation as an inherent part of language (Bakhtin 1981:271–272, 288). The term primarily refers to a theoretical notion rather than a language ideology, but it has also been approached as an ideological position (see e.g. García 2009:120–121, Mäntynen et al. 2012:329). I argue that heteroglossia is also a useful notion in examining non-linguist perceptions, as they can express beliefs that align with heteroglossic views.

Appropriateness is an ideological concept where linguistic variants are evaluated based on whether they are deemed suitable for the registers and domains in which they appear (Fairclough 1992a:33–37). While normativity always involves evaluation based on context, the appropriateness model involves a rigid differentiation between registers with little recognition of overlap or blending (Fairclough 1992a:36–39, 43–46). Fairclough (1992a:34–36) also remarks that some registers and domains of language – and consequently the variants associated with them – are regarded as more 'serious' than others.

The notion of indexicality refers to the meanings associated with linguistic features through co-occurrence and the socio-cultural connections between speakers, their relationships with interlocutors, and the linguistic choices they make (Eckert 2008:463–464). This paper adopts the view on indexicality proposed

by Eckert (2008), who uses the term *indexical field*, i.e. a 'constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable' (Eckert 2008:454).

The approach to normativity, language ideologies, and indexicality taken in this paper is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and thus it continues the efforts to build methodological and theoretical bridges between CDA and language ideology studies (see Milani & Johnson 2008). CDA is primarily concerned with the intersections of language use and social structures, especially power imbalances and social inequalities (Reisigl & Wodak 2001:35–36; Fairclough 2010:3–8), but discourse that challenges social inequalities is also of interest (Fairclough 2010:7). CDA is also a key framework in ecolinguistics, which promotes more equal relationships between humanity, other animal species, and the environment (Stibbe 2017:643–645).

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Data

The data used in this study consist of social media posts and comments from discussions on nonhuman-referent *hän*. The data were collected from Twitter and from two Finnish Facebook groups, *Aristoteleen kantapää* ('Aristotle's heel') and *Kielletyt sanat ja sanonnat* ('Forbidden words and sayings'). There are 288 tweets and 137 Facebook posts and comments in the data. The average length of the tweets is 116 characters and 16 words, and the average length of the Facebook posts and comments is 250 characters and 33 words. Both the Twitter and Facebook posts and comments were collected manually, as their number was small enough to do so, and stored on an external, password-protected hard drive. The posts and comments from the Facebook groups were published between 1 January 2019 and 10 February 2020, and the Twitter posts were published between 1 and 10 February 2020. Twitter has since changed its name to X, but I use the name Twitter here, as that was the name of the platform at the time of data collection.

These Facebook groups were selected because they are sufficiently active and large (at the time of data collection, *Aristoteleen kantapää* had approximately 35,000 members and *Kielletyt sanat ja sanonnat* approximately 24,000 members), and both groups have repeatedly discussed nonhuman-referent *hän*. The *Aristoteleen kantapää* group is named after a language-themed radio programme and contains discussion on both the topics of the programme and language-related issues generally, focusing on the Finnish language. *Kielletyt sanat ja sanonnat*, for its part, is a group where the members vent about language use that irritates them and debate light-heartedly on whether certain linguistic practices should be 'forbidden'.

The Twitter data were obtained by searching for the phrases *eläin on hän* ('an animal is *hän*'), *eläin ei ole hän* ('an animal is not *hän*'), *eläintä häneksi* (part of a phrase such as *sanoa/kutsua eläintä häneksi* 'call an animal *hän*'), *koira on hän* ('a dog is *hän*'), *koira ei ole hän* ('a dog is not *hän*'), *kissa on hän* ('a cat is *hän*'), and *kissa ei ole hän* ('a cat is not *hän*') with Twitter's own search tool and selecting the tweets that were relevant to the topic, including any tweet threads to which they belonged. The Facebook data were found by searching for the word *hän* in the selected groups and selecting the conversations where nonhuman-referent *hän* was the topic.

