

**The Rhetoric of Eating Corpses: Vegan  
Discourse and the Subversion of Animal  
Product Euphemisms**

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## Introduction

Picture a pink, snub-nosed animal rolling in mud. Why is the animal you see in your mind's eye a "pig," but when the same animal's flesh is packaged in the meat section of the grocery store, it's called "pork"? Why can we accessorize an outfit with a chic, leather belt without being repulsed by the thought of wearing someone's skin? When you read "someone" in the previous sentence, why did you picture a human and not an animal?

These examples demonstrate how uncomfortable realities can be masked by the language we use to describe them. The language used to describe animal products is not arbitrary; it is a meticulously constructed system of rhetorical control enacted through euphemistic language. Carefully constructed taxonomies make acceptable what many people, when confronted with their own ethical positions, find reprehensible, such as cruelty, murder, and sexual exploitation. The minor linguistic distinction that transforms a "cow" (an animal) into "beef" (food) is essential to managing the profound moral contradiction at the heart of animal-product consumption.

This contradiction, recognized in critical animal studies and psychology, is known as the "meat paradox." This phenomenon describes the psychological conflict between people's dietary preference for meat and their moral response to animal suffering. Essentially, "people simultaneously dislike hurting animals and like eating meat" (Loughnan 156). The "meat paradox" was identified by Steve Loughnan, Nick Haslam, and Brock Bastian in 2010 in their research on the phenomenon of people withdrawing moral status from animals and denying animals' capacity to suffer so that they (the humans) can continue eating meat. Humans work to reduce this paradox through a variety of psychological and linguistic mechanisms, and "through

repeated dissonance reduction, the immorality of a given behavior ultimately ‘disappears’” (Bastian 283). Euphemisms are the primary, institutionalized rhetorical strategy used to resolve this dissonance by creating psychological distance.

Language, specifically the widespread use of euphemisms, acts as a form of “linguistic camouflage use[d] to convince the population that...animal exploitation do[es] not exist” (Mowery 164). Through the rhetorical taxonomy of euphemisms, some animals are recategorized as “food” animals. As Bratanova et al. found in one study, “the act of categorizing an animal as food makes its capacity to suffer less salient, independent of the animal’s death and human responsibility” (Bratanova 195). Essentially, we care less. This is done through creating psychological distance in a person’s mind between human and non-human “food” animals. When an animal is seen as being too close to a human intellectually, emotionally, and even spiritually, it creates a cognitive dissonance in the human—the “meat paradox.” Great rhetorical efforts are made to resolve this.

These efforts have not gone unnoticed by the vegan activist community, specifically on YouTube. These activists and creators visit public spaces to create content and initiate debates. In their debates, one common rhetorical tactic they use is to subvert common animal consumption euphemisms by replacing them with terms that depict things in a harsher, more factual light—“Beef steak” becomes “cow flesh.” “Artificial insemination” becomes “rape.” “Humane slaughter” becomes “murder.” This specific tactic is a deployment of parrhesia (speaking uncomfortable truths) and catachresis (using an improper term for effect). The use of terms like “rape” for sexual assault on an animal is an example of catachresis because the term is socially (and legally) reserved for humans. By intentionally applying this improper term to animals, the activists transfer the moral weight of the despicable human act to the animal, maximizing its

disruptive effect. Through this, the activists disrupt the fiction of difference between human and non-human animals, thus reintroducing the dissonance that was diminished or removed via euphemistic language.

Animal product euphemisms both create and sustain a dominant terministic screen that diminishes or resolves the “meat paradox” by performing linguistic abstractification, thereby enabling moral disengagement. This paper argues that by employing the rhetorical strategy of euphemism-replacement, vegan YouTubers Earthling Ed and Joey Carbstrong serve as parrhesiastic disruptors of this established screen. By abruptly substituting euphemistic terms (“meat,” “slaughter,” “artificial insemination”) with more accurate, harsh, and evocative counterparts (“flesh,” “cut their throats,” “rape”), the YouTubers strive to collapse the conceptual distance created by the euphemisms. This tactic elicits observable cognitive and behavioral responses in debate opponents by causing them to confront the ethical exigence of animal exploitation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Though at times the language is shocking, euphemism-replacement is not just a moment of linguistic spectacle—it is a tactic, deployed as precisely as a bolt gun to the head. It is meant to surprise and disgust people out of the waking sleep of fabricated moral neutrality. The rhetorical concepts below help describe the exigence for this tactic, the power of perceptual screens, and how the screens are undergirded with language.

