

# Communication Between Animals and Humans: Language, Understanding and Matters of Attitude in Human-Animal Interaction

SANDRA GRÖTSCH

University of Oulu (Finland)

## Abstract

Sandra Grötsch, University of Oulu, Finland Conversation strategies between animals and humans. Language, understanding and matters of attitude in human-animal interaction. Literature and especially fantasy literature provides us with numerous examples of conversation types between animals and humans. This presentation is going to look at texts from among others J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling in order to analyse communication between human and non-human participants. In this presentation the difference between animals and non-humans possessing human language to those that do not is examined. Rhetoric as well as silence in animal communication and their meanings will also be taken into consideration. Interesting questions raise about the definition of language, its use and communication between different species. What does it mean to possess language? How does human attitude change towards animals that are able to communicate? How do different languages influence the strategies for conversation and the role of the speakers? Literature provides a window into the struggle humans go through when trying to understand animals or fantastic creatures especially in such cases where a common language is missing. The desire to converse with animals and understand them can be found also in the reality outside of texts where engaged scientific examinations try to shed light on the languages and communication realm of animals. The literary instances used in this presentation will show the tradition from myths transported into modern texts to let non-humans express themselves in various ways connected to communication and the relationships humans build with their bestial opposite number.

## ANIMAL COMMUNICATION

Communication is «the production and exchange of messages and meanings» (Danesi 1998 p. 283) or more detailed the ability to let other individuals know about ones identity, ambitions, attitudes and emotions. Humans need to communicate with each other in order to establish relations, exchange vital information, co-operate and achieve a more or less stable position to survive and thrive. Communication does not only include verbal signs, but also various signs and signals conveyed with the body, mimics, posture, movement, smells, use of colour, and many more. Hence communication is not only limited to the human species but is valid for animals as well. Inside semiotics zoosemiotics studies the semiosis within and across animal species (Martinelli 2007 p. 28). Some features of communication are such that humans and animals are born with, but others have to be gradually developed. Naturally, an individual will learn communication from the members of her nuclear family first and later from members of the society she is a part of. An individual may meet many different individuals of its own kind as well as of other society and species. Also individuals of animals species may encounter various other animals and humans with whom they have to communicate to survive. The analysis of communication in literature offers a wide spectrum of interesting subjects to study, for instance the relations of characters of a story, the development of a hero or villain, and the structure of a society in the text in question. This paper deals with the communication between animals and humans and uses examples of fantasy literature as the specific genre to examine, because it provides a broader variety of communication between individuals of different species and their interrelations. Additionally, fantasy literature features animals and other creatures more often and more centrally than other works of literature. It is possible to compare interspecies communication with the real world outside a literary text but one does not need to do so in order to gain insight into the importance of communication in the text and for the development of the characters of the text. Animal communication is fascinating for readers, because it offers a comparison to the natural world but also allows fresh approaches. New concepts of animal and human as well as of communication and its status arise, but on the other hand stereotypes and prejudices may be strengthened.

In order to be able to analyse communication between humans and animals it may prove useful to have a definition for animal that would make it different from human in the first place. Not all literary texts have such a separate definition for their readers and a distinction of human, animal or any other living being may be challenging. It is not the point here to prove whether or not a certain work of literature offers a correct scientific definition for animals, but rather to investigate whether animals are an important subject in the works and their occurrence meaningful. For the purpose of this article it suffices to say that an animal, no matter of what species, is a being capable of more than signalling to its own and other species, but it also inhibits a capacity for semiosis, the understanding and producing of signs. Additionally, animals are depicted as different from humans, which seems to be an established notion in literature and elsewhere (see f. ex. Martinelli 2007 p. 218). Human and animal semiotic systems and communication differ from each other (see Danesi 1998 p. 244-250), but in fantasy literature this difference may be resolved. In many texts animals use human language or there is an existence of a common language. The example texts used most in this article is the Harry

Potter-series. The author of these books, J.K. Rowling, does not give a definition of animals in general, neither does she employ on the difference between animals and humans. It is nevertheless very interesting to examine the relation and interaction of animals and humans in the books, because they provide the possibility to gain a deeper insight on characters as well as on structures of the society and world created in the books. From reading the stories the readers may assume that natural animals of both the real and fantasy world are quite close to what they would be a definition from a dictionary. The stories include numerous animals which can be found in the real world, for example dogs, cats, horses, several rodents, owls, and so on. They are described in a way one may see in any text and that would occur as a description one would have expected of the animal in question.

