

Testi brevi
di
accompagnamento.
Linguistica,
semiotica,
traduzione



UNIVERSITAS
STUDIORUM

a cura di
Donella Antelmi
Mara Logaldo

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DONELLA ANTELMI

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Capturing/Captioning Wildlife in Nature Photography

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1. Introduction

“When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures”. With these words, Susan Sontag (1973: 15) described the inherent predatory nature of photography as a sublimation of the act of killing and as the transformation of an aggressive mood into an elegiac one. Like photographs, also the short texts that accompany them may underline this idea. Captions have indeed the task to ‘capture’ the story told by the picture and condense it into its essence. Focusing on photographs of the natural world, it is interesting to observe that captions have ceased to be mere scientific descriptions of animals and plants and have increasingly emphasized a storytelling paradigm in the attempt to seize not only a lifeform but an instant in which the delicate balance of the ecosystem has been fixed.

At its 52nd edition, the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition organized by the Natural History Museum of London insisted on the principle that photography “accurately and inspiringly documents wildlife in ways that can help understanding and conservation” (Kidman Cox 2016: 6). As remarked in the Foreword to the *Portfolio*, the hundred pictures have been selected as “icons of nature as an experience and as history [...] ethically sourced and ethically produced” (*ibid.*). The book is a sort of multimodal showcase in which the complexity of wildlife is filtered and assessed through an image-led, creative use of language. The captions that accompany the pictures are consciously used to enhance awareness and emotional involvement; they tell stories that “can move us to action” (*ibid.*).

The aim of this study is to explore from a multimodal and ecolinguistic perspective (Stibbe, 2015) the narrative patterns, rhetorical

strategies and linguistic features used in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* to build up a powerful 'beneficial discourse' around wildlife, both in the pictures and in the captions.

2. Background

2.1 Captions in photojournalism

Captions have always played an important role in photojournalism, providing verbal anchorage/relay with the pictures (Barthes 1964). In recent years, however, their presence has become even more crucial, due to the pre-dominant space given to images over long verbal texts (for instance, extended feature articles), which has resulted in a concentration of verbally-articulated meaning within the few lines of writing placed under, above or beside photographs and sometimes even partly overlapping with them. As their presence has gradually replaced other kinds of descriptive, argumentative or expository texts, captions have turned into interesting objects of study in themselves, as micro-texts that bear the weight of the discursive function both in relation to and sometimes even independently from the picture they go with. In other words, besides showing the multimodal and often multimedial dynamics of contemporary forms of communication, captions have increasingly acquired a relevance of their own, as a form of discourse that displays distinct communicative purposes, rhetorical strategies and argumentative/narrative patterns.

It is widely agreed that a good caption should not state the obvious but say something relevant which is not immediately detectable from the picture (Becker 1992: 133-134). Captions cannot describe whatever occurs within the image – an impossible task given the semiotic complexity of the visual code (Gubern 1974: 122) – but single out some signifieds (Lombardo *et al.*, 1999: 127) which the writer, having in mind the target reader and the editorial framework, intends to highlight. Captions, therefore, necessarily entail

the extraction of one or more details and articulate an interpretation of the image rather than an objective, matter-of-fact account of what appears in it. According to Barthes (Culler, 1975: 33-34), this selective process is aesthetically and ideologically driven: words guide the reader through the image, foregrounding some traits and leaving other ones in the background. Evidence of the powerful combination of pictures and words in the creation of meaning can be observed in the history of photojournalism, particularly in tabloids. Suffice it to think that a biased use of captions has sometimes led to legal cases, especially when the people portrayed have been deliberately put in a bad light (Kobré, 2008: 406).

The shortness of captions makes them interesting objects of study also on account of their semantic and rhetorical density. Indeed, captions not only extract and abstract meaning from the picture, they may also build up a discourse that is related to it in many indirect ways. Like in other accompanying texts based on conciseness such as catch phrases in advertising and taglines in film trailers, also in captions the relation can be metaphorical, pointing to mental associations and using word connotations to transform the observation of the picture into a memorable experience. Furthermore, as captions have become more and more extended, they have also increasingly shown narrative patterns, building up stories that, while revolving around the image, both reflect and transcend it. The process draws from the tradition of reportage, where the power of pictures to tell stories is often enhanced by the storytelling power of words. In fact, both documentary photography and captions intend to capture a moment or event in a narrative fashion, the former through visual techniques, the latter with the aid of verbal devices.

