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The Pit Bull's Discourse: An Examination of Discursive Construction

Karen Jennings

ABSTRACT

Since the early 1980s, news reporters have used the pit bull as a scapegoat to get media attention by plastering the frightening image of a snarling, bloody dog across all news outlets. Over the years, the pit bull's image has suffered major blows to its already battered reputation with every new "dog attack" news story published. Each reporter's word choice, in both past and present news stories, has an effect on the reader's perception of the topic. By analyzing several unrelated stories about pit bulls, both good and bad, I reveal how word choice alone shapes a reader's perception while providing a new image for the breed, one mixed with my own personal experiences and the true history of the American Pit Bull Terrier.

The skies were pitch black, the road empty. No one was around, and the sounds of snarling, growling, whining, yelping, and barking filled the empty street as two large black dogs escaped their yard and tried to kill my family's elderly 13-year-old mutt as we were on our nightly walk. Princess was pinned between two dogs, one with its mouth firmly locked around her neck, the other with her hind leg in its mouth. My mother, screaming about saving "her baby," had a firm grip on the end of the leash, her knuckles white. The way that the one dog was dragging Princess around by her neck, I feared he would kill her. Just one snap of his jaw and he could have broken her neck. It was only the fact that I could see Princess still supporting her own weight that kept me from breaking down. Slightly in front of me, my 5-year-old American Pit Bull Terrier, Fetch, was on her back haunches, trying to put enough weight on the leash to pull me forward. She wanted to get to her surrogate mother. It was at that moment that I saw the "monster" that the media portrays the breed to be. But she wasn't one. She was being loyal, even in the face of danger.

The inner cities in the United States had long been battlegrounds for gangs and gang-related activity. According to Bell (2010), as gang members began to accumulate large sums of money, they began to buy status symbols, including fancy cars and muscular dogs. Dogfights became a common venue for gambling, where dog breeders pitted their dogs against others in a test of their toughness and aggression in the fighting ring (Bell, 2010). Magazines like *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* ran sensationalistic stories about the breed, starting the disintegration of a once-noble breed of dog. A breed that first entered the United States around 1870, the pit bull was the floppy-eared friend of Buster Brown, a companion of President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House, a decorated World War I dog named Sgt. Stubby, and Pete, the canine pal of a group of children commonly referred to as the Little Rascals or Our Gang. The pit bull symbolized America on 1914 propaganda posters. And yet, headlines like "Time Bombs on Legs" and "The Pit Bull: Friend and Killer" plagued the public, painting the pit bull in a bastardizing light. It was as if "the vicious hound of the Baskervilles that burst upon Sherlock Holmes out of the fog [had] returned to haunt the streets of America" (Brand, 1987).

The pit bull. The mere mention of the name elicits narrow-minded remarks about the dangers of such a breed in a public setting. However, what does the name pit bull really mean? To different people, the word carries different connotations. Owners of the American Pit Bull Terrier use the moniker pit bull as "shorthand for their breed. However, fans of the American Staffordshire Terrier and English Staffordshire Terrier are usually quick to tell you that their breeds are not pit bulls" (Foster, 2012, p. 22). The fact of the matter is that "the term 'pit bull' is used to describe 10 to 20 percent of the dogs found in the United States, including pit bull-type breeds, indeterminate breeds, and breed mixes" (Foster, 2012, p. 22). No

matter the canine's "true origins, in the eyes of most people—including the media and the law—these dogs are called pit bulls (or bullies or pit bull types)" (Foster, 2012, p. 25). The pit bull, thanks to the media's portrayal of the breed, is a dog with a bad rap, a bad rap that has overshadowed its good qualities.

Because of the pit bull's bad rap, my peaceful walks around the neighborhood have become battles on their own. People sneer as I walk by with my pit bull. And it is all because of her breed. There have been days where people walk on the other side of the street, whether they have a dog or not, to get away from Fetch. Yes, my dog is a sight. She's a red-nosed pit bull weighing around 80 pounds and boasting a very stocky build. What people don't know is that her favorite pastime is sleeping in either my bed or my parents' (depending on whose door is open for her) and that she is absolutely terrified of my Russian tortoise (who happens to measure in at a whopping seven inches in length).

Flashback to World War I. Called the American bull terrier then, it was the pit bull "who was featured on U.S. propaganda posters, representing the country's position: neutral, but prepared to join the fight. . . . the proud pit bull in the center, surrounded by dogs representing other countries. Another shows a pit bull guarding a litter of kittens nestled on the American flag" (Foster, 2012, pp. 110-111). During the same time period, Theodor Seuss Geisel had "an ally in his dog, Rex. Rex was a pit bull with a limp—he had all four of his legs but walked on only three—and wherever the two went, the other boys in town made fun of them" (Foster, 2012, p. 61). In 1914, with World War I on the horizon, the "anti-German sentiment was strong, so Geisel must have found some comfort in having Rex as a friend, sharing their outsider status" (Foster, 2012, p. 61). Rex was his first inspiration, starring as a horse rather than a dog in many doodles. Rex's influence over Geisel could have easily inspired his "moral sensibility. In *Horton Hears a Who*, the faithful elephant teaches everyone that 'a person's a person, no matter how small.' In the *Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, it is the Grinch's dog, Max, who demonstrates loyalty to a master, even if his heart is two sizes too small" (Foster, 2012, p. 62).