Public Twitter posts can be argued to be a platform open to research, as the site is generally understood to be a mainly public platform (Gold 2020). Because of this, I deemed it unnecessary to reach out to individual Twitter users for permission to use their tweets. Although the examined Facebook groups are similarly public, their members may not assume them to have the same level of publicity as tweets, and the publicity status of a group may be changed, resulting in some group members potentially being unaware of the public status of the groups to which they belong. Because of this, and due to differences in the terms of use of the platforms (Meta Privacy Policy; Twitter Privacy Policy), I deemed it necessary to obtain permission from the members of the Facebook groups, and I requested the individual permission of each user, who consented to their posts and/or comments to be used in the study. I did this by publishing a public post to each group and additionally by reaching out to some users who had participated in the discussions prolifically via direct message.

I use modified versions of messages as extracts to illustrate my findings. I consider this a form of ethical fabrication (see Markham 2012). In addition, I do not mention the source of each extract, as there were no significant differences between the discussions on the two platforms or between the Facebook groups, but obscuring the exact sources further helps protect the privacy of the authors of the comments. Although the decision to use fabrication is not entirely unproblematic, I argue that it is a justifiable measure to protect the privacy of the Twitter and Facebook users whose messages are used in this study. The decision was prompted by several participants on Facebook stating that they wished not to be identifiable in the published research. The analysis and interpretation were done on the original, unmodified data, and only the excerpts presented in this article have been modified.

I modified the messages enough that the original posts and comments are not easily available through a simple search, but I have aimed to preserve the core meanings of the messages and the linguistic features that are relevant to the analysis to the best to my ability. I showed a few examples and their modified versions to a third party for agreement that my modifications preserve the core meanings. The modification of examples involved changes such as altering the word order of a sentence, replacing single words with synonyms, removing hashtags from tweets, and removing typing errors and other orthographical changes. Whenever possible, I used words and expressions that appeared elsewhere in the data as replacements for the original ones. To provide an example: the fictitious comment *Eläi**m**en hän**i**ttely on aivan tavallista murteissa ja puhe**kile**ssä* ('Referring to an animal with ʜᴀ̈ɴ is completely ordinary in dialects and spoken language') would have been modified into *Eläi**nt**en hän**e**ttely on i**h**an tavallista puhe**kie**lessä ja murteissa* (small orthographic changes highlighted in boldface). I have also translated each extract into English, aiming to represent the original comments as authentically as possible. Some extracts are partial and do not contain the entire (modified) message.

3.2 Analytical approach

The data were subjected to analysis through a combination of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Initially, a preliminary

Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier 2012) was conducted to determine and categorize the surface-level justifications for approving or disapproving of the use of nonhuman-referent *hän*. The data were coded using ATLAS.ti (2021). Coding was also used to identify manifestations of language ideological concepts. Thus, the QCA was a combination of data- and concept-driven coding: it was data-driven in terms of the human–animal relationship, and concept-driven in terms of language ideologies. The categories were developed by subsumption (Schreier 2012:115–120). The preliminary taxonomy had five categories, two for the human–animal relationship ('equality' and 'differentiation') and three for language ideologies ('standard', 'heteroglossia', and 'appropriateness'), but after a test coding I added separate categories for metacommentary and discussion on the commenters' individual pronoun use as well. The last two categories are not relevant to this study and are thus not examined further here. Each comment was classified as a single unit of analysis but could have one or multiple codes attached to it.

The primary tool of analysis was Critical Discourse Analysis. The aim of using CDA was to examine the ideologies and discourses embedded in the data in more detail and depth, using the themes identified through Qualitative Content Analysis as a starting point. This paper follows the three-dimensional approach to CDA proposed by Fairclough (1992b:10–11, 2010:132–133), where discourse is analysed from the perspective of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

The CDA phase of the analysis was based on the thematic categories identified with QCA and further defined by identifying the linguistic choices constructing discourses of both the human–animal relationship and language ideologies separately. As 'ideologies are primarily located in the "unsaid"' (Fairclough 2010:27), the textual level of the analysis places heavy emphasis on presuppositions, implicature, and syntax. However, lexical choices allow access to valuable insight into discourse as well through referential and predicational strategies (Reisigl & Wodak 2001:45), so lexical-level observations were coded as well. The CDA part of the analysis is heavily data-driven, and I repeated the coding multiple times, refining the categories and their criteria for inclusion each time.

