

"Cleanse" our language of anti-animal slurs, says leading SA Linguist

Leading socio-linguist at the University of Cape Town, Professor Raj Mesthrie, says South Africans need to look at the derogatory terminology against animals which is inherent in our language.

"The bias against animals, inherent in our language, reminds me of the struggle that black people, women and homosexuals have had to face in the elimination of the derogatory terminology which was an essential part of discrimination," says Professor Mesthrie.

"In earlier days, for example, black men were called 'boys', a word that influenced people to see full-grown black men as people to be pushed around. That simple word held the power to remove their dignity and status. The same applies to the language we use to denigrate animals.

For example, the phrase 'he behaved like an animal' implies that animals behave badly. Humans behave badly, not animals. 'They treated me like a dog' implies that to have treated a dog badly would have been acceptable but the same treatment is unacceptable if used against a human."

But, says Professor Mesthrie, "linguistic disinfection" in itself won't alleviate the plight of animals unless it is accompanied by a change of heart and behaviour.

"Linguistic engineering is but one strategy among many in any struggle. It is useful insofar as it draws attention and controversy to a problem area. Since animals don't have a voice in our sense, I would support any attempt to conscientise the world about their plight," he says.



Professor Raj Mesthrie. "Derogatory terminology is an essential part of discrimination," he says.