An individual with the ability to communicate with individuals of either its own or another species is provided with the power to establish itself in a community and find its place inside a society. Communication is a vital tool to convey messages, information and personal attitudes to others and hence be understood which again may lead to satisfaction of needs and fulfilment of desires. If an individual fails to communicate with others it will remain or become an outsider, and will have difficulties to create itself a safe place in a community to assure its survival and wellbeing. Animals are equally dependent of communication even though they use different communication means and channels. In literary text the ability of animals, whether natural or fantastic, to communicate is of importance to the human characters of the text, because they often gain knowledge they would not have access to otherwise. Animals act as advisors, teachers and friends. They are very often a measure for the reader to analyse a hero's character because his attitude and behaviour towards the animals he encounters may mark him as good or bad, and give a hint on the development of the character as the story unfolds. In some texts animals are only different from humans in their appearance. They can use language, think, solve problems and have in general all capabilities humans have too. In other works of literature animals are closer to their natural counterparts and limited to their abilities. Both cases are interesting to investigate and examples will be given in this paper. It is in any case vital that humans understand animal semiosis to a certain extend in order to engage with the being in question and adopt a positive attitude towards it.

## **ANIMAL COMMUNICATION IN HARRY POTTER**

A great variety of animals occurs in the Harry Potter-novels, which makes the series interesting to examine in many respects. There are as well fairly common animals as described above as there are fantastic creatures that belong to the realm of an imagined world as dragons and unicorns for instance. This fancy display of creatures of all kinds is possible because the novels represent an alternative world alongside the reality the reader shares with the main character. The mix of real and fantastic animals sharing both worlds but the fantastic animals only to be seen by witches and wizards adds to the excitement of the series. In connection to communication most of the animals in Harry Potter behave in a way the reader would consider as rather normal. They cannot talk but express themselves with sounds and behaviour the natural animal would probably produce. The reader can only guess whether there exists a secret language

between animals of different species or whether they have to learn to interpret each other's signs and messages. The characters of the novels communication with animals and the readers are cryptanalysts facing unusual channels and codes in communication (see Sebeok 1972 page 67). The reader is not provided with the point of view of an animal and whether it tries to convey a message to another animal or human, but the thoughts of the human characters during acts of communication are provided at times.

The central figure of the series is a boy named Harry Potter, whose life is followed from the age of eleven to seventeen. In the household he grows up in does not include any pet animal, but Harry is used to the spiders living in his cupboard serving as his room for the first years of his life at his aunt's and uncle's place and he also encounters cats at a neighbour's house. Otherwise Harry does not have much contact with animals in the Muggle world, the world of non-magical people, until his cousin's eleventh birthday when he is reluctantly taken along to a zoo. There he communicates for the first time in his life with an animal, which happens to be a Boa Constrictor. The incident is most significant because it shows that Harry has the rare gift to talk with snakes and that conversation with animals could be possible. Harry shows compassion for the fate of the snake in the zoo and without noticing it he sets it free. His ability to speak the snake language, Parseltongue, proves worthy in many occasions but also connects him to the dark side of magic, because the ability is usually displayed by such witches and wizards who are evil and use snakes for their cruel deeds. There is on the other hand no proof in the texts for snakes being evil. They do not approach humans to communicate with them but are summoned by those who are able to and wish to use snakes against their adversaries. There is only one snake having a bigger part in the story and she is the pet of the evil wizard Lord Voldemort named Nagini. Nagini does not seem to have a will of her own but is controlled by Voldemort like a slave would be by his master. This control may be explained by the fact that Nagini carries a part of Voldemort's soul, which he has been implanted into the animal using it as a vessel in order to make himself less vulnerable. He does not use a hoard of snakes to attack his enemies nor do snakes otherwise play a big part in the story besides the fantastic snake-like animal Basilisk that features as a threat to people's life in the second novel Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. Again the Basilisk is controlled by Lord Voldemort and sent to kill people instead of acting on its own drive.