4. Analysis

Nonhuman animals have limited access to the discursive construction of their relationships with humans. The construction of human–animal relationships is influenced in interspecies interaction by the vocal and bodily participation of nonhuman animals (e.g. Mondémé 2018:xv, Harjunpää 2022:93–94), but most situations where human language is used, including social media discussions, remain inaccessible to them. In the discussions examined here, the human–animal relationship is negotiated between humans through metalinguistic discourses by imposing norms on what kinds of views, stances, and affects are acceptable for humans to exhibit toward nonhuman animals.

The main categories determined by QCA are *human–animal relationships* and *language ideologies.* The 'human–animal relationships' category encompasses comments where discussion on nonhuman-referent *hän* focuses on the relationships between humans and other animal species. The 'language ideologies' category,

for its part, includes comments where pronoun use is examined and evaluated based on linguistic norms and standards or perceptions of the nature of language in general.

The 'human–animal relationships' category includes two subcategories: *equality* and *differentiation*. These categories correspond to the two prevalent discourses focusing on the human–animal relationship that were identified in the data. The differentiation discourse emphasizes the difference and hierarchy between humans and nonhuman animals. Conversely, the equality discourse challenges this hierarchy and advocates for more equal relations between species. In the following analysis, I will examine these discourses in relation to the language ideological themes corresponding to the categories of *standard*, *heteroglossia*, and *appropriateness*, which in turn are informed by the theoretical notions discussed in Section 2.2. Examples will be presented along with the analysis. Each example includes a translation where the third-person pronouns are in Finnish and in small capitals, with case markings and clitics indicated (e.g. *hänen* is HÄN.GEN in translation).

4.1 Hän *as index of politeness and positive evaluation*

Using *hän* is repeatedly interpreted as signalling a positive opinion or feeling toward the referent: the use of *hän* is presented as stemming from respect or appreciation toward the referent, and in addition, affection or status as a family member is mentioned (and occasionally implied) as a reason to use *hän*. The connection between *hän* and positive evaluation is occasionally expressed explicitly (e.g. by mentioning the word *arvostus* 'appreciation'), but it also appears as a presupposition (e.g. when stating that people use nonhuman-referent *hän* because they prefer them to humans). The commenters often do not seem to consider it necessary to explicitly bring up the notion of *hän* indexing positive evaluation toward the referent, which suggests that it is regarded as common knowledge.

Politeness is also mentioned as a reason to use nonhuman-referent *hän*. This finding is supported by earlier research on Finnish third-person pronoun use, which has found that *hän* is often interpreted as a marker of politeness when referring to humans (Seppänen 1998:91–92; Laitinen 2005:83–84; Priiki 2017b:52, 56). In the case of nonhuman-referent *hän*, the politeness is not necessarily directed toward the nonhuman animal: instead, some commenters describe using *hän* to avoid offending the guardian of the pet who is being referred to (see also Siitonen 2008:99). Nevertheless, the assumption that a person may wish for others to use *hän* when referring to their pet implies that they hold the pet in high regard.

These findings suggest that nonhuman-referent *hän* is commonly interpreted as indexing a positive evaluation toward the animal being referred to or toward nonhuman animals in general. The primary differences between the discourses lie in other potential meanings of the pronoun *hän*, and in the attitudes and perceptions toward evoking the indexical meanings of politeness and positive evaluation in reference to a nonhuman animal. Companion animals, especially dogs, are most often mentioned as potential referents of *hän*, which is expected given the connection between *hän* and the positive evaluation of the referent.

4.2 Differentiation discourse

4.2.1 Normativity and standard language ideology in differentiation discourse

The differentiation discourse intersects significantly with standard language ideology, as it allows both language and the social structure surrounding it to be presented as static and uniform. It is thus natural for the standard language ideology to be involved in discourses that align with the status quo of the human–animal relationship; the standard against which pronoun use is evaluated is the current standard language norm established in the late 1800s, which involves a linguistic separation between human and nonhuman animals. Predictably, the use of nonhuman-referent *hän* is generally portrayed negatively in the differentiation discourse.

Several comments opposing nonhuman-referent *hän* present the Finnish language as a uniform and unchanging entity, exemplifying the suppression of variability involved in the standard language ideology (see Milroy & Milroy 2012:6). Some comments, such as (1), refer to schools as an authority on language norms.

