



SECOND REFLEXIVE MODERNITY AND NON-HUMAN ANIMALS:

A few reflections on the ape language experiments

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Abstract. In this paper, we link anthropocentrism's decline, the rise of zoocentrism, and the so-called 'animal turn' in the 20th century to the reflexive modernity and general tensions characteristic of risk societies. In this essay, the ape language experiments are brought up as an example of boundary-blurring typical of risk societies. It is only at the beginning of the 20th century that we have the first scientific explorations into language acquisition in other animal species. The discovery that great apes, among other-than-human animals, could acquire certain aspects of human language has certainly shaken the scientific community, putting into question humans' uniqueness among other living beings. These experiments have effectively blurred the boundaries between humans and other-than-human animals and changed the scientific understanding of what it means to be human.

This paper proposes that the ascription of certain linguistic abilities to non-human animals, the movement advocating for recognizing 'personhood rights' for great apes, and other related phenomena that blur the boundaries between humans and other-than-human animals are all strictly connected to the nature of risk societies. Thus, they can be interpreted as a byproduct of the reflexive modernity conceptualised by Ulrich Beck.

Keywords: risk society, ape language, urban space, zoocentrism, other animals

Teine refleksiivne modernsus ja mitte-inimloomad: mõned mõtted ahvide keele eksperimentidest

Abstrakt. Antud essees seome antropotsentrismi languse, zootsentrismi tõusu ja 20. sajandi nn „loomade pöörde“ riskühiskondade refleksiivse modernsuse ja üldiste pingete tunnustega. Toome esile inimahvide keeleeksperimendid kui riskühiskondadele omaste piiride hägustamise näited. Alles 20. sajandi alguses on meil esimesed teaduslikud uuringud keele omandamise kohta teistel loomaliikidel. Avastus, et inimahvid, teiste mitte-inimloomade kõrval, võivad omandada inimkeele teatud aspekte, on teadusringkondi kindlasti raputanud, seades kahtluse alla inimeste ainulaadsuse teiste elusolendite seas. Need katsed on tõhusalt hägustanud piire inimeste ja teiste loomade vahel ning muutnud teaduslikku arusaama inimeseks olemise tähendusest.



Selles artiklis teeme ettepaneku, et teatud keeleliste võimete omistamine loomadele, liikumine, mis pooldab inimahvide „isikuna“ tunnustamist, ja muud sellega seotud nähtused, mis hägustavad piire inimeste ja muude loomade vahel, on tugevalt seotud riskiühiskondade olemusega. Seega saab neid tõlgendada kui refleksiivse modernsuse kõrvalprodukti, mille kontseptualiseeris Ulrich Beck.

Märksõnad: riskiühiskond, inimahvide keeleeksperimendid, linnaruum, zootsentrism, mitte-inimestest loomad

Risk society, self-reflexivity, and boundaries loss

Ulrich Beck (1992) introduced the concept of risk society to describe how modern industrialised societies organise themselves around the idea of heightened ‘risks’. This emergence is marked mostly by change in political and economic conditions in the late twentieth century. According to Beck, the problems and conflicts of traditional scarcity societies and risk societies, or second reflexive modernity (Beck 2006: 61), overlap. While in scarcity societies, we are mostly concerned with “making nature useful” and “releasing mankind from traditional constraints” (Beck 1992: 19), in risk societies, we need to deal directly with the problems resulting from techno-economic development. Modernisation has become reflexive, its “own theme” (Beck 1992: 19), inasmuch as it creates itself problems that need to be addressed and solved. Modernisation, of course, characterises both paradigms. In scarcity societies, the distribution of socially produced wealth is put in the foreground as long as there is a material need dictated by scarcity itself. It is believed that problems can be solved with techno-scientific development; however, in Western welfare states, we usually face the opposite problem: overproduction. In a related manner, we must deal with the “hazardous side effects” (Beck 1992: 20) of industrialisation, such as pollution and ecological disasters.