2.2 The *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition

The *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition is a prestigious international contest whose aim is to provide a showcase for the

world's best nature photography. Owned by the Natural History Museum in London, since its first edition in 1965 it has collaborated with the BBC *Wildlife Magazine*, founded in 1963 and originally called *Animals*. However, it is only since 1992 that the selected pictures have been exhibited in travelling exhibitions and published in portfolios by the Natural History Museum of London on a yearly basis. The two events are obviously interconnected. The opening to a public of millions of people triggered a wide gamut of marketing possibilities besides the exhibitions themselves, such as the creation of a worldwide membership and the use of the brand for merchandising (prints, postcards, lamps, bags, tee-shirts, jewelry, stationery, jigsaw puzzles, kitchenware, etc.). The publication of the *Portfolios* is part of this wide marketing project, one which has certainly increased the popularity of the competition and disseminated knowledge of the natural world among a wide audience of amateurs.

Yet, standards have remained very high. The images must display artistry as well as an original way of seeing nature. Only 100 pictures of wildlife out of the tens of thousands (50,000 in 2016) submitted from countries all around the globe (95 countries in 2016) are anonymously selected among “the most memorable, beautiful and sometimes challenging images” (Kidman Cox 2016: 8) by a Jury composed of nature and fine art photographers, writers, editors and biologists. Both aesthetic and ethical rules are very strict. The subjects portrayed must be wild and free; the welfare of animals is paramount; pictures must be true to nature; manipulation of the animals or digital manipulation of the pictures that goes beyond in-camera settings and digital processing is not tolerated (*ibid.*).

In short, the competition shows what Arran Stibbe in *Ecological* (2015), drawing from Drengson and Inoue (1995), defines as a “deep ecological attitude”, that is, it recognizes “the intrinsic worth of humans, plants, animals, forests and rivers beyond direct,

short-term use for humans.” (Stibbe 2015: 13) In fact, the taking of the picture is justified not only by the aesthetic value of the picture itself but by its being “likely to encourage people to protect and preserve the conditions that support all life, including human life” (*ibid.*).

2.3. Captions in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*

Though essentially books of pictures, the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* portfolios have always devoted great attention to the written texts. The first edition contained a foreword by Sir David Attenborough (Wilkinson/Glinks 1992), while subsequent editions have been edited by important writers such as Harry Ricketts (who is also a poet and a literary critic), Chris Packham (a naturalist mainly known as television presenter), and Rosalind Kidman Cox (editor of *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and an outstanding writer specializing in wildlife and environmental issues).

It is relevant to note that attention has progressively shifted from the threshold to the body of the book and hence to the captions under or beside the pictures. If we take for instance the reviews from the Amazon website (which may be revealing, since their discourse is targeted on a general audience), we observe that until the 10th edition no reference is made to captions; about the editions published between 2000 and 2006 it is said that short captions will give behind-the-scenes information and photographic details. However, to be highlighted is still the information provided by the pictures and their photographic value. Only from the 17th edition, when the editing was taken over by Rosamund Kidman Cox, the reviews started to specify that each picture “is accompanied by a memorable caption that tells the story of how and why the shot was taken.” (<https://www.amazon.it/Wildlife-Photographer-Year-Portfolio-17/dp/>). About the portfolios 20, 21, 23, 24, 25 and 26 the reviews state that “each stunning photograph is accompanied by an extended caption” (<https://www.amazon.it/>

Wildlife-Photographer-Year-Portfolio-26/dp/). The review which refers to the portfolio 22 does not mention the captions; however, the one related to the book *The Masters of Nature Photography* published in the same year (also edited by Kidman Cox) states that “the accompanying captions focus on why the images are special for the photographer as well as telling the stories behind their creation” (<https://www.amazon.com/Masters-Nature-Photography-Photographer-1-Aug2013/dp/>). Similarly, the review about the most recent edition, *Portfolio 27*, claims that the “memorable book also tells the often memorable stories behind the pictures” (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Wildlife-Photographer-Year-Portfolio-27/dp/0565094157>).

The use of the same adjective – ‘memorable’ – for both pictures and captions suggests that the visual text and the verbal text have reached equal status. It also underlines their common elegiac mood, as underlined by Sontag (1973: 15). The captions in the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* portfolios may therefore be considered a significant example of New Nature Writing, a genre based on “the tonal mix of the poetic and the scientific and analytical” and whose patterns are, at the same time, factual, narrative and lyrical. Indeed, “[New Nature Writing] folds in aspects of memoir, travel, ecology, botany, zoology, topography, geology, folklore, literary criticism, psychogeography, anthropology, conservation and even fiction” (MacFarlane 2013: 166). In this genre, as argued by Smith (2017: 100), language is necessarily drawn into the debate.

3. Aims

As shown in § 2, captions in the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* portfolios are an interesting object from a linguistic, and more specifically ecolinguistic, perspective. While witnessing how these captions differ from those in other prestigious books of nature photography, the study will focus on the texts that accompany the hundred pictures in the 26th edition of the *Portfolio*, which con-

tains the photos selected in the 2016 competition and exhibited at the Natural History Museum in London from 21 October 2016 to 10 September 2017.