(1)　"Hän" on ihmistä varten. Koulussa on näin opetettu ja vielä se on muistissa.
　　　'"HÄN" is for humans. This is how it was taught in school and I still remember it.'

A repeatedly occurring discursive practice in the differentiation discourse is to use predicative sentences that express a category to which the subject referent belongs, such as *eläin on se* ('an animal is SE'), where the pronoun is construed as being connected to the essential qualities of its referent. This discursive strategy demonstrates the naturalization of the differentiation between human and nonhuman animals and the idea of pronoun choice being connected to social categorizations tied to the referent's qualities. Linguistic choices and norms, as well as the social order behind them, are presented as natural and self-evident instead of social and negotiated. Example (2) illustrates this, despite denying the connection between pronoun choice and attitudes toward nonhuman animals.

(2)　Eläin on "se", eikä se niitä halvenna. Se on suomen kieltä.
　　　'An animal is "SE", and it doesn't demean NE.PART. It's the Finnish language.'

It is also worth noting that the comment presupposes that some may consider nonhuman-referent *se* demeaning, and the author argues against this interpretation by appealing to an understanding of language that is influenced by standard language ideology. The predicative sentence *Se on suomen kieltä* ('It's the Finnish language') implies that nonhuman-referent *hän* is not part of the Finnish language, presenting the language as uniform and invariant.

4.2.2 Nonhuman-referent hän as linguistic anthropomorphism

Nonhuman-referent *hän* is frequently regarded as linguistic anthropomorphism in the data. Occasionally, such as in (3), the word *inhimillistäminen* ('anthropomorphism') is explicitly used.

(3)　Minun mielestäni hänettely on typerää inhimillistämistä.
　　　'In my opinion, using HÄN is stupid anthropomorphism.'

Another, more implicit way of presenting the nonhuman-referent *hän* as anthropomorphism is to draw parallels between nonhuman-referent *hän* and other anthropomorphizing practices (linguistic or non-linguistic). The most commonly mentioned feature of linguistic anthropomorphism (after nonhuman-referent *hän*) is the usage of parenthood-related vocabulary – a pet guardian calling themselves their companion animal's *äiti* 'mother' or *isä* 'father' (or synonyms indexing endearment, such as *mami*, *mamma*, or *isi*) or calling their companion animal their 'child' (*lapsi*) or 'baby' (*vauva*, *vaavi*) (see Mondémé 2018:xiii–xv for further discussion). Examples (4–5) illustrate how disapproval of this practice is expressed: (4) appeals to the biological facets of parenthood, whereas (5) offers an imitation of speech containing parenthood-related vocabulary, including vomiting emojis that express disapproval.

(4)   Entäs kun koiralle sanotaan "äiti antaa nyt herkkua." Koirat ovat tulleet koirasta eivätkä ihmisestä!
       'How about when somebody says to a dog "mom will give you a treat now". Dogs come from dogs, not humans!'

(5)   Kävin ulkona mamin pikku karvavaavin kanssa. Ihanasti hän kakkasi nurmikolle. Voi mikä kultimussukka. 🤮🤮🤮🤮
       I went outside with mommy's little hairy baby. How wonderfully HÄN pooped on the lawn. Oh, what a precious sweetie. 🤮🤮🤮🤮

Using parenting-related vocabulary in reference to pet guardianship frames the relationship between a person and their companion animal as a nurturing and affectionate one; the differentiation discourse therefore regulates not only linguistic expression, but also the relationships expressed in language. The word *äiti* ('mother') is mentioned more often than *isä* ('father'), and while *äiti* appears in varying textual contexts, *isä* is mentioned only after the word *äiti* or in reference to the commenter themselves. This indicates that there may be a gendered element to the issue of parenting vocabulary in reference to nonhuman animals. This is supported by Priiki (2023:116–118), whose findings on written biographical pet stories suggest that women might use language that equates companion animals to children more often than men.

