

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Posts on Street Dog in an Online Student Community

Engin Anıl Yolcu

Boğaziçi University, Department of Sociology

enginanol.yolcu@std.bogazici.edu.tr

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the Turkish public sphere saw increasing debates about what is commonly called the “stray dog problem” (*başiboş köpek problemi*). This paper analyzes competing discourses on the representation of the stray dog population in the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus and the surrounding 100. Yıl/İşçi Blokları neighborhood in Ankara, through in a Facebook group populated by METU students residing in the area. Using Critical Discourse Analysis supported by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, this study aims to shed light on a) how stray dogs are represented and discursively established as a security threat, b) how any hypothetical security measure that would be taken against the contamination of stray dogs is justified, and c) how the individuals who disagree with the securitization of stray dogs are represented. Doing so, I hope to contribute to the grassroots origins of the increasing securitization of stray dogs in Turkey and also to contribute to the lacking literature on stray animals in Critical Animal Studies.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Computation-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) is a relatively recent field in Discourse Analysis (DA), having originated in the ‘90s as an extension of Conversation Analysis (CA) dynamics to digital discourse. The key dynamics CA analyzes, such as turn-taking, repair, and synchronicity, are also central to CMDA scholarship. However, since online discourse dynamics differ considerably from conventional speech-based conversations that CA specializes in, even differing from one digital medium to another, the qualitative analysis of online discourse is often classified under the label CMDA.

Also relevant to the study at hand are the still-emerging fields of ecolinguistics, Critical Animal Studies (CAS), and Securitization Theory (ST) literature. As laid out by Balzacq et al. (2016) and demonstrated by Gaufman (2022), securitization theory analyzes how certain phenomena are constructed as threats (“securitized”) in a given community, with discourse analysis constituting one of the framework’s main pillars and social theory, the other. Ecolinguistics, and CAS (Taylor & Twine, 2014) to an extent; use Critical Discourse Analysis to understand and reveal humans’ attitudes and perceptions toward their environment and the non-human living beings that exist in them, as well as how they participate in the construction of the presumed notion of “the nature” (Steffensen & Fill, 2014).

The online community that is in the focus of this study is a closed Facebook group called *100. Yıl Evleri* (Houses of 100. Yıl). The community boasted a membership of 29.590 as of May 2023. A variety of topics are covered in the group discussions, including but not limited to lost & found posts, asking for product advice, questions and comments about developments in the METU area, roommate ads, academic questions, and as it is the focus of the study, posts about stray dogs. The data used in this study comes from the group as accessed in May 2023.

3. Findings

3.1 Representation and Securitization of Stray Dogs

Participants of the threads often anthropomorphize stray dogs, portraying them as either innocent or malevolent beings with human-like behavioral capabilities. Stray dogs' behavior is often framed as unnatural or unpredictable, contributing to their securitization. Narratives and (often memetic) visuals are often invoked to shape perceptions of stray dogs, with negative portrayals being more prevalent than positive ones.

3.2 Justification of Action against Stray Dogs

Arguments against stray dogs often stem from an anthropocentric perspective, where human interests are prioritized over non-human ones. The existence of free-ranging domestic animal populations in residential areas is associated with underdevelopment, legitimizing securitarian actions.

3.3 Representation of Pro-Stray Individuals

Pro-stray views are rare in discussions, with pro-stray individuals often depicted negatively by anti-stray individuals. Pro-stray individuals are portrayed as feminine and naive, with political affiliations often influencing perceptions.

4. Discussion

The negative presentation of stray dog defenders and the securitization of stray dogs are achieved through a variety of discursive strategies. Narratives about encounters with stray dogs reproduce and reify the community opinion, while parodical resonance and irony conveyed through memes and political references further act as a “semiotic weapon” (Zappavigna, 2022) targeting the stray dogs and their defenders. Stray dogs are portrayed as violent predators, and their violence is, on some occasions, attributed to a presumed sadistic urge. Their construction as beast-like violent predators enables their portrayal as an existential threat to human welfare. This, in turn, justifies cleaning the streets of their presence, so to say, or even their annihilation by appealing to an anthropocentric empathy hierarchy. Further studies supported by anthropological and sociological methods should be conducted to illuminate the societal and animal-behavioral mechanisms behind the contestation of the co-existence of humans and stray dogs.

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