

Véronique Servais
Professor, Anthropology of communication
HACAB Project
Laboratory of Social and Cultural Anthropology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Liège, Belgium
v.servais@uliege.be
https://www.irss.uliege.be/cms/c_12822178/fr/irss-hacab

Mai 2026

Human-animal political collectives. The crucial role of interspecies communication analysis.

The question of interspecies political collectives is currently addressed by new trends in animal studies, where it appears that the issue of language and communication is central (Meijer, 2019). Currently, research on human-animal communication and interactions is divided between two main and apparently opposing approaches: 1- studies that emphasize co-construction of meaning and collaboration (King, 2004; Merrit, 2021; Haraway, 2008), and 2- approaches that, in line with critical animal studies, emphasize exploitation and domination. In their 2007 paper, Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo have proposed a tool for identifying domination and exploitation at the very heart of communication processes: the concept of co-regulation of the interaction. It questions the real power of animals to influence the course of interaction and allows us to distinguish between situations where they have genuine agency from situations where they are reduced to the status of instruments for the benefit of human beings.

But human-animal interactions are usually complex and even in the case of captive zoo animals, for example, while they are clearly used for the benefit of human beings, they are still resisting their fate. Here, we propose to move towards defining an analytical framework that would allow researchers, based on a series of criteria, to evaluate various communication situations on an emancipation/alienation axis, while remaining consistent with enactivist theories. We will start with a series of questions that will structure a multi-level description. For example: is communication generative? How do animals make themselves present? What are the epistemic conditions, as well as the human dispositions necessary for the perception of animal's presence? What possibilities do animals have to correct humans' misinterpretations? What do humans do with animals' responses, and what listening devices are in place? What implicit communication model do the human being rely on? What kind of interspecies culture are created? We will start from the hypothesis that animals, whatever they may be, perform interpretive work in their response to the world they enact, and that this interpretive work can be, or not, perceived by human beings.

Based on the enaction paradigm, the communication presents an analytical framework for human-animal interaction and communication analysis which aim is to place them on a spectrum between emancipation and exploitation.