Reflexive modernity is signalled by the transformation from industrial modernisation to the confrontation with the effects of modernisation. In other words, modernity has produced side effects or threats that traditional institutions are unable to deal with, thereby giving rise to public insecurities and anxieties within a risk society. These anxieties and insecurities are reflected differently, for example, by challenging the traditional authority of science and political power. In this context, mass media plays a fundamental role in shaping the definition of ‘risk’ (Beck 1992: 46). Simultaneously, the past loses its power upon the present while the future becomes the shaper of the present-day situation (Beck 2006: 65), meaning that risk societies tend to think about possible terrible future consequences in an almost obsessive way.

The side effects of modernisation characterises risk societies in the first place: the realisation that human activities have a broad impact. Human actions do not only affect other humans, but they have the potential of being disastrous for the whole ecosystem.



It is precisely this realisation that lies at the core of risk societies. In Beck's framework, however, other-than-human animals and other living beings do not seem to play an active role in shaping the relations and their surroundings in risk societies; in Beck's work, other-than-human animals are severely underrepresented; they are mostly victims of human actions. On the one hand, other-than-human animals need to be protected from human destructive activity, and on the other hand, they also may pose health and security risks, for instance, in the case of pests and hazardous animals. As such, they need to be controlled. In their ambivalent position, however, non-human animals remain mostly silent in Beck's work.

On the position of animals in risk societies

Franklin (1999: 175) has argued that modern societies are characterised by a decline of anthropocentrism and an emergence of zoocentrism, the latter bringing with itself implications regarding the semiotic agency of animals (Uexküll 1992) and recognition of 'higher' animals as moral subjects (Hoffmeyer 1993: 172; 1996: 139). Close attention to animals is far from new and can be traced back to Aristotle (1965); however, in the last decades, scholars have understood the role of animals in the "past and present" (Ritvo 2007: 119) and adopted a new perspective that highlights the role of the interactions and mutual influences of humans and other-than-human animals. In this context, it is not a surprise that many speak of an 'animal turn' in science (Salzani 2017; Andersson Cederholm et al. 2014; Weil 2010).

The various problems linked to modernisation are also strictly connected to a more general and wider understanding that human actions affect other living beings. The last few decades are characterised by the rise of animal rights movements (Rollin 2011), ecological concerns such as climate change, and an increase of those questions regarding animals' minds and consciousness and ethical treatment of other living beings (Singer, Cavalieri 1993). Such changes can be interpreted as a response to the growing anxieties characterising risk societies and a by-product of second reflexive societies. Even urban spaces, once the human place *par excellence*, have been stripped away from humans; the recognition of the hybrid nature of cities (Blair 1996; Mäekivi 2016) puts into questions such places as uniquely human spaces, spring-boarding different strategies born to ensure peaceful coexistence of different species. Sharing our daily activities with non-human animals has an impact on the material, and political dimensions of society, since animals have contributed to shaping "the histories, moralities, political subjectivities and places we take as natural and/or devised through human ingenuity alone" (Hobson 2007: 257). The consequences of this paradigm shift are multiple. Risk societies are characterised by a decreased distinction between nature and culture (Beck 2000: 221), although some scholars have argued that there exists no univocal definition of such boundaries in modernist discourse (Tovay 2003: 206). Previously mentioned tendencies, such as animal rights movements and ecological concerns, have been here linked to the



self-reflexive nature of risk societies as described by Beck. Taking a step forward, we propose that the ape language experiments represent an example of boundary loss in contemporary scientific discourse, simultaneously resulting from the reflexive modernity described by Beck.

Ape language experiments and blurred boundaries

Linguistic abilities are conceived as a distinctive factor, the hallmark of humanity. Human language remains for many the marker that separates humans and their higher thinking abilities from other animals, whose cognition is understood as pre-linguistic. Language acquisition has been linked to specific mental structures only present in the human brain (Chomsky 2000). Based on such premises, the ape language experiments have been accused of relying on false scientific premises or being compromised by fallacious interpretations, because language is viewed as qualitatively distant from other animal communication systems (Trask 1995: 19; Sebeok, Danesi 2000: 19; Lenneberg 1980), such experiments have been dismissed.