## Lloyd Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation"

Lloyd Bitzer defines rhetoric as "a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action" (Bitzer 4). Essentially, rhetoric's purpose is to produce change in the world. Rhetorical discourse is created "as a response to a situation" (Bitzer 6). The situation is composed of three elements: the *exigence* (an imperfection that can be modified by discourse), the *audience* (those who can mediate the required change), and the *constraints* (persons, events, and beliefs that influence audience response).

In the context of animal ethics and activism, the exigence is the ethical inconsistency of animal consumption and the resulting moral dissonance people feel when confronting the suffering of their "food" animals. The constraints in this context are primarily the pervasive euphemistic language employed by the animal production industry and proliferated by society. These words act as mental barriers that filter out ethically challenging information, thus preventing the exigence from fully manifesting in the average person's consciousness. This is where the activists come in.

The YouTubers' strategy of euphemism-replacement becomes the "fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it" (Bitzer 6) because it creates the necessary discourse to remove the constraint. This unblocks the ethical exigence, allowing the individual to see that "which is other than it should be" (Bitzer 6) in its true light and demanding a change in thought or behavior.

Additionally, Bitzer's notion of the situation as an almost "imperative stimulus," where rhetors "feel obliged to speak," directly applies to the ethical obligation felt by vegan activists to

address animal suffering and exploitation (Bitzer 5). The nature of the online public debates, often conducted on university campuses and busy streets, aligns with Bitzer's discussion of the "loosely structured situation" (Bitzer 12), where activists must strategically search for and constrain audiences capable of mediating the desired change. As a rhetorical tool, euphemism-replacement delivers quick, disruptive impact in an environment that demands it.

### **Kenneth Burke's "Terministic Screens"**

"Terministic screens" serve as a foundational layer for understanding how a linguistic veil creates a selective filter through which we perceive and conceptualize the world. Burke posits that all language is inherently selective, acting as a selective filter, or a "screen," that shapes and distorts human perception of the world. This framework is extremely useful for exploring how euphemisms function to create an alternative perceptual reality in which cognitive dissonance is resolved.

The pervasive language of animal consumption is a "carnist" nomenclature serving an anthropocentric, human-exceptionalist screen. The goal of this screen is to create and perpetuate an alternate reality in which ethical people can enjoy and endorse the production and consumption of animal products. In particular, this "carnist" screen deflects the reality of violence and suffering, and how it erases sentience and thus moral responsibility. For example, when a consumer uses the term "pork," the screen reflects a safe, desirable commodity while deflecting the image of a dead, sentient pig.

The terministic screen rhetorical framework is also relevant here because it governs the concepts of continuity and discontinuity, which lead to identification and division. Burke asserts that through the unavoidable use of terms, which "necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of

screen,” our attention is directed and the range of observations within the given terminology is defined (Burke 50). As terms, euphemisms create different screens, by which different sets of concepts are possible. Through this, euphemisms can enforce division by creating psychological distance and separation between humans and animals. Through euphemism-replacement, the YouTubers force a shift from a “carnist” screen to an ethical screen, which restores the realities that the “carnist” screen obscured or erased. This act dismantles the anthropocentric screen, replacing it with one that highlights the animal’s suffering and attempts to shift the audience’s perception toward identification—seeing the animal’s pain as morally equivalent to human suffering—thus making the initial euphemistic reality impossible to sustain.

### **George Lakoff’s “Conceptual Metaphor”**

According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphor is conceptual in nature, not just a linguistic flourish. Similar to Burkes’ terministic screens, conceptual metaphors shape what we think, do, and experience every day. The deep structures of our thought are governed by metaphorical concepts which define our realities and “can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept which are not coherent with that metaphor” (Lakoff 458)...at least without some impetus to make a shift. One such powerful metaphor is the one underpinning animal consumption: ANIMALS ARE FOOD. This conceptual structure is promulgated through euphemisms that frame an animal’s body as a commodity or ingredient, replacing the concrete, morally significant reality of the animal (“cow”) with the abstract, morally neutral concept of a product (“beef”).