Several comments link parenting vocabulary to so-called baby talk (often called *hellittely* or *lässytys* in Finnish; the latter usually has a negative connotation). Pet-directed speech has been found to share some features with the register used when talking to a baby (Mitchell 2001:192–196; Tannen 2004:408–417). By contrast, Peltola & Simonen (2024:16) problematize the similarity between the registers, arguing that they emerge in different social and physical contexts. Regardless, this notion of 'pet-directed baby talk' is prominent in metalinguistic social media discussions, suggesting that non-linguists perceive it as a distinct register or style. Example (5) offers a textual representation of baby talk, while (6) explicitly mentions the word *lässytys*. By including the pronoun *hän* in the imitation, the comment implies that nonhuman-referent *hän* is a part of the style as well.

(6) Tuo kuulostaa kyllä tosi ärsyttävältä. Sitten vielä semmoinen lässytys: "hän on niiiin ihana". En kyllä voi sietää lässytystä muutenkaan. :D
'That sounds really annoying. Add to that baby talk like: "HÄN is sooooooooo sweet". I can't stand baby talk anyway. :D'

Other anthropomorphizing practices mentioned include giving a companion animal a name that is typically given to a human, as in (7), and putting clothes and accessories on them, as in (8).

(7) Minua häiritsee myös kun sanotaan hän. Ja se, että eläimille annetaan ihmisten nimiä tai toisin päin.
'It bothers me as well when people say HÄN. Also when animals are given human names or the other way around.'

(8) Lemmikkien sanominen häneksi on samanlaista kuin se, että heille puetaan päälle hattuja ja aurinkolaseja...
'Calling animals HÄN is similar to putting hats and sunglasses on HE.ALL...'

Example (8) also includes the nonhuman-referent *he* (plural form of *hän*). I interpret the example as negative toward the use of nonhuman-referent *hän* and the use of *he* in this context as ironic, equating the use of *he* and unnecessarily anthropomorphizing companion animals by putting accessories on them.

Research on actual language use shows that the connection between pronoun choice and other linguistic practices that are deemed anthropomorphizing is not clear-cut (Priiki 2023:116–119). Still, it is notable that anthropomorphizing practices repeatedly and spontaneously come up in discussions about nonhuman-referent *hän*, which indicates that these linguistic and non-linguistic practices are socially connected to each other and constitute stylistic ensembles despite not always co-occurring. These ensembles include not only linguistic practices but also styles of pet guardianship – ways of expressing specific kinds of relationships with nonhuman animals.

The human–animal relationship is brought up in more explicit terms as well. Some commenters state outright that the use of nonhuman-referent *hän* is connected to the status of nonhuman animals in society, which in the differentiation discourse is presented as being excessively high, and others claim that companion animals are replacements for children for some people, such as in (9). Using nonhuman-referent *hän* is also equated to training a pet too leniently in (10).

(9) Lemmikkieläimistä on tullut lapsen korvike monille. Tuntuu oikeastaan, että koira on jopa lasta tärkeämpi. Tietäisinpä, mistä tämäkin kertoo.
'Pets have become replacements for a child for many. In fact, I feel that the dog is even more important than the child. I wish I knew what this means.'

(10) Minuakin ärsyttää kun eläimestä sanotaan hän. En tietenkään kannata eläinten kaltoinkohtelua, mutta inhimillistämisellä kasvatuksesta jää pois oleellinen ja syntyy tietty mukavuusalue, jossa eläimen on sallittua olla "oma itsensä".

'I'm also annoyed when people refer to animals as ʜäɴ. Of course, I don't support abusing animals, but anthropomorphism takes the essential out of the rearing and creates a comfort zone where the animal is allowed to be "themselves".'

Both (9) and (10) contain implicatures that contribute to the differentiation discourse. In (9), human children are presupposed as being the default receiver of care in the family, and having a companion animal occupy a similar position in some families is seen as pets replacing children. The (assumed) preference of pets over children by some people is presented as an extreme position by using the focus particle *jopa* ('even'). Example (10) implies than an 'essential' quality (*oleellinen*) of rearing a pet is keeping them under some level of control instead of letting them behave in an uninhibited manner.

The differentiation discourse also involves presenting the use of nonhuman-referent *hän* as stemming from irrationality, either by using adjectives such as *typerä* ('stupid') or by implying that people who use nonhuman-referent *hän* are mentally unstable or that they have untrue, illogical beliefs about nonhuman animals. This finding reflects the one made by Priiki (2021:335–336); however, compared to the discussions analysed by Priiki, where irrationality is connected to an assumed lack of knowledge about the standard language norm, here the perceived irrationality is also connected to views on anthropomorphism and the societal hierarchies between human and nonhuman animals. Example (11) illustrates how this association is expressed in discourse and how it links the differentiation discourse to the standard language ideology.