As stated in § 1, the analysis intends to highlight linguistic features, narrative patterns and rhetorical devices used in the captions while connecting them to more specific issues of environmental discourse within an ecosophical framework. The aim is to show, on the one hand, the discursive importance of captions in this kind of nature writing and, on the other hand, to demonstrate how captions can incorporate the communicative strategies of “beneficial discourse” aimed at “encouraging people to protect the ecosystem that life depends on” (Stibbe 2015: 201).

4. Methods

The quantitative and qualitative analyses have been carried out with the aid of the Word Search Tool on the captions contained in the scanned version of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* (for a total number of 18,679 tokens). Keywords and their frequencies within the file have been reported and subsequently examined with an ecolinguistic approach within the wider perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1985). The study builds on the hypothesis that the captions perform in this photographic book an important narrative and communicative function, articulating a discourse around the pictures which feeds on ecosophical ideology. The perspective is preliminarily diachronic: the study is based on the assumption that, in the editions published annually since 1992, captions have become increasingly important and central in the textual organization of the portfolios. But the analysis is mainly synchronic, since it concentrates on the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in the captions of the 26th edition and compares them to contemporary books of nature photography, namely those published by *National Geographic*.

5. *Capturing/Captioning Nature*

As Sontag pointed out in the early Seventies, photography has replaced the crude practice of capturing animals in safaris: now the camera captures their image instead of their body and life.

The photographer is now charging real beasts, beleaguered and too rare to kill. Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecology safari, because nature has ceased to be what it always had been – what people needed protection from. Now nature – tamed, endangered, mortal needs to be protected from people. When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures (Sontag 1973: 15).

In the captions of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*, the verbs used to express the action of taking the pictures underline this idea of photography. Besides the obvious ‘to photograph’ (13 counts),³⁴ the neutral expression ‘to take the picture’ is unexpectedly low (6 counts), while ‘to catch’ (13 counts for catching the animal in the right place at the right time)³⁵ is preferred. Also worth of attention is the presence of more expressive synonyms of ‘take’, such as ‘seize’ (2),³⁶ ‘grab’ (2)³⁷ and even ‘freeze’ (2).³⁸ But the verb most frequently used for taking the picture is ‘capture’ (27 counts), either followed by ‘picture’, ‘image’ or ‘shot’, by ‘moment’ or the name of the animal itself. Indeed, 1 out of 3 captions contains this verb.³⁹ Here are some examples:

-
34. However, the nouns ‘photographer/photography’ and the adjective ‘photographic’ appear 16 times. When the number of counts is not specified, it means that the term appears only once in the text.
 35. “His perseverance paid off when he caught the perfect pose as a bat leaves the roost on its night-time foray” (Kidman Cox 2016: 77).
 36. “Quickly framing the trail of hefty footprints, blood-spattered ice and contrasting colours, Joanna seized her graphic composition, devoid of the bear and its prey yet resonant with their presence” (*Ivi*, 109).
 37. “Hugo grabbed his chance and illustrated the scattering of glossy black birds contrasting with the white-dusted, geometrically patterned roof” (*Ivi*, 76).
 38. “To freeze the movement and catch the all-important facial expressions in the low light of the forest, he had to use a high speed and a higher-than-normal ISO” (*Ivi*, 45).
 39. Note that, by contrast, “hunt” both as a noun and as a verb, is never used

By angling his camera down to enhance the mysterious atmosphere, he captured the moment a toad rose up – copper-coloured eyes glinting – ‘like a creature from the abyss.’ (Kidman Cox 2016: 18)

As the light faded, he finally captured his magical image of the dying jellyfish. (*ivi*, 23)

Juan was there to capture the character of these strange spider-like arachnids. (*ivi*, 27)

The hardest part was capturing the female flowers motionless while the catkins were moving. (*ivi*, 66)

It can be argued that, as is often the case in photojournalism (Logaldo 2017: 247-266), also in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year 26* the subject is visually captured and verbally captioned. As suggested by the etymology of the word ‘caption’ (from Latin ‘captionem’, assimilated into the English language through Old French ‘capcion’ = ‘capture’, ‘arrest’) (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/caption>) the writer does with language what the photographer does with his/her camera. The idea of photography as capture is underlined and supported by the accompanying text, which therefore constructs a metadiscourse both around the picture and its own role in relation to it.