During their debates, the vegan YouTubers engage with this idea in two ways. First, they engage in metaphorical warfare by strategically employing counter-metaphors

(euphemism-replacements). Through this, they replace the metaphorical language of one conceptual structure with that of one in which ANIMALS ARE INDIVIDUALS whose bodies can't be reduced to mere products. This move then thwarts the dominant, distancing conceptual metaphor. Through its displacement, the listener is urged to process the subject within a new conceptual reality where animals retain moral value.

### **David Casagrande's "Abstractification"**

"Abstractification" is the process by which we move "discourse to more abstract concepts, where one can obfuscate and/or ignore contradictions at lower levels" (Casagrande 2). Essentially, it is a tool for reducing or removing cognitive dissonance. In the context of the "meat paradox," discourse is moved from the particular to the abstract through euphemistic labelling. For example, the concept of "cow" is more abstract than is one specific cow (Bessie), but "cow" retains the quality of being categorically "animal." But through abstractive rhetorical manipulation, "cow" is further abstracted as "beef," and as such, is recategorized as "food." This technique of "steer[ing] the discourse toward more abstract and logically indefensible beliefs" is "a widely used rhetorical strategy for avoiding logical inconsistencies" (Casagrande 10). This is precisely what's being done through euphemistic language, and what the vegan YouTubers are attempting to undo.

The YouTubers' rhetorical strategy is one of direct de-abstractification or concretization. They deny the interlocutor the comfort of abstraction by replacing vague, euphemistic terms with shocking, evocative ones. The YouTubers leverage the idea that by removing euphemistic language, the opponents' empathy for animals will be increased in direct proportion to disgust for eating their flesh. By making the hidden visible, they can uncover the moral exigence,

making it immediate, shattering previous constraints, and urging opponents to reconsider their beliefs and actions.

These frameworks—Bitzer’s for understanding the rhetorical event and Burke, Lakoff, and Casagrande’s ideas for conceptualizing how linguistic choices alter perceptual reality—lay the foundations through which I will analyze a selection of YouTube videos for the usage and impact of euphemism-replacement.

## **Euphemism-Replacement in Action**

The informal YouTube debates held by Earthling Ed and Joey Carbstrong provide an opportunity to examine real-world demonstrations of these theoretical frameworks enacted through euphemism-replacement. The YouTubers’ strategic targeting and subversion of conciliatory euphemisms validates the idea that this tactic is both intentional and effective as a rhetorical tool—though its efficacy may be likened more to death by a thousand cuts. That is, results are not necessarily immediate, and the ability of the human mind to dodge discomfort should not be underestimated.

### **The Rhetoric of Meat and Murder**

In their debates, both activists frequently employ terms that emphasize the living animal origin of the “products” being discussed. This directly attacks both the conceptual metaphor and the abstractification.

Neat terms to disguise the cruelty of animal murder are a hallmark of the animal production industry...terms like “dispatch,” “cull,” “process,” or “humane slaughter.” These terms are ripe with opportunity for replacement. Earthling Ed’s shift from the industrial term

“slaughter” to the visceral phrase “cut their throats” (Berkeley Student 08:30) is a potent move from abstractification to concretization. The industry term “slaughter” is a verbal abstractification that removes the human agent and the painful reality, making the death remote and conceptual. The activists’ phrase, however, is immediate and specific, compelling the audience to visualize the weapon, the action, and the trauma of the animal. Being already oppositional and defensive, the opponent in this debate offers no reaction to the rhetorical move, ignoring the phrasing. Later, when Ed uses the phrasing “have your throat cut” when asking what the opponent would accept as a humane slaughter if he were a farm animal, he doubles down, agreeing he would find that humane. His facial expression, slow blink, and abrupt “yeah” suggest that his response is an act of defiance rather than truthful (Berkeley Student 20:16).