Following the distinction in the Tartu-Moscow school between primary modelling systems, used to refer to language, and secondary modelling systems, which instead denotes higher-level cultural systems built upon language (Lotman 1977), Thomas Sebeok conceptualised *umwelt*¹ as the primary system, with language and culture as secondary and tertiary modelling systems, respectively. Human language is portrayed as one of the fundamental aspects of diversification in humans, a view also shared by Floyd Merrell (2001: 244). However, the ape language experiments have put the notion of language, as a specific human device, up for discussion. These experiments have shown that other-than-human animals are able to acquire certain characteristics of human language, heavily blurring the boundaries between humans and other animals. This paper does not propose providing an exhaustive analysis of such experiments, which can be found elsewhere (e.g. Cerrone 2018; Martinelli 2010). In this essay, we are merely proposing the idea that testing linguistic abilities in other species from the one hand is a result of the reflexive nature of risk societies; on the other hand, it feeds back to the anxieties and questions arising from the awareness that human actions have repercussions on other beings.

Apart from the well-known criticism against such experiments (Sebeok 1980), some concern has been brought up about the imminent risk that heavily socialised and language-trained animals may lose their 'species identity'. Examples of this sort come from many experiments dealing with apes' sign language acquisition. Nim Chimpsky, Washoe, and Viki behaved as if they belonged to the human species (Fouts 1993: 28–41; Linden 1974: 50). Washoe included pictures of herself among those of other humans in experimental settings and refused to interact with other chimpanzees when she



encountered them for the first time. Concerns regarding animals' loss of species identity due to language training and heavy socialisation can be linked to that deeper realisation that human actions have wide-ranging effects that we have referenced in the previous section.

The blurring of boundaries between what is human and what is not, is simultaneously, an inevitable side-effect of risk societies. In second reflexive modern societies, "there is no wilderness, or perhaps no nature since everything everywhere is subject to human control" (Franklin 1999: 59). This loss of boundary, or more precisely, the effects of human activities on other living beings, has become a repetitive theme in contemporary societies; we only need to think about public concern for genetically modified organisms and animal hybridisation (Macnaghten 2004). The underlying problem seems to lead to the constant anxiety linked to the loss of our sense of humanity and the health risks connected with DNA manipulation. As for the ape language experiments, we believe that such experiments are linked to the reflexive modernisation that characterises risk societies. As a matter of fact, it is only thanks to the fulfilment of material and immediate needs that humans can start questioning their position on this planet and seek similarities, and differences, with other living creatures. Similar experiments would be unthinkable in scarcity societies. At the same time, however, by pushing further the limits of what should be humanly possible and by questioning the uniqueness of humans on Earth, these experiments also represent an invisible risk for the stability of human identity and that of other-than-human animals. Thus, the harsh criticism towards such experiments can also be interpreted as a response to the anxiety originating from boundary loss.

Conclusions

This paper presented the ape language experiments as strictly linked to the modern reflexivity that characterises risk society. We have focused on an often-overlooked aspect of Beck's risk society theorisation, namely the loss of a clear boundary between nature and culture and animals' role in risk societies. The loss of boundary is, simultaneously, characteristic of risk societies and a source of anxiety typical of second reflexive modernity. This loss has been exemplified here by the ape language experiments that have gained great popularity in the second half of the 20th century. With these experiments, researchers have questioned the special place given to humans within the animal kingdom and have shown that certain elements considered exclusive to human linguistic abilities are acquirable by other-than-human animals. We have furthermore sketched the role of animals in contemporary discourse and highlighted how this has significantly changed in the last decades. Future research should focus instead on how the anxiety linked to the perceived boundary loss between humans and other animals,



culture and nature, is mediated in media. After all, it is precisely in risk societies where mass media holds power over knowledge, as wisely noted by Beck.

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Notes

- 1 We follow here the definition of 'umwelt' as "the world around an animal, conceived by it as a perceiving and operating subject, i.e., the subjective world as contrasted with the environment" (Sebeok, Danesi 1994: 1146).