The media attacks the pit bull breeds because of the actions of a few misguided dogs and society's draw to violence and sensationalism, destroying the reputations of many breeds through the calculating choices that are made when picking and choosing words for a news story. A writer's use of language, no matter the intentions, carries a lot of power behind it depending on the words chosen. Through word choice, both personal choices and quotes from sources, a writer is creating a new image for the pit bull's already damaged discourse.

Plagued by discrimination, the pit bull has been forced to fight an upward battle for forgiveness and redemption. Dogs, just like people, that "share the same physical, social, and cultural features" (Ghanbarinajjar, 2013, p. 4) find themselves to be grouped together with breeds of similar dispositions. Like the racial profiling that police are often accused of, pit bulls are picked from the pack because of their features, a topic that "is highly dependent to the time and place and the people directly involved with the issue" (Ghanbarinajjar, 2013, p. 3). One group of people highly attuned to the pit bull's racial profiling is the news reporters who write about all of their highs and lows. In an article published in 2006, the reporter states that "Pit bulls try to inflict the maximum amount of damage on an opponent. They bite, hold, shake, and tear. They don't growl or assume an aggressive facial expression as warning. They just attack" (Applebome, 2006). Despite the article's overall message about the beauty of the breed, when taken out of context, the one received by the reader is that of a dangerous, deadly animal.

The discourse of the breed relies heavily on the word choice and language that a writer uses to describe its kind. The structure of the language used to describe the pit bull "determines the structure of the mind, behavior, and action" (Piliang, 2012, p. 3) within the reader. In 1987, when *Sports Illustrated* released its cover story about pit bulls, it was reported that "pit bulls do not usually growl before attacking; they seldom bark. The hair on their backs does not stand on end when they are enraged. These are not dogs given to threatening displays" (Swift, 1987). Flash forward nineteen years to an article published in *The*

New Yorker, which states that pit bulls “don’t growl or assume an aggressive facial expression as warning” (Gladwell, 2006). The same language structure and the same phrases are used. The opponents of the pit bull use false ideas to “control the condition of life of [pit bulls]” (Piliang, 2012, p. 4) by focusing almost entirely on the negative aspects of the breed.

In 2002, an elderly woman was found dead with several dog bites covering her body. It was originally reported that these bites caused her death. As both dogs in the house were pit bulls, news stories began to pop up with titles like “Killer Pit Bulls Rip Granny to Shreds.” Described as “bloodthirsty,” the two pit bulls were reported to have left “80 percent of [the woman’s] body covered with teeth and claw marks” (Fermino, 2002). When the scene was discovered, “the floors and walls of the home were splattered with blood. The scene was so bad that Garfield police thought a homicide had taken place” (Fermino, 2002). Nowhere in the news do the reporters retract their earlier claims when it was discovered that the woman “had died from a cardiac arrhythmia, and the *few* bite wounds on her body were non-lethal and post mortem” (Delise, 2007, p. 142). The truth about certain topics “in a particular discursive situation is highly dependent on who has the power and the authority to speak, in what political situation and social setting” (Piliang, 2012, p. 8); because the reporters, having the authority to report what they deem as important, did not find the later discoveries to be relevant, they allowed the incident to remain “permanently archived in the newspapers and on the Internet as a ‘Pit bull-related fatality’” (Delise, 2007, p. 142). This authority, unfairly exercised as it is, “manipulate[s] and control[s] the ‘truth’” (Piliang, 2012, p. 8).

Writers decide how they want their piece of writing to be received from the moment they place the first word on the page. Their word choices and variety say much about their own personal feelings with the topic. Over the course of thirty years, the pit bull has been forced to endure stereotyping fueled by what is published in magazines and newspapers. While they are slowly being resurrected by the many supporters that the breed has, the pit bull is still seen by some as a violent, vicious killer. From 1987 to today, many writers have positively and negatively influenced the pit bull’s reception. After randomly selecting a group of articles, I have compared the texts of each, looking at the author’s word choice. The result: a more rounded view of how words affect perception.