5.1 A visual/verbal booty: the aesthetic and ethical function of captions in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*

It would be a mistake to underestimate the artistic intent of the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition: pictures are select-

with reference to photography but only literally, as a practice of survival when the agent is an animal and as an anti-ecosophical activity when practised by man: “The hunt had caused the levels of aggression and social stress to surge, and it was a ‘loud, gory and difficult event to witness’, says Ronan. ‘I wanted to capture all those tensions.’ [...] At first glance, it’s not clear from the picture whether the interaction involves play, curiosity or anger, but once you see the protruding spine, the magnitude of the situation becomes clear. Hunts are rare – and in this case, opportunistic – and in the year he spent with the chimps, Ronan only witnessed three” (*Ivi*, 45).

ed not only because they testify to the life of a species, but also because they are beautiful. However, aesthetic achievements are constantly supported by ideological motives, which are highlighted both in the selection of the pictures and in the captions. Hence, photographers that take part in the competition are expected to be, at the same time, artists and naturalists. Like Gideon, aged 16, “who wants to study applied science at college and continue with his photography in his spare time, both as an art and as a way to observe his local wildlife” (Kidman Cox 2016: 139).

At the visual level, this intent is apparent in the choice of photographic techniques. Most of the shots (close ups, medium shots, long shots) are taken from an eye-level angle and from a frontal position (fig. 1), to suggest intimacy and the equal importance of the observer and the animal. High camera angles (fig. 2), which look down on the subject, are also sometimes used, mainly to represent the animal as powerless or endangered; by contrast, low angles, where the camera looks up at the subject, are rarer and mainly aimed at obtaining dramatic and artistic effects, for instance, to show animals fighting for food or for a female or involved in ludic activities. The caption that accompanies the photo titled “Star Player” (fig. 3), for example, acknowledges the artistic intent of the picture. However, this shot, too, is functional to the ecosophical perspective of the book, since the caption specifies that it is meant to show a characteristic of the animal: “Angling his camera up towards the dawn light – just as the pup offered him the starfish and another youngster slipped by close to the rocks – he created his artistic impression of the sea lion’s playful nature” (*ivi*: 104).



Fig. 1. Eye-level angle.



Fig. 2. High-angle.



Fig. 3. Low-angle.

The frontal eye-level shots, which, as already remarked, can be observed in most of the photographs, are sometimes defined as “portraits”, thus stressing the “environmental-art appeal” mentioned in the “Foreword”: they are “impactful on the eye”, “icons of nature,” examples of “great photography” which “illustrate our story” (*ivi*: 6). The word “picture” recurs 16 times and so do the words “composition” and “image.” However, collocations (with particular reference to the use of pre-modifiers) are generally meant to present the animal/s portrayed as vulnerable creatures whose transient beauty is to be wondered at with compassion and respect, especially when there is the risk of extinction. The message in all cases is that wildlife deserves being protected.

As the light faded, he finally captured his magical image of the dying jellyfish (*ivi*: 23).

It had taken nearly five months to get a decent image out of the set-up (*ivi*: 139).

He hopes that his image will convey their astonishing adaptability and ‘give value to these miracles of nature, which can be so thoughtlessly exterminated in the name of sport’ (*ivi*: 40).

So he kept the shot wide, embracing the drama of the sunbeams falling through gaps in the riverside vegetation to illuminate his atmospheric portrait (*ivi*: 12).

He was rewarded when the youngster peeked over and, apart from a flick of his ear, stayed motionless for long enough to create this intimate portrait (*ivi*: 78).

Portrait of a pelican (*ivi*: 102).

It would have been so easy for Leon to go for a classic portrait of a basking land iguana, as most of the others in his Galapagos tour group were doing (*ivi*: 149).

As the titles and the captions underline, these are not ordinary portraits. The editor pays great attention not to convey the idea of passivity on the side of the animals. She rather places emphasis on *performance*, representing animals as *actors*, that is, as active

subjects. This explains why there is no conflict between the iconic nature of the pictures and the dynamic world of nature, “from the drama of leopards prowling the alleys of Indian towns at night to the environmental-art appeal of dramatic volcanic landscapes” (*ivi*: 6). The words ‘scene’ appears 13 times, ‘action’ 7 times, ‘drama/dramatic’ 6 times, ‘stage’ 4 times (of which 1 with its literal meaning, for the picture of the young orangutan made to dance on stage) and ‘show’ 3 times. Terms such as ‘performance’, ‘dance’, ‘fandango’, ‘swirl’, ‘spiral’, ‘dynamic’, ‘spectacle’ are also found in the captions. The following example may well illustrate this emphasis on drama:

Above the water, the stage is empty. Below, the show has begun. In February, just before leaving the bays in the fjords of northern Norway to migrate south to mate, male humpback whales begin to play and sing more intensely. From the surface, brief sightings of tail flukes and flippers and the thwack of tails and bodies hitting the surface signal what’s going on, but Audun wanted to capture the whole stage, including the interface between ocean and air. But he faced a considerable challenge: the low light at the end of the polar winter. Not only did he have to fashion his own underwater system for the split-level view, but he had to find a male that would stay with him in the water, with the right background above the surface. He also had to be in the water at the right moment and be close enough to the whale and in the right position without disturbing it. So the picture took a huge amount of planning and attempts to get the composition and mood right: peace above, playfulness below. It’s thought that the male whales are both serenading the females and communicating with each other ahead of the huge journey to southern latitudes and warmer waters where they finally mate – a show worth marvelling at (*ivi*: 94).