In another example, Ed says that if, in order to get a goat curry, “you have to cut the throat,” most people wouldn’t do it. He asks the opponent, “How do we justify paying someone else to do it on our behalf?” (Meat Eater 03:01). The opponent pauses, seeming to visualize the visceral description of the violent act he’s being asked to consider. He smiles nervously and admits that “that’s a good question.” This person, seeming from the outset to be more open to debate and having his opinion changed, appears to have been more impacted by the euphemism-replacement tactic.

Similarly, Joey Carbstrong’s replacement of “butcher” or “cut meat” with “shoot them in the head and chop their bodies” (VEGAN VS. MEATEATER 16:34) achieves this same effect, ensuring the audience is confronted with a dismembered corpse rather than a neat product. However, as before, this opponent’s mental gymnastics flip her out of discomfort, and she instead reverts to equating moral value with level of consciousness.

In a televised debate with a BBC presenter, Joey Carbstrong produces a litany of euphemism-replacements. He describes humane slaughter as going “to a slaughterhouse to be stabbed in the neck, strung up by their ankle, and have the blood drained out of their throat” (BBC 00:40). He describes “gas chambered pigs” (BBC 02:45) and animals being “stabbed in the neck” (BBC 02:50). The conversation becomes quite heated between Carbstrong and the presenter, which culminates in the presenter accusing Carbstrong of “employing hyperbole.” Rather than shocking the opponent into disgust and/or compassion, the effect of this tactic was to produce outraged accusations of exaggeration.

Beyond the act of murder, we have the product thereof: meat. The term “meat” is a core euphemism, born out of and reinforcing the ANIMALS ARE FOOD metaphor. Earthling Ed counters this in his debates by frequently using the word “flesh” instead. For example, when discussing the value of a chicken’s life, Ed says, “My enjoyment of chicken flesh does not have higher value than the life of a sentient being” (Berkeley Student 04:58). The use of “flesh” in this and other instances is not happenstance. This is a rhetorical move designed to shift the listener into the counter-metaphor: ANIMAL PRODUCTS ARE VICTIMS’ BODY PARTS. This move forces the listener to see meat as biological and personal, which is empirically shown to increase empathy and disgust. As Kunst says, “disgust is central in determining people’s attitudes towards eating animal products and...dissociation may maintain meat consumption as it suppresses empathy and disgust equally” (Kunst 771). Consequently, this move should reduce the willingness to eat meat. However, as expected, due to his opposition and defensiveness, the opponent does not react as desired. Rather, he ingenuously declares that taste has more value than life because he “like[s] eating chicken.”

In another debate, Earthling Ed describes eating animals as the “convenience of wanting to consume their flesh” (Elitist stance 09:19). This opponent, being the most adversarial of all, does not even look at Ed. In fact, he seems angry—he bounces his leg and scowls into the distance. Ed’s point exacerbates the opponent’s agitation rather than altering his perspective.

Joey Carbstrong employs a similar strategy when debating with a woman on the idea of eating meat from “a farm with happy animals.” He describes mother pigs living in a cage, having their babies serial kidnapped and, once they can no longer produce, they are “sent to get gassed...and then we eat their bodies” (VEGAN VS. MEATEATER 02:45). Carbstrong paints a picture with words that re-sentientize the pig as an animal and a mother instead of a product before describing the act of eating “meat” as eating the body of a being. While this doesn’t elicit a visual display of disgust in her response, the woman furrows her eyebrows and admits that it’s terrible. The woman is more receptive from the outset, so there are fewer instances of euphemism-replacement throughout this debate.

### **The Rhetoric of Rape**

The euphemism that most disturbingly obscures an act of violation is the term “artificial insemination” used in the dairy industry. This term masks the indignity of sexual violation and repeated theft of bodily autonomy. Because of this, activists often replace this term with more precise and evocative terms like “sexually exploit a dairy cow,” “forcible impregnation,” or even “rape”.

This industry term acts as a highly effective constraint on the rhetorical situation, suppressing the exigence of bodily violation. The use of “artificial” both suggests a sterile, technical process about which moral consideration is unneeded and objectifies the animal to

whom it is done. Activists' substitutions are the most fitting response precisely because they re-cast the exigence in the most emotionally and morally loaded terms available.

