People that are nervous: attributions of humanness in third-person pronouns?

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Haslam and colleagues proposed that humanness consists of uniquely human (UH) traits and human nature (HN) traits; artists and animals were associated with HN traits, whereas businesspeople and automata were associated with UH traits. The current study explored the influence of third person pronoun referents 'who' or 'that' on attributions of humanness for four categories (animals, named animals, automata and people). Preliminary pilot testing with 20 professional copyeditors, proofreaders and writers ensured that items in the categories were representative. In the experiment, sixty university students performed a semantic attribution task where they were shown a phrase containing one category item with either 'who' or 'that' (e.g. elephants who are…) and then two words (UH/HN pairs, e.g. polite/curious) from which they selected the option most meaningfully suited to the phrase. Trials were randomized so that participants saw each category item paired with 'who' or 'that' and with six UH/HN word pairs, which carried an equal number of positive and negative connotations. A repeated measures 4 (people, automata, animals, named animals) x 2 (HN traits, UH traits) x 2 (who, that) ANOVA was used to analyse the data.