

Cathy Comstock, Ph.D.  
UCB 180  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, Colorado 80310

CATHY.COMSTOCK@COLORADO.EDU

I have been teaching classes in critical thinking and cultural analysis at the University of Colorado for over 20 years. Language is perhaps the most transformative aspect of human culture. Entire webs of thought and actions and reactions are tied to our choice of a single word. (Consider how one feels about being called "slim and trim" rather than "anorexic.")

Most remarkable, very subtle changes can have profound impact on the world. The change to "guardian" rather than "owner" is completely in line with many of our oldest cultural traditions, such as calling dogs "Man's best friend." Students in my class on Gandhian philosophy are appalled when they find how badly our "friends" and other species are often treated. When they ask me in pained confusion how these things could happen, given that most people *like* animals, I explain that another powerful strand of our culture and language is our treatment of animals as consumer objects. And however benign that may seem to begin with when we take home a pet, the status of consumer object will lead many people to evaluate their animals in the same light that they decide whether to turn in their old car and buy a new one.

The problems with this approach become clear when one visits a humane society and reads the reasons on the cages why people abandon their animals, despite all the powerful bonds that pets form with humans. One sees animals desperate for affection--or sometimes just sitting too depressed to move in their cage--because they were treated with the same attitude with which people leave furniture behind rather than transport it to a new location: "Moving to a new home and don't want to take along." Or the attitude when we discover we don't have the time to use that new sports equipment we bought after all: "Too busy to take care of dog." Or, "Cat left claw marks in couch"--a competition of possessions in which the cat turned out to be the less valuable object.

These reasons--clearly from well-meaning people who bothered at least to take their animals to a shelter, unlike many who leave them to wander the streets, an even darker aspect of the problem--testify to the importance of changing our conceptualization of animals from that of possession to that of responsible compassion. It's a great sadness for all of us, humans included, when our own best intentions toward our "best friends" are subtly betrayed and diverted by a language of consumption rather than caring.

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