The replacement of the euphemism “artificial insemination” attempts to destroy the anthropocentric, human-exceptionalist screen by introducing the language of sexual violence, a concept universally condemned within the human moral sphere. This move, a clear example of catechesis, is designed to shift the audience from division (humans versus animals) to identification (all sentient beings are vulnerable to sexual assault). The success of this move is evidenced by the opponent's reaction: in one debate, when Earthling Ed calls the practice “sexually exploit a dairy cow,” the student immediately shifts the subject, abandoning the ethical frame to ask “have you ever eaten chicken” and remarking on how it tastes good (Berkeley Student 04:39). This is the student actively re-solving the “meat paradox” by replacing a moral claim with a hedonic justification, thereby neutralizing the ethical exigence introduced by Ed.

However, this strategic reframing isn't always successful. As a guest on a morning talk show, Joey Carbstrong defines the act of “artificial insemination” as “forcible impregnation” and “sexual abuse.” By doing this, he challenges his opponent to engage with the terministic screen he has imposed: “...if it was a human being, what would we call it?” (DAIRY FARMERS 02:35). This replacement results in one of the farmers arguing over the definitions of “rape,” “murder,” and “slavery” in what appears as a desperate attempt to reinforce the euphemisms in order to maintain the existing terministic screen. Ideally, this rhetorical comparison would force the opponent to deal with the moral status of the act itself, rather than the commodity it produces. But in this case, with the opponents being farmers, there was a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Based on this small sample of examples, it seems that people are less willing to concede that artificially inseminating a cow is a sexual violation on par with that of a human, and thus, the euphemism-replacement seems to be less impactful. This might lend additional insight into why more people are willing to give up meat than are willing to give up dairy. But that is a line of inquiry for another paper.

### **The Rhetoric of Mutilation**

While the cloaking language of murder and rape are obvious candidates for euphemism-replacement, the practice is also extended to the language used for animal modifications commonly used in farming practices. Words like “castration,” “dehorning,” and “branding” can be replaced with the more general and highly-charged term “mutilation.” Through this rhetorical dilation, these practices are reframed as sadistic cruelties.

In one debate, Earthling Ed deploys this tactic in a series of direct, hypothetical questions to the opponent, forcing them to imagine the “humane” experience of the victim: “what you'd like then is to be raised in a farm to be mutilated, to have your genitals mutilated” (Berkeley Student 20:01). This use of the second-person personalizes the ethical exigence, attempting to increase empathetic identification with the animal. However, in this debate, Ed’s opponent defiantly nods, saying that yes, he would like that. His staunch confirmation (as well as his nervous fumbling at his genital area) suggests that the truth is, in fact, the opposite. While there was no concession from the opponent, his reaction reveals that the combination of euphemism-replacement and second-person led to a disturbance in his mental state. Again, death by a thousand cuts.

## Contrasting Rhetorical Strategies

While this paper focuses on vegan activists who prioritize a confrontational ethical appeal through euphemism-replacements, it is not meant to appraise the value of this strategy. Rather, it observes a pattern of a particular tactic being used in certain rhetorical scenarios and analyzes when it is used and to what effect. There are alternative rhetorical approaches to animal rights activism with which we can contrast this tactic. For example, Tero Kivinen analyzes the persuasive impact of animal rights discourse and suggests that judicial topoi (focusing on morals and ethics) can be less effective than employing “the special topic of the advantageous.”

In short, Kivinen argues that “animal rights discourse should become more heavily invested in the special topic of the advantageous and explore the possibility of furthering the interests of animals by reference to the corresponding interests of human beings” (Kivinen 195). By using lines of argument that focus on the anthropocentric benefits of improving animal well-being—such as human health, environmental benefits, and human rights—animal rights rhetoric would be more persuasive, according to Kivinen. This approach, in contrast to the ethical shock tactic of euphemism-replacement, aims to reduce psychological distance by uniting human and animal interests, thereby maintaining anthropocentric interests to the benefit of humans and animals alike.

The two approaches thus present a stark rhetorical choice: the special topic of the advantageous aims to reduce psychological distance by forging identification through the shared interests of humans and animals, whereas the activist strategy of euphemism-replacement seeks to eliminate psychological distance by the truth of the act of exploitation itself, thereby creating an urgent moral exigence.

