

The case of the dog who ate bamboo

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The style guides of the majority of newspapers and news agencies dictate using *who* to refer to a nonhuman animal only when the referent's name or sex are known (Gilquin and Jacobs 2006; Jacobs 2005). However, people use *who* to refer to nonhuman animals in many other circumstances, not just when the name or sex are known (Gilquin and Jacobs 2006), so news organizations' style guides may be out of sync with language users' pronoun choices.

In the summer of 2011, U.S. news media erupted with a story that makes for an interesting case study of how reporters deal with their profession's prescribed pronoun use. Casey Anthony, a young woman in Florida, was accused of having killed her two-year-old daughter with chloroform. Gasps were heard in the courtroom on June 23, 2011, as Cindy Anthony, the child's grandmother, reversed her earlier testimony and said that she, not her daughter, had been the one to search for information on chloroform online. She explained that her dogs had been eating bamboo leaves and feeling ill, so she searched for *chlorophyll* and that brought up *chloroform*.

These dogs have an extremely peripheral role in the case, and almost nothing is known (or relevant) about them. Let us see how reporters presented them in the 37 news stories in which the dogs were mentioned. Following Gilquin and Jacobs (2006), we can consider to what extent they were individuated, what semantic role they were given, and what pronouns were used to refer to them.

The formulation of the key proposition in the Associated Press story, used verbatim in 10 news sources, was *She believed her dogs may have been eating bamboo leaves containing chlorophyll*.

In terms of individuation, it is not surprising that definite expressions (generally *her dogs*) were used. Interestingly, though, eight of the stories managed to mention that the dogs were Yorkshire terriers. Conceivably, the fact that they were not large, aggressive dogs could be relevant to a case in which child safety was prominent—but that seems a bit of a stretch. Could the reporters' real purpose in specifying the breed have been to treat the dogs as individuals, even in a minimal way?

In the majority of the stories, the dogs appeared as the agent in an embedded clause (or as the underlying agent in an embedded verb phrase); the action the dogs performed was to eat bamboo leaves. This might seem the obvious way to present the events, but other options were possible, as in a story on CNN: *...she thought plants in their yard might have been affecting her puppies*.

As to pronouns, the dogs' names and sex are unknown, so the reporters should have slapped *it* and *which* on them—but not a single one did. It would be reasonable to suggest that pronouns were simply not necessary if only one reference to the dogs was needed, as in the Associated Press story mentioned above. However, a closer

look suggests that the reporters did need to refer to the dogs multiple times, but that they engaged in pronoun avoidance, most frequently by means of gerund phrases. For example, *she thought her dog was getting poisoned from eating leaves in the back yard* (WDBO.com) makes it unnecessary to name explicitly the party eating leaves. Interestingly, six of the news stories featured multiple noun phrases referring to the dogs, to a remarkably awkward effect:

*... she started looking up chlorophyll on the Internet because she was concerned about **the Anthony family's youngest Yorkshire terrier**. Called to the stand on behalf of the defense, Cindy Anthony explained she conducted the computer searches in an attempt to figure out why **her Yorkshire terrier** was "extremely tired all the time." **The dog** was known to eat bamboo plants, so Cindy Anthony said she started out searching for chlorophyll, a green pigment that is found in most plants. [Emphasis added.] (Huffington Post)*

What is this, if not an attempt to avoid it?

Finally, two of the 37 news stories subverted the current pronoun guideline in journalism. One online source (the SOP) referred to one of the dogs as *him/her*, and WTSP did this:

*She was apparently worried about her dogs **who** may have been eating bamboo leaves that contained chlorophyll. [Emphasis added.]*

Even alongside the tragedy of a child losing her life, it would just be too strange to speak of a dog as an inanimate object. As Gilquin and Jacobs (2006) showed, nonhuman animals from familiar species who are family companions are often referred to as *who*. When news organizations' style guides draw an artificial and inappropriate line between referents for *who* and *which*, reporters sometimes get creative.

Gilquin, Gaetanelle & George M. Jacobs. 2006. Elephants who marry mice are very unusual: The use of the relative pronoun *who* with nonhuman animals. *Society & Animals* 14(1). 79-105.

Jacobs, George. 2005. Extending the circle of compassion to include nonhuman animals: The case of the use of *who* as seen in grammars and dictionaries. *Language and Ecology* 1(4).