(11)   Siinä on kielioppi ja maailmankuva vinksallaan.
        'The grammar and worldview are warped there.'

The indexical field of *hän* in this discourse seems to shift according to the referent: *hän* is interpreted generally as indexing humanity, but when used to refer to a nonhuman animal, it also gains an indexical meaning of irrationality. When *hän* is interpreted as exclusively referring to humans, using *hän* indexes human-like qualities, presupposing that nonhuman animals are fundamentally different from humans. Implying otherwise by using *hän* counters these underlying assumptions, which are treated as self-evident truths, making the speaker seem irrational.

4.3 Equality discourse

4.3.1 Language norms and ideologies in equality discourse

The equality discourse views nonhuman-referent *hän* more positively than the differentiation discourse, and intersects with multiple language ideological views. Heteroglossic views on language are apparent in this discourse, as linguistic variation is viewed positively, and strictly normative views are resisted. The coexistence of different styles and registers and the ability of speakers to draw on a variety of linguistic resources are regarded as natural features of language. However, ideological notions of standard language and appropriateness also shape the way in which linguistic norms and indexical meanings are negotiated in this discourse.

There is an apparent tendency in the data of interpreting *hän* as indexing sentience or animacy instead of humanity. This aspect in the indexical field of *hän* is a central feature of the equality discourse, and shapes the way pronoun use relates to the human–animal relationship and linguistic norms. It also brings forth the ideological underpinnings of language use in relation to the human–animal relationship, which contribute substantially to the disagreements about third-person pronoun use.

Hän being used in reported speech or when interpreting mental processes is only once mentioned explicitly in the data, which corroborates earlier findings of non-linguists rarely bringing it up (Priiki 2014:199, 2016:131; Siitonen 2016:387). Nevertheless, a shared understanding of *hän* as an index of sentience is apparent, as several commenters argue that nonhuman animals being sentient entails *hän* being a natural pronoun choice for them. This is illustrated in (12).

(12) Käytän hän-sanaa, koska monilla eläimillä on oma persoonallisuutensa. Eivät he ole mitään elottomia objekteja, vaan he tuntevat iloa ja surua ym. Koirakin on perheenjäsen eikä sisustusesine.
'I use the word HÄN because many animals have their own personalities. HE are not lifeless objects, but HE feel joy and sadness, etc. A dog is also a family member and not a piece of decoration.'

Some commenters, such as the author of (13), believe that the standard language norm will change to *hän* being used to refer to all animate beings. This openness to linguistic change also reflects heteroglossic views, as language is presented as naturally changing.

(13) Luulen että kun kieli kehittyy, "se" jää tarkoittamaan elottomia esineitä ja "hän" elollisia olentoja. Hän ei minua haittaa ollenkaan.
'I think that when language evolves, "SE" will refer to inanimate objects and "HÄN" to living beings. HÄN doesn't bother me at all.'

In (12–13), using *se* is suggested to imply that the referent is a lifeless object, although in colloquial language it is the most common third-person pronoun for both human and nonhuman referents. This demonstrates how the standard language norm is taken as the point of reference even in discourses advocating for linguistic change: if there were no preference for the standard language at all, commenters could be advocating for the introduction of human-referent *se* in formal language as well.

Similarly to (1–2) in Section 4.2.1, comments promoting nonhuman-referent *hän* also use predicative sentences expressing membership of a category. This is illustrated by (14), where the assumed self-evidence of the appropriateness of *hän* when referring to a dog is further emphasized with the phrase *ehdottomasti* ('unconditionally, unquestionably').

(14) Aivan ehdottomasti koira on hän.
'Unquestionably, a dog is HÄN.'

It seems that although the differentiation discourse is based on an ideology that is dominant in human societies and on a well-established linguistic norm, there is significant resistance to this discourse, and a process of potentially establishing a new norm appears to be taking place. The potential new norm is put forth in (14) by discursively treating it as if it were already an established norm, using the same syntax that contributes to the naturalization of the standard language norm.