The vegan activists' consistent preference for euphemism-replacement is therefore highly strategic and philosophically consistent, aligning directly with the definition of veganism, which “seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose” (Vegan Society). By focusing on the victim and the violent act, the activists prioritize a radical ethical demand over anthropocentric negotiation and benefits. Their approach is not merely about conversion; it is about using the online video format to create an “imperative stimulus” where the viewer cannot escape the moral implications, trusting that the power of de-abstracted, visceral reality will ultimately change truth as perceived by the listener.

## **Conclusion**

The euphemisms surrounding animal consumption and exploitation are polite substitutions. Like all such linguistic masks, they hide aspects of human action that most would rather not confront, so offensive they are to our ethics or sensibilities. These euphemisms both create and perpetuate the terministic screens, conceptual metaphors, and linguistic abstractifications that prevent the ethical exigencies of the “meat paradox” from being fully realized. Fortunately, euphemisms are not invulnerable to rhetorical counter-attacks, as evidenced by the frequent deployment of euphemism-replacements.

This analysis confirms that the YouTubers' strategy of euphemism-replacement is a pragmatic and effective form of rhetorical intervention. It recenters and re-sentientizes animals, shocks people out of the fog of linguistic masking, and targets and dismantles the following fundamental linguistic defenses:

- Exposing the exigence (Bitzer): By replacing constraints like “artificial insemination” with a term like “sexual abuse,” activists break down linguistic barriers, allowing the ethical urgency of the situation to appear as a moral imperative.
- Imposing a new screen (Burke): The new term shifts the concept of a “food” animal from product to victim, displacing the anthropocentric, human-exceptionalist screen and forcing opponents toward identification with the victim.
- Collapsing the metaphor (Lakoff): The use of words like “flesh” and “rape” successfully disrupts the dominant conceptual metaphor ANIMALS ARE FOOD and enforces the reality that ANIMALS ARE INDIVIDUALS.
- Forcing concretization (Casagrande): The move from abstract terms to visceral, specific actions (“cut their throats”) destroys the psychological distance necessary to reconcile consumption with moral concern, increasing empathy and disgust.

While the strategy is effective, it is most often used in scenarios with an adversarial opponent. In these situations, the tactic was not successful in delivering a complete conversion. Rather, it appeared to have a smaller emotional impact, which often increased resistance, triggered a topic change, or resulted in dissociative body language (fidgeting, refusal to make eye contact, nervous smiling).

However, this analysis of the one-on-one interactions overlooks the broader rhetorical goal of the YouTube format. The primary audience for these debates is not the opponent, but the online viewer. These videos ensure that the viewer, unlike the debate opponent, cannot dodge the moral implications of the euphemism-replacement. The opponents’ defensive reactions serve as a negative model for the viewer, showing the mental convolutions required to reduce cognitive dissonance and maintain the “carnist” screen. The repeated exposure to this discomfort, or the

death-by-a-thousand-cuts style campaign, works on the viewer over time, fulfilling the activists' goal of creating an "imperative stimulus."

Ultimately, this comes down to the power of naming. The words we use directly impact our perceptual world-views, our actions, and our moral frameworks. The animal industry intuits this and exploits it advantageously. The industry employs a strategy of linguistic camouflage to "efface exploitation or to desensitize the ruler to the suffering of the ruled" (Mowery 163). Vegan discourse offers a convincing counter-rhetoric. The effectiveness of euphemism-replacement in these debates lies both in its ability to persuade the debate opponent and in the chosen medium of presentation. Because these videos are freely viewed and shared on YouTube, the debates and the rhetorical tactics therein can become a viral form of discourse that shows a wider audience how linguistic systems can perpetuate institutionalized violence against animals.

The fact is, "pork" is not any more real than "pig," or vice versa. They are both words for human concepts. But at the other side of either of these concepts is an animal—one alive and one murdered to be eaten after a life of suffering and exploitation. By replacing the deceptive euphemisms of animal exploitation, we mount a campaign to reframe collective conceptual metaphors in which the former is preferred to the latter.

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