The captions reflect the aesthetic intent combined with an ecosophical attitude of the photographs. To achieve this aim, the writer resorts to poetic devices such as metaphor, simile, alliteration, pun, parallelism, as well as to connotation and intertextuality. This is particularly evident in the titles given to each photograph. Here are some examples:

- Metaphor: “Arctic showtime” (*ivi*: 94).
- Alliteration: “Tentacle tornado” (*ivi*: 92).
- Pun: “Current riches” (*ivi*: 93).
- Parallelism: “No voice, no choice” (*ivi*: 114).
- Intertextuality: “Remains of the Day” (*ivi*: 52); “Requiem for an Owl.” (*ivi*: 82).

Rhetorical devices are therefore not used for their own sake but to meet the needs of ecosophical discourse. In the caption that accompanies the picture by Angel Fitor (Spain), titled “The Dying of the Light”, for instance, the dying jellyfish floating in the lagoon in Southeastern Spain is metaphorically described as a dying light but also, with a simile, as “a living island.” In fact, perfectly aligned with the jellyfish, we perceive the real island in the background (fig. 4).



Fig. 4.

According to the caption, this is “a magical image”; however,

It is also a picture symbolic of the lagoon itself. Since the picture was taken, continuing fertilizer and pesticide run-off from intensive agriculture has finally resulted in a huge algal bloom that is threatening to destroy the fragile ecosystem of this Specially Protected Area (*ivi*: 23).

Most of the captions in the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* show this attempt to align beauty and ecological denunciation, rhetoric and ecosophy, the metaphorical and the literal level.

5.2 Captioning/capturing nature “as an experience and as history”: storytelling in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*

According to Lewis Blackwell, the different categories portrayed in the *Portfolio* encourage “different styles, including documentary reportage and storytelling.” Although the pictures freeze-frame an instant in wildlife, they “tend to combine being impactful on the eye with being part of a narrative – they are icons of nature as experience and as history.” Conversely, the stories told in the captions are triggered by the pictures: they are “image-led stories” (Kidman Cox 2016: 6). Hence, no dichotomy is perceived between visual and verbal language: they are both considered as narrative mediums. The “Foreword” underlines the novelty of the project, the originality and scientific value of the achievement.

At a close analysis, we realise that all the captions in the *Portfolio* repeat the same pattern, one which builds up through the intersection of three parts variously combined: a) the story of the search for the ideal picture; b) a dynamic description of the location and of the subject being portrayed (always supported by scientific data, but mainly constructed around animal behaviour and ecological issues, such as risk of extinction, pollution and climate change deriving from inconsiderate human behaviour); and c) a climax: the story of how the perfect shot was finally obtained.

In the example:

Little treasure
Marco Colombo
ITALY

The summer heat on the Italian island of Sardinia had reduced the mountain river to a series of small pools, but undeterred, Marco eased

himself into the turbid water. His quest – part of a project to highlight the biodiversity of freshwater environments – was the shy European pond turtle. Despite its wide distribution in central and southern Europe and beyond, many populations are declining, threatened by water pollution, habitat loss and the introduction of competing American red-eared terrapins. Individual that have a speckling of yellow or gold across their dark shells and skin are also caught illegally for the pet trade. When Marco was forced to rely on natural light (his strobes failed), his challenge was to stay focused on the turtle as it moved across the shadows, stirring up mud and debris. ‘Conveying a sense of place was essential,’ explains Marco. So he kept the shot wide, embracing the drama of the sunbeams falling through gaps in the riverside vegetation to illuminate his atmospheric portrait (*ivi*: 12).

- a. The summer heat on the Italian island of Sardinia had reduced the mountain river to a series of small pools, but undeterred, Marco eased himself into the turbid water. His quest – part of a project to highlight the biodiversity of freshwater environments, was the shy pond turtle. [...] When Marco was forced to rely on natural light (his strobes failed), his challenge was to stay focused on the turtle as it moved across the shadows, stirring up mud and debris. ‘Conveying a sense of place was essential,’ explains Marco.
- b. Despite its wide distribution in central and southern Europe and beyond, many populations are declining, threatened by water pollution, habitat loss and the introduction of competing American red-eared terrapins. Individual that have a speckling of yellow or gold across their dark shells and skin are also caught illegally for the pet trade.
- c. So he kept the shot wide, embracing the drama of the sunbeams falling through gaps in the riverside vegetation to illuminate his atmospheric portrait.