Presenting the use of nonhuman-referent *hän* as natural and self-evident challenges not only the linguistic norm but also the way nonhuman animals are socially conceptualized. Similarly to (2), the commenter in (14) presents the pronoun choice in terms of category membership, implying that using *hän* when referring to a dog stems from some inherent quality of the species. Therefore, it seems that the acceptance of nonhuman-referent *hän* and the potential for the emergence of a new norm may at least partially stem from changing attitudes toward nonhuman animals and the relationships people have with them. This interpretation is further corroborated by the commenter applying this new norm specifically to dogs, who have an exceptional status as valued companion animals in human societies.

4.3.2 The human–animal relationship in equality discourse

The construction of the human–animal relationship through language is a repeatedly occurring theme in the equality discourse as well. These relationships are viewed through both a personal lens and from a wider societal perspective. Similarity between human and nonhuman animals is evoked through the interpretation of *hän* as indexing sentience and animacy; in addition, commenters emphasize emotional attachment to pets and call for more egalitarian relations between human and nonhuman animals in society.

For several commenters, using *hän* when referring to companion animals indexes affection toward them, and a pet being a family member is frequently stated as a reason to use *hän*. Example (15) explicitly states that using *hän* is appropriate when a pet is considered an important family member and evokes affection with a heart emoji.

(15) Kyllä silloin kun rakas lemmikki on tärkeä perheenjäsen, hän on hän siinä missä ihminenkin. ❤️ 🐾
      'When a beloved pet is an important family member, HÄN is HÄN as much as a human. ❤️ 🐾'

Parenting vocabulary is also connected to nonhuman-referent *hän*, similarly to the differentiation discourse (see above in Section 4.2.2). In (16), this connection is made explicit when the commenter states that they use both *he* (plural of *hän*) and *äiti* ('mother') in reference to companion animals due to feeling affection toward them.

(16) Minua eivät kiinnosta kielioppisäännöt, kun puhutaan minulle rakkaista ja tärkeistä eläimistä. He ovat minulle he, ja minä olen myös heille äiti.
      'I don't care about grammar rules when talking about animals that are dear and important to me. HE are HE to me, and I am also a mom to them.'

Other forms of (perceived) anthropomorphism besides parenting vocabulary are not compared to nonhuman-referent *hän* in the equality discourse; practices such as putting clothes on pets or giving them names traditionally given to humans are not mentioned (cf. Section 4.2.2).

Several commenters also reflect on the societal status of nonhuman animals in general terms; an understanding of language use being connected to the societal relationship between human and nonhuman animals is apparent. This connection is made explicit in (17).

(17)　Eläimet nähdään niin usein esineinä tai hyödykkeinä, joita vois omistaa, että muutama hän-sana ei varmaan haittais mitään.
'Animals are seen as objects or commodities that can be owned so often that a few HÄN words probably would not do any harm.'

The use of nonhuman-referent *hän* is presented as reflecting and constructing an egalitarian relationship between human and nonhuman animals. By stating that animals are seen as inanimate objects and that using *hän* 'probably would not do any harm' (*ei varmaan haittais mitään*), the author of (17) contrasts using *hän* and seeing nonhuman animals as objects or commodities, implying that using *se* perpetuates an objectifying attitude to nonhuman animals, and suggests a shift toward a more egalitarian view, which is equated with using nonhuman-referent *hän*.

4.3.3 Stylistic practice, playful speech, and appropriateness

Heteroglossic views on linguistic play and stylistic practice are apparent in discussions on nonhuman-referent *hän*, and they are closely aligned with the equality discourse. However, these discussions also involve the stratification of registers, which reveals that the ideology of appropriateness is also present.

Nonhuman-referent *hän* is frequently presented as a feature of playful speech, or of so-called baby talk, as discussed above. In the equality discourse, playful (*leikkisä*) or fun (*hauska*) speech is contrasted with so-called 'proper' (*asiallinen*), formal speech. This is illustrated in (18–19).

(18)　Murretta tai puhekieltä käyttäessä hänestä tulee helposti se. Minusta hän se-sanan tilalla on huumoria ja leikkisää puhetta.
'In dialects and informal language, SE often turns into HÄN. HÄN instead of SE is, in my opinion, humorous and playful speech.'