The next animal Harry has to learn to communicate with is an owl. These birds are traditionally connected to witches and magic, and are often found in texts of fantasy literature or fairytales. Owls are used as messenger birds in the magical world Harry is going to be part of and hence he has to understand how to deal with them in order to be able to use their services. He receives his own owl, a snowy owl, as a birthday present and spends some time observing her behaviour. He learns very much what any person in reality would, namely that owl are nocturnal, hunt mice and other small animals and produce hooting or screeching noises. Hence Harry's owl, called Hedwig, is for the most part a normal snowy owl, but it may be noticed that this species is not endemic to the British isles, where the Harry Potter-stories take place and therefore she could already be considered special. Hedwig is Harry's only pet and even though she is self-sufficient and spends most of her time in an owlery, she learns to communicate with Harry insofar as that he is able to give her orders and understands her feelings. Those include much more than simple feelings humans usually subscribe to animals such as

hunger, fear, exhaustion and contentedness. Hedwig knows when Harry did wrong towards her and is able to express her disagreement. On the other hand, she is also capable to forgive and show affection: «She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way...» (Rowling 1998 p. 158) and Harry on most occasions reacts positively to his pet owl. She is at times his only company especially during the stretches he has to spend with his Muggle relatives and does not have any social contact at all. How important the owl is to Harry can be seen from the following quote: «She was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.» (Rowling 1999 p. 10). The use of personal pronouns «she» and «who» indicate that animals have personality and a meaning for the humans they are dealing with. The intimate way of Hedwig understanding her owner's emotions whether they are expressed verbally or through behaviour shows itself most clearly when she flies from England to France without being ordered to, so she can pick up a birthday present for Harry from his friend Hermione, who spends her holidays abroad.

Even though Harry can only interpret the noises of his owl she seems to understand human language as she fully understands to whom Harry is sending a message to and on top of that is able to find the addressee wherever he may be. Additionally, delivery owls are able to demand the fee for their delivery and make sure they receive the right amount. In the beginning of his career as a wizard at school Harry does not receive any messages, but his faithful bird comes to visit him nevertheless: «Hedwig hadn't brought anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his (i.e. Harry's) ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls.» Hence the owl shows affection for her master and with her behaviour of nibbling communicates her feeling to him. Harry feels miserable and responsible for her violent death. He, maybe for the first time, fully understands the meaning of taking care of a living being and the pain of losing it: «The realisation crashed over him: he felt shamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes. The owl had been his companion, his one great link with the magical world whenever he had been forced to return to the Dursleys (Harry's family).» (Rowling 2007 p. 6).

Another animal connected rather to witches than wizards is the cat. Some representatives of this feline species are engaged in nocturnal activities and their yellow or green eyes have a quality of secret knowledge and understanding. Cats' behaviour seems to be somewhat more difficult for humans to understand and the independence of cats may additionally create a more distant attitude towards them than towards dogs, for example. In Harry Potter there are only few but very interesting cats. One is Crookshanks, the male cat of one of Harry's two best friends, Hermione Granger. Harry's godfather thinks that Crookshanks is «the most intelligent of his kind» (Rowling 1999 p. 267) because he was able to detect that Ron's, Harry's other best friend's, rat is in fact a wizard in disguise. Some wizards, so-called, are able to transform into a certain animal and the wizard Peter Pettigrew is one of them. Because of the fact that the pet of Hermione is trying to harm Ron's pet rat the two friends almost have a fall-out. Crookshanks communicates his discovery to Harry's godfather though, who is thereby able to unmask the disguised wizard. The reader can only guess how the cat communicates with Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, especially since they seem to meet only when the man is transformed into a dog. Even though the texts never mention such a possibility it could still be suggested that a communication between animals of different species is not impossible even though the animals

themselves, as for instance Crookshanks, are not necessarily magic creatures. Crookshanks' case rather indicates the instinct and intelligence of animals that humans fail to fully understand but often still admire. The cat instinct may in this case just have told Crookshanks that he not dealing with a rat, but a human in disguise. The smell may have given the false rat away or something else that a human could not perceive.

A certainly very communicative cat is Mrs. Norris, «a scrawny, dust-coloured creature with bulging, lamp-like eyes» (Rowling 1997 p. 99), the pet of the Harry's school's caretaker. This Mr. Filch is a very lonely man and does not have anybody else but Mrs. Norris to share his life with. There is a «mysterious power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat...» (Rowling 1998 p. 96) helping the caretaker to appear suddenly on the spot where his cat framed a student. She helps him to guard the school during nights and detect students, who are doing forbidden things. Mrs. Norris is able to understand that she is dealing with a culprit and heads off to inform Mr. Filch about the whereabouts. Many pupils hate the spying cat, but know better to leave her alone. By chance Harry gets to know that the caretaker cannot perform magic even though his whole family is able too and hence Mrs. Norris is the only way he has to achieve outstanding performances and get over his fate. Just as in normal life also in the world of magic pets are there to comfort their owners, keep them company, improve their social life and give them a reason so feel necessary. It does not matter whether the pet is something rather regular as a cat or a dog, or unusual as an owl. The relation between the animal and the owner forms from the point on when the human chooses or receives the pet that often has a resemblance of its owner. The case of Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris is a sender-receiver-model of which we know that it works but not how. After all, the only point that may matter in the relation between animal and humans is what Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts and Harry's mentor, says about Phoenixes: «...and they make highly *faithful* pets» (Rowling 1998 p. 155, italics Rowling's).