The passage from the narrative to the descriptive parts goes rather unnoticed, though marked by a change of verb tense (from past to present tense and back again). However, the texts present a prevalence of narrative tenses (-ed 777 counts + -ught 20 + -aw 13), the present simple being used only to intersperse the story with brief, factual descriptions. Continuous tenses (present/past perfect continuous) are frequent: particularly

when animals are the actors/agents, continuous forms prevail over simple ones to suggest duration and continuity, the impression of a ‘real’ story going on. The storytelling revolves both around the picture and the animal’s behaviour. The two are interconnected, for the animal’s behaviour/life is described from the point of view of an observer.



Sand-napping

Destin Wernicke

USA

Destin was captivated by the Galapagos sea lions he saw on the island of Floreana – especially their ‘fun-loving, playful nature’. He enjoyed watching their behaviour, gliding through the surf, waddling along the beach or clustering on the sand or rocks to socialize and dry off, barking at visitors ‘as if owners of the island’. Though sea lions are usually highly gregarious, this young male was dozing alone on the beach. Lying down on the sand, Destin watched him from relatively close quarters and took his portrait as the sea lion rolled over and opened his eyes for a moment: ‘I love the innocent look of the animal and the way the light reflects off his back and contrasts with the texture of the sand’ (*ivi*: 140).

As the predominance of verbs of perception and the presence of direct speech suggest, these are not impersonal accounts; they are “useful alternative ways of telling stories about the world” (*ivi*: 30). As we shall see in 5.3., these are also typical features of benefi-

cial discourse, “a discourse which conveys an ideology that accords with the ecosophy of the analyst” and which is seen as “encouraging people to protect the ecosystem that life depends on” (ivi: 201).

5.3 ‘Beneficial discourse’ in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*

Emotional impact is necessary to what Stibbe defines as “beneficial discourse”, a form of discourse about the ecosystem which should lead to action, inspiring us “to care” (Stibbe, 2015: 30). He speaks of the “hybrid pattern of scientific or scholarly precision combined with the precision of observed detail,” as well as of the “use of technical terms from science (...) to build facticity (...) and the equally high facticity of direct sensory experience” (ivi: 137-138). He also reports this quote from Aldo Leopold: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (Leopold, 1979: 204; Stibbe, 2015: 161). Indeed, the style of speech in the captions “opens our senses to the sensuous” (Abram 2010: 3) both when expressing the relation between the photographer and the subject of the picture and when addressing the reader.

According to Stibbe, beneficial discourse can be detected by looking at four features of discourse: 1. Appraisal patterns; 2. Salience; 3. Reminding; 4. Personalisation. In the next sections these modes will be investigated in the captions of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year 26*. Since they are closely interconnected, salience and reminding have been discussed under one heading.

5.3.1 Appraisal patterns

The first trait highlighted by an ecolinguistic readings of texts is the presence of *appraisal patterns*, which Stibbe, drawing from Halliday (2001) and Martin and White (2005), defines as “clusters of linguistic features which come together to represent an area of life as good or bad” (Stibbe 2015: 83). Linguistic features in the captions of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year 26* promote a na-

ture-centred perspective rather than an anthropocentric one. Lexical choices are clearly meant to represent wildlife as an area to be observed and preserved, while human intervention, except for the brief, respectfully ‘stolen’ picture, is often portrayed as senseless and destructive. The participle adjective ‘endangered’ is used 13 times with reference to wildlife, while ‘threat’ is conversely used 10 times with reference to human behaviour towards nature.

5.3.2 Salience and re-minding

The second principle embodied by the captions in the *Portfolio* with reference to the natural world is *salience*. Each subject is portrayed as standing out in the environment. A salience pattern is “a linguistic or visual representation of an area of life as worthy of attention through concrete, specific and vivid depictions” (Stibbe, 2015: 206). In fact, salience patterns are more usually referred to visual representations (Kress/Van Leeuwen 2006: 210) than to verbal ones; however, they can find their linguistic equivalent in the way “patterns of linguistic features” such as focus, vitality, levels of abstraction, transitivity and metaphor “can come together to form salience patterns which represent particular participants prominently in a text” (Stibbe, 2015: 162).

To explain the extensive use of these techniques in the captions of *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26*, it may be useful to compare them to the captions that appear in another prestigious nature photography competition: the *National Geographic Photography Contest*.

Zebras and the Rim of the Crater

Photo and caption by Zik Teo.

Ngorongoro Crater, Tanzania, is the world’s largest inactive volcanic caldera. It is a collapsed volcano that harbours a range of African wildlife that live in relatively close proximity and competition of each other. Zebras are amongst the most common animals in the crater along with wildebeest, gazelles, hyenas, and lions. On a clear day, a 360° view of the crater rim can be seen whilst being inside.