(19)　"Hän" eläimestä on minusta lempeää ja hauskaa. Asiallisessa tilanteessa sanoisin toki "se".
'I think "HÄN" for an animal is gentle and fun. In a formal situation, I would naturally say "SE".'

There is a notable connection between playfulness and affection indicated by the word *lempeä* ('gentle') in (19) and by the potential referent of *hän* usually being a companion animal.

Additionally, some comments associate nonhuman-referent *hän* with humour and irony, such as (20) (for discussion on *hän* and irony, see Siitonen 2008:104, Priiki 2014).

(20)   Käytän eläimestä "hän"-pronominia sellaisissa tilanteissa, jossa se vaikuttaa kuvittelevansa itsensä kuninkaalliseksi. Joidenkin tapausten kohdalla tämä on erittäin helppoa. Silloin puhe on hellää ja ironista: "Ruoka-annos sopii kerrankin hänen standardeihinsa."
'I use the pronoun "HÄN" for an animal in situations where it seems like SE thinks SE is royalty. With some cases, this is really easy. The speech is then warm and ironic: "For once, the meal fits HÄN.GEN standards."'

The author of (20) emphasizes the distinction between ironic and non-ironic speech by using nonhuman-referent *se* in non-ironic language, while *hän* is used when exemplifying ironic speech.

This intersection of heteroglossia, stylistic stratification, and appropriateness demonstrates how language ideologies mediate the social aspects of language. Ideas of linguistic play and freedom are used to justify practices that breach standard language norms, but only in specific contexts and registers. Nonhuman-referent *hän*, along with the indexical meanings of interspecies affection and animacy associated with it, are limited to registers that are not taken as seriously as others (see Fairclough 1992a:35–36).

5. Conclusion

This study has critically examined how discourses on the human–animal relationship interact with language ideologies and participate in the construction of pragmatic norms. Ideologies related to linguistic standards (Milroy & Milroy 2012), heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), and appropriateness (Fairclough 1992a) were shown to interact with these discourses. The indexical field (Eckert 2008) of nonhuman-referent *hän* includes meanings related to anthropomorphism and animacy.

Two competing discourses on interspecies relations were identified, one emphasizing equality, affection, and nonhuman sentience, and another focusing on differentiation and hierarchy. Standard language ideology was demonstrated to be intricately linked to the differentiation discourse, which portrays nonhuman-referent *hän* as irrational, unfounded anthropomorphism. The equality discourse, on the other hand, constructs more egalitarian human–animal relationships. Although the standard language norm also influences this discourse, it is additionally shaped by heteroglossic views on language. These views are, in turn, constrained by ideological notions of appropriateness. Societal issues connected to the human–animal relationship are made explicit when discussing nonhuman-referent *hän* and affect how its use is evaluated. The limitations of this study stem mainly from the small dataset. Further research could explore attitudes toward nonhuman-referent *hän* with more comprehensive and representative data and expand its scope from pronoun use to other linguistic features. In addition, further

research on actual pronoun use in diverse contexts, including contemporary spoken interaction, would deepen the understanding of interspecies interaction and human–animal relationships.

The analysis has shown that language ideologies interact with discourses about the human–animal relationship, and they both influence attitudes about nonhuman-referent *hän*. Adopting a critical perspective has allowed for the examination of language ideologies in the context of societal hierarchies between human and nonhuman animals. The perceived appropriateness of nonhuman-referent *hän* is limited by language ideologies and the societal hierarchies between different animal species: nonhuman-referent *hän* seems to be considered most appropriate in a playful, non-formal context and when referring specifically to companion animals. The results suggest that more critical examination is needed for a thorough understanding of the connections between language and the human–animal relationship.

Notes

1 This paper is based on my MA thesis (Kangas 2021).

2 I use the term *nonhuman animal* instead of just *animal* when referring to other animals than humans, as using *animal* when only referring to nonhuman animals is arguably inaccurate and speciesist (Stibbe 2001:149, Singer 2015:xx). The exception to this is the term *human–animal relationship*, which I employ for the sake of clarity and brevity.

3 By *non-standard*, I refer to regional dialects and other variants of colloquial speech. In Finnish, the standardized variant is distinct from dialects and colloquial language, and it is rarely used in informal, everyday language.

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