The third important cat is the one the witch and school's headmistress Minerva McGonagall is transforming into. This cat has astonishing resemblance with her human counterpart, as all the animals of transforming witches and wizards have, but is otherwise just a cat. She cannot talk, fly or do anything else a natural cat could not do besides reading. The animal a witch or wizard transform into show as well external similarities as they share certain characteristics. The traitor transforms into a rat, the spy into a fly and the cocky, shaggy but protective godfather of Harry into a dog. All of them meet the prevailing stereotypes of the animal in question. It would not be preferable to live for a longer time as animal, but it has advantages at times. Harry godfather could escape from prison, because its guards could not «sense animal emotion» (Rowling 1999 p. 273) and as a dog he «...managed to communicate to him what I was after». The cat in turn was capable of making a decision and helped the wrongly accused man. Again the reader is left at guessing how Crookshanks understood a dog and how he came to his decision, but there is no doubt that Rowling provides the animals in her books with communicative power and a good amount of wit. On the other hand she illustrates how dependent animals are on human compassion and understanding. One magical creature, the Hippogriff Buckbeak, is executed because a young wizard failed to accept the behavioural pattern and communication acts of this creature that demands respect. The execution is reversed by Harry and his friends, but Buckbeak has to stay in exile sharing this fate with Harry's godfather.

## DRAGONS

Dragons in Harry Potter could be compared to wild, dangerous predators. Their means of communication with other animals and humans are limited, because the dragons are fiercer and more powerful than any other being, which potentially serves as food only. On the other hand, they can be used by magic people for certain purposes and if not domesticated so at least controlled. The dragons in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien are rather different. They possess the gift of human speech and furthermore of deceit and persuasiveness. The «father of all worms», Glaurung, speaks with his own voice but the content is given by the dark god Morgoth, who is also the creator of dragons and other evil creatures. This is a great difference to all animals in Harry Potter and the good or neutral animals in Tolkien, because they are natural. Glaurung deceives humans like the snake leads Eve and Adam to lose paradise and since he does so with the voice of his master, Morgoth can be compared to Lucifer as also he fell from the light into darkness. Glaurung helps to implement his master's curse onto a particularly resistant family of heroes and by doing so wipes them out. His actions lead also to his own downfall, but not the one of the dark god. There is one animal possessed by another entity in Harry Potter as well, the snake Nagini, but she does not communicate with other individuals and is not used by her master for acts of communication. Tolkien's idea of speaking dragons finds another outlet in his work «The Hobbit or There And Back Again» (Tolkien 1996) where the dragon Smaug tempts the hobbit Bilbo to reveal himself and his friends. The voice of Smaug is full of malice, but his sly way of making conversation leads his opponent into a trap. He likes riddles and competition and uses that as a conversation strategy. Open threat and teasing are other means to disarm the other speaker. Besides these gifts of speech dragons possess a «dragon spell» (Tolkien 1996 p. 202) under which his opponents fall and which makes them reveal their secrets. Also Bilbo Baggins almost succumbs to the dragon's snare: «That is the effect that dragon-talk has on the inexperienced. Bilbo of course ought to have been on his guard; but Smaug had rather an overwhelming personality» (Tolkien 1996 p. 202). Bilbo is fortunate and witty enough to escape the spell. He manages to praise the dragon and such a smart way that Smaug on his part reveals the weak spot on his body. In *The Hobbit* the dragon's character is caricatured and his evilness leads only to his own and not the hero's downfall. Smaug could be compared to any animal with a will on its own but Glaurung is a creation of an evil god and partially possessed by him. Therefore, he could be compared to the snake Nagini in Harry Potter to some extent, but there is no evidence that Nagini is not a natural animal and she does not use language to cause harm. She does kill on her master's command though.