Photo location: Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania.

Category: nature

(<<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/photo-con-test-gallery/zebras-and-the-rim-of-the-crater/> 2014>).

This is a more factual, scientific description of what we can see in the picture. The caption opens with a sentence that could be the verbal equivalent of an establishing shot. The location, “Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania,” is named and defined as “the world’s largest inactive volcanic caldera.” Animals are not represented individually but as a collective category (“A range of African wildlife”), or as species, by using the plural noun: ‘gazellas’, ‘hyenas’, and ‘lions’. Time is not specified either: “on a clear day” means *any* clear day. Nature is objectified. The main copular verb is the verb ‘to be’ (‘is’, ‘are’). We find the use of the passive voice to stress the impersonal construction of sentences: “Can be seen” suggests that everyone can see that scene if they go there. Although the name of the photographer is reported (note that he is also the author of the caption, which entails that the editing process is reduced to a minimum) he is only giving information that is supposed to be as objective as the picture taken through his camera lens. No reference is made to the subjective action of taking the picture in that particular place at that particular time. We have a third person point of view. The most used pronouns for the animals portrayed are it/(implicit) they. Sentences are short and all about the same length. We can summarise the pattern of the caption as such: Name of the photographer/caption writer, definition of the subject, addition of some scientific details, photo location and category.

This pattern is repeated in most *National Geographic* captions. Of course, there are differences and nuances. This is another example:

Spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*) in the waters off Kona, Hawaii. These dolphins forage at night in the deep water offshore, then come into shallow bays in the early morning to socialize and rest. This species of dolphins is known for its spinning behavior, where the dolphins leap out of the water, spinning and turning. Although researchers are not certain why they do this, a leading theory is to dislodge remoras and for communication. Spinner dolphins are especially social and are almost never found alone. They typically travel in large pods. (<https://www.brianskerry.com/portfolio/dolphins_new/attachment/mm8121_130713__38767>)

Although we have here more lengthy descriptions and a deeper interest in the animals' behavior, we still find abstract terms: "This species of dolphin"; the use of the passive voice "is known" "almost never found alone" and impersonal formulae that generally refer to the scientific community: "Researchers are not certain" "a leading theory is". The most used pronoun is "they".

On the one hand, also the captions in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* follow facticity patterns, i.e. "clusters of linguistic devices which come together to represent descriptions as certain or true" (Stibbe, 2015: 202). In fact the project is avowedly based on "absolute concern for truthfulness to the experience, to show the world as it is and how it changes" (Kidman Cox, 2016: 6) and should accurately and inspiringly document wildlife (*ibid.*). Hence the captions do contain scientific information about the animal or plant and related ecological issues. On the other hand, impersonal formulae are rarely used. There are only three examples of purely academic register:

- (1) Recent research suggests that it uses special platelets in its skin cells to reflect polarized light (light moving in a single plane), making itself almost invisible to predators and potential prey (*ivi*: 16).
- (2) And now recent research suggests that bees may also play a role (*ivi*: 66).
- (3) And research suggests that, with overfishing and warming waters, the run is becoming less predictable (*ivi*: 84).

More often, a harmony between researchers and the subjects they study is supported by the use of verbs of cognition and em-

phasis on a cooperative relationship. The aim is to promote a more ecosophical way of conceiving scientific research.

University researchers know the individual personalities of the meerkats and even the cultures of different groups. [...] Part of the story for Jennifer is the cooperative relationship between researchers and their subjects – ‘the joyous part of research’ (*ivi*: 121).

Furthermore, unlike the caption used for the *National Geographic* competition, which represents animals as a species (i. e. in a more abstract way and as objects of a study), here focus is on the individual: the single animal (the whale, the turtle, the eagle) is named and conceived as a unique subject. The definite article ‘the’ is used in the captions 1714 times, while the indefinite article ‘a’/‘an’ appears 538 times (‘any’ 9 counts).

Obviously, it would be difficult to judge which kind of approach is more effective or truer to nature. The aim of this study is only to show how, through discursive strategies, the captions in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* achieve what Stibbe calls *re-minding*: by explicitly calling “attention to the erasure of an important area of life in a particular text or discourse and demand that it be brought back into consideration” (Stibbe, 2015: 162). In these captions, re-minding is obtained through concrete and specific lexical sets drawn from nature rather than abstractions such as ‘fauna’, ‘ecosystem’, ‘species’, ‘extinction rate’ (*ivi*: 163). Moreover, the animal is represented actively as doing something in the world for its own purposes: emphasis is on behavior – both animal behavior and human behavior – particularly when the author wants to emphasise the disastrous consequences of inconsiderate human action on the ecosystem.