In 1987 two articles, published on Monday, July 27, 1987 in separate magazines, focused on the pit bull from two widely differing perspectives. The articles titled “Time Bombs on Legs” and “The Pit Bull Friend and Killer” share little more than a topic. Published in *Time*, “Time Bomb on Legs” brings a monster to life from the first sentence. Described as a “creature,” the pit bull is “so fearsome . . . that it has become imbued with much the same malevolent aura as the beast in Arthur Conan Doyle’s story” (Brand, 1987). These “killer dogs” have a “bloody reputation,” a reputation that has caused its supporters to fight for its acceptance. Despite the closing note on responsible breeding and the Doberman’s earlier “most vicious dog” status, the articles use of “violent” terms to describe the breed creates a disturbing image. The other article, published in *Sports Illustrated*, approaches the topic in an unbiased way. The breed, while still connected to the underground workings of the drug lords and dogfights, is given a much more forgiving role. Looking at the statistics of the breed from 1987, it has “been estimated that there are half a million pit bull terriers alive in the United States today. What about the 99% who have never bitten a human being? Are these dogs ‘loaded handguns,’ as many have called them?” (Swift, 1987). Instead of just claiming a “fact,” Swift allows readers to come to their own conclusion about the breed. As “some folks would have you believe [pit bulls] are impervious to pain” (Swift, 1987), others will let readers believe what they want.

The next five articles, spaced between 2006 and 2013, reveal mixed reviews of the pit bull. Only two of the five deal with dog attacks. Only one of the articles demonizes the breed. Picked from different news outlets and times, each article shows the overall acceptance of the breed. Compared to the articles that were written thirty years ago, the pit bull is no longer described as a fire-breathing animal. On

Latimes.com, it was reported that a pit bull that was strapped with fireworks and set ablaze is now healed. And “he still loves humans as much as he does” (Wells, 2013) despite the abuse and torture that he was put through. On *Jconline.com*, there is a report of two pit bull attacks in one day, something that could easily destroy the breed’s healing reputation. Instead, it is quoted that “the most effectual biter . . . is an unaltered male, regardless of breed” (Campion, 2013). In 2007 *The New York Times* published an article about Foxy, the companion of a homeless man. She had been hit by a truck and died and this article served as her memorial. She was a “creature of eternal sweetness, unfailingly friendly to people and animals, tail wagging at the merest glance, a pit bull in name but not in metaphor” (Applebome, 2007). In *The New Yorker*, an article that starts off as seemingly against pit bulls does a 180. Instead of attacking the breed, the writer, Malcolm Gladwell, looks at the breed in terms of what we can learn from them about profiling. He even goes on to break down the attack that he starts the piece off with, explaining that it wasn’t the breed of dogs, but how they were raised and handled that brought about the attack.

In another article, written by Jorge Fitz-Gibbon and Hoa Nguyen (2013) for *The Journal News*, the authors state that a pit bull bit off a little boy’s genitals. Instead of focusing on what went wrong to cause the attack, the author of the piece quoted from a biased public education group, *DogsBite.org*. The title of the home page for *DogsBite.org* is “Pit Bull Attacks: Advocating for Victims of Dangerous Dog Attacks.” The site’s main focus is to bastardize the breed. Having written articles for my high school newspaper for three years, I am flabbergasted that the writers did not notice the extreme bias of this site. Or perhaps they were actively looking for a biased source of information, which is equally problematic. The effect of the writer’s use of biased sources to write the article is that pit bulls are portrayed as extremely vicious. Source attribution in this article provides “perceived credibility” (Sundar, 1998, p. 63) to the story. Whereas sources commonly serve as “the backbone of a news story in traditional media like print and broadcast,” an internet article’s use of sources “may not be as important to users’ judgments of the veridicality of” the stories (Sundar, 1998, p. 55). The source used within the story, no matter how questionable it is, will look truthful when the article is published. The website, *DogsBite.org*, does not focus on any dog attacks other than the pit bull; the data that they claim is true offers little more than a thinly veiled lie to the viewers of the site. When taken off of the website and placed into a “reputable” news story, the data from the site is given credibility that many readers would not verify. It is not until the last sentence that the writer reveals, “the younger boy’s movements likely made the dog feel threatened” (Fitz-Gibbon and Hguyen, 2013). An article’s word choice and variety can negatively or positively affect a person’s perception of a topic. It only takes one negative article to destroy the breed’s reputation. While our society is slowly becoming more accepting of the pit bull, it suffers hits when articles like this last one are posted with little research done.

It’s October 31. Halloween. After a spur-of-the-moment Halloween costume purchase for Fetch earlier in October, the time had finally come to take her on her very first trick-or-treat at Barefoot Landing. Polite as can be, Fetch walked beside me, paying no attention to the crowds (or dogs) around her. But why is this important? Because people saw her as just a dog, not a pit bull. They didn’t care. Parents with kids walked right beside her, smiling and pointing. People wanted pictures of her because she was “so cute.” No one gave a damn about her looks or her breed. Maybe, just maybe, people are recognizing the beauty of the breed as a whole and not focusing on the actions of a few. Viewed once as a fire-breathing monster, the pit bull is finally being viewed as the victim and survivor.

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