Dragons have a long tradition in fantasy literature and their role in respect to the story's hero is of great importance. Whether they are good or evil is rather connected to the world the author created, but all of them are emphasising a hero's abilities to act and overcome his weakness. Some dragons challenge the hero and with fighting against them and eventually killing them he gets a step closer to his final goal. Dragons may also be a hero's helper as in Michael Ende's «The Neverending Story» (Ende 1979) where one of the heroes befriends a lucky dragon. In the Harry Potter-series dragons do not speak and hence do not share their wisdoms. If examined a bit closer it actually turns out that the dragons in Harry's world are in a weak position. First of all they are close to extinction and are hidden away from the non-

magical humans. They are only three instances where Harry meets dragons and it is not in their natural habitat. The first appearance is in the first book where Harry's friend Hagrid obtains a dragon egg, which is an illegal act. Out of the egg hatches Norbert, a Norwegian Ridgeback. J.K. Rowling invented different dragon species that are all described in her work «*Fantastic Beasts and where to find them*» (Rowling 2001). This little text provides us with the notion that most of the fantastic beasts are categorised like natural animals, but feature magical attributes or powers. Additionally, they appear in ancient myths and are not as such a creation of Rowling. The dragon species are her own creation and a good testimony of her creativity and sense of humour. The first dragon incident in Harry Potter is not of greater meaning but mainly serves as an introduction to these famous creatures in Harry's world and adds a lot of excitement to the story. The second incident in book four where Harry has to fight a dragon in a tournament. The aim of the fight is not to kill the dragon but to steal an egg from its nest. The egg is not a dragon's egg but just a trophy. The idea to have breeding mother dragons as opponents in a tournament is interesting, because in the natural world the rule that the fiercest creatures are mothers protecting their young ones is well known. The dragons in the tournament have no choice but to communicate their anger and fear with roars, fire and physical protection of their nests. The situation almost suggests the dragons are abused for a test to find capable wizards and witches, and brought to an improper environment for them. The reader never encounters them in their natural habitat. Additionally, during the tournament one dragon accidentally crushes some of her own eggs in her panic which has not other effect than some points taken off the score of her human opponent. Only in the last volume of the series the tragic of dragons abused by other members of the magic community is openly presented through an enslaved dragon at the wizards' bank Gringotts. The animal is held in caves without sunlight and company. It is put in chains, cannot move much and lost its eyesight in the darkness. Harry and friends use this dragon to escape from a desperate situation and at the same time set the animal free.

There are, however, other cases of clear human dominance over other creatures and the problem of categorisation arises. House elves use human language but sound like foreigners as they do not master grammar and sentence structures. Also centaurs speak and use the human language correctly, but because of their appearance they are still on the lower level of society. Language and the capability to communicate are hence not enough to establish oneself among humans. It is the attitude of those who set the norms and rules of a society that put all living beings into their designated place. The term «animal» is a very broad one and may contain many meanings. Dario Martinelli lists eight different connotations of the term and points out that half of them carries a rather negative implications, three more positive ones and the last class, the fantastic animals, are neutral because there is a great variety of creatures that, depending on the context, may have both features (Martinelli 2007 p. 217-219). This list refers to animals in general but is useful for examining artistic creation, as in literature for instance, as well. The examples given in this paper support the idea of positive or negative connotations of animals. Snakes are laden with negative connotations because they refer to the one snake in the Old Testament that lead to the expulsion of humans from paradise. This only works of course in cultures where Christianity is largely adopted. Other cultures may experience snakes as dangerous, but not necessarily evil animals. Another negative animal is the rat, but this is yet again dependent on the cultural background. Owls are probably animals with both



positive and negative connotations, but at least in Harry Potter they are fully positive and the main character's pet owl Hedwig, carrying the name and sharing the fate of a saint, has a good role in the story. Also cats are positive in the story even though they and owls fell from grace during the Middle Ages and became the company of evil witches. This conception is tuned from negative to positive in the Potter-novel. The magical creatures in Harry Potter are mostly positive. They exhibit magical capabilities, beauty or extravagance, old age and a very long tradition in tales. They belong to the cultural background of the readers the author addresses and are therefore an important part of identifying one's own cultural heritage. Many of the animals in Harry Potter and other works communicate a meaning to the reader they need not express otherwise than through their mere presence. They are signs for cultural, religious and educational tradition the reader brings along without being asked. Rowling herself provides a reason for including many natural and fantastic animals in her novel: «...to ensure that future generations of witches and wizards enjoy their strange beauty and powers as we have been privileged to do» (Rowling 2001 p. xxi).

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