5.3.3 Personalisation

A point made in the “Foreword” of *Portfolio 26* is that these pictures are cognitively relevant. Blackwell speaks of “the emotional grab of a photograph” and states that “pictures must

be made with emotional impact while also holding an absolute concern for truthfulness to the experience” (Kidman Cox 2016: 6). He insistently resorts to expressions referring to cognition and feeling: “emotional grab”, “emotional impact”, “our thoughts”, “our reflections”, “passionate”; the pictures are something to “to marvel at” (“marvel about the health and the value of this truly wonderful natural world”) and they make us “think about” what these photographers “see or witness”. The verbs reflect this interest in perception and cognition. Some examples: see/saw (27 counts), watch/ed (27), know/knew (19), feel/felt (5), love (5).

With reference to the photographer, the process of personalisation in *Portfolio 26* goes as far as to include his/her first name in the body of the caption. In other words, the name does not only appear under the heading or at the bottom of the caption, which would simply remind the reader of authorship: through the use of either direct or free indirect speech, the editor (here clearly distinct from the photographer) suggests that the story behind the picture is told from the point of view of the photographer, who is not a mere observer but a *senser* physically and emotionally involved in the action of taking the picture.

Bence was so busy concentrating on adjusting the composition and focus that he failed to notice what the piece of ‘reed’ really was. It wasn’t until he was checking through his images later that he saw that the gull’s foot was trapped in a plastic clothes hanger. The gulls feed at rubbish dumps outside the national park. ‘I often saw them entangled in bits of rubbish,’ he says, ‘but mainly they get caught up in fishing line and hooks discarded around the lakes. I saw this poor bird flying around in the area for two more days before it disappeared (*ivi*: 120).

Personalisation, of course, also regards the representation of wildlife, which stresses uniqueness rather than generality (§ 4.3.3.). Animals are often humanised. Whenever the gender of

the animal is known, the author of the captions resorts to the pronoun “he” (161 counts) or “she” (16) rather than “it” (137). Even when the gender is unknown or the text refers to a number of animals so that the pronoun must necessarily be ‘they’ (105), as in the example above (‘the gulls’/‘them’), there are other words in the text that signal the focus on a particular individual rather than on an indistinct group (“this poor bird”).⁴⁰ We also find verbs and adjectives usually adopted for humans: ‘feast’ (7 counts) outnumbers ‘eat’ (4 counts). Also nouns such as ‘father’, ‘pup’, ‘baby/ies’, ‘mate’, etc., which tend to attribute to animals human or personal qualities, are very frequent. As in the example: “The father of her pups is nearby, keeping watch (maras mate for life, and the male follows the female wherever she goes).” (*ivi*: 42)

In conclusion, personalisation of both humans and animals in the captions is aimed at concretely satisfying one of the core tenets of beneficial discourse: the idea that recognising worth in nature may encourage people to protect all forms of life. As underlined in the foreword, the pictures in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* are “the polar opposite to the repetitive self-portraits found in social media.” They’re not “solipsistic reflections”, they are focused on “the world around us,” since wildlife looks outward at all other species and places.” On the other hand, they are also about ourselves: “While these pictures may not have our faces in shot, they have our fingerprints on the cameras and the files, and our thoughts are in the frame, along with our reflections as we look at them” (*ivi*: 6).

40. Explicit devices are also used. See, for instance, “Individuals that have a speckling of yellow or gold across their dark shells and skin are also caught illegally for the pet trade.” (*ivi*: 12)

6. Concluding remarks and future developments

The study seems to confirm that captions can be a powerful form of New Nature Writing. Indeed, the captions in *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio 26* satisfy all the core tenets of deep ecology: “ordinary plants and animals are represented as worthy of consideration in their own right; [...] are referred to in concretely imaginable ways; and are [...] given the role of *actor* and *senser* in sentences” (Stibbe, 2015: 145). Through narrative patterns and linguistic choices that underline salience patterns and produce reminding and personalisation, they build up, along with the pictures, a ‘beneficial discourse’ which is, at once and at the same time, aesthetically rewarding and ethically useful.

The analysis carried out from a multimodal and ecolinguistic perspective has shown that both the visual and verbal text are aimed at representing researchers, photographers, editors and readers as harmoniously cooperating to articulate the stories animals implicitly beg for, thus witnessing the risks run by wildlife in times of pollution and human exploitation while also creating beauty.

A limit of the research is that it analyses only the captions of one edition of the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year Portfolio*. Further research could be focused on the development of captions in all the editions since 1992, investigating the forms taken by multimodal and beneficial discourse in a diachronic way, thus highlighting how captions have evolved from simple accompanying texts to the undisputed co-protagonists of pictures in these fascinating nature books.

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