

## Animals and Human Language



One evening in the mid-1980s my wife and I were returning from an evening cruise around Boston Harbor and decided to take a waterfront stroll. We were passing in front of the Boston Aquarium when a gravelly voice yelled out, “Hey! Hey! Get outa there!” Thinking we had mistakenly wandered somewhere we were not allowed, we stopped and looked around for a

security guard or some other official, but saw no one, and no warning signs. Again the voice boomed, “Hey! Hey you!” As we tracked the voice we found ourselves approaching a large, glass-fenced pool in front of the aquarium where four harbor seals were lounging on display. Incredulous, I traced the source of the command to a large seal reclining vertically in the water, with his head extended back and up, his mouth slightly open, rotating slowly. A seal was talking, not to me, but to the air, and incidentally to anyone within earshot who cared to listen.

Deacon ([1997](#))

There are a lot of stories about creatures that can talk. We usually assume that they are fantasy or fiction or that they involve birds or animals simply **imitating something** they have heard humans say (as Terrence Deacon discovered was the case with the loud seal in Boston Aquarium). Yet we believe that creatures can communicate, certainly with other members of their own species. Is it possible that a creature could learn to communicate with humans using language? Or does human language have properties that make it so unique that it is quite unlike any other communication system and hence unlearnable by any other creature? To answer these questions, we first look at some special properties of human language, then review a number of experiments in communication involving humans and animals.

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## Communication

We should first distinguish between specifically [communicative signals](#) and those that may be unintentionally [informative signals](#). Someone listening to you may become informed about you through a number of signals that you have not intentionally sent. She may note that you have a cold (you sneezed), that you are

not at ease (you shifted around in your seat), that you are disorganized (non-matching socks) and that you are from somewhere else (you have a strange accent). However, when you use language to tell this person, *I'm one of the applicants for the vacant position of senior brain surgeon at the hospital*, you are normally considered to be intentionally communicating something.

Humans are capable of producing sounds and syllables in a stream of speech that appears to have no communicative purpose, as in [glossolalia](#), or “speaking in tongues,” which is associated with the religious practices of Pentecostal churches. These outpourings sound like language, but with no speaker control it is not intentional communication. We might say the same thing about some of the chirping and singing produced by birds. We also don't assume that the blackbird is communicating anything by having black feathers and sitting on a branch. However, the bird is considered to be sending a communicative signal with the loud squawking produced when a cat appears on the scene. So, when we talk about distinctions between human language and animal communication, we are considering both in terms of their potential for intentional communication.

## Properties of Human Language

While we tend to think of communication as the primary function of human language, it is not a distinguishing feature. All creatures communicate in some way, even if it is not through vocalization. However, we suspect that other creatures are not reflecting on the way they create their communicative messages or reviewing how they work (or not). That is, one barking dog is probably not offering advice to another barking dog along the lines of “Hey, you should lower your bark to make it sound more menacing.” They're not barking about barking. Humans are clearly able to reflect on language and its uses (e.g. “I wish he wouldn't use so many technical terms”). This is [reflexivity](#). The property of

reflexivity (or “reflexiveness”) accounts for the fact that **we can use language to think and talk about language itself**, making it one of the distinguishing features of human language. Indeed, without this general ability, we wouldn’t be able to reflect on or identify any of the other distinct properties of human language. We will look in detail at another five of them: displacement, arbitrariness, productivity, cultural transmission and duality.

### **Displacement**

When your pet cat comes up to you calling *meow*, you are likely to understand this message as relating to that immediate time and place. If you ask your cat what it has been up to, you will probably get the same *meow* response. **Animal communication seems to be designed exclusively for the here and now.** It isn’t used to relate events that are removed in time and place. When your dog says *GRRR*, it means *GRRR, right now*, because dogs aren’t capable of communicating *GRRR, last night, over in the park*. In contrast, human language users are normally capable of producing messages equivalent to *GRRR, last night, over in the park*, and then going on to say *In fact, I’ll be going back tomorrow for some more.* Humans can refer to past and future time. This property of human language is called **displacement**. It allows language users to talk about things not present in the immediate environment. Displacement allows us to talk about things and places (e.g. angels, fairies, Santa Claus, Superman, heaven, hell) whose existence we cannot even be sure of.

We could look at bee communication as a small exception because it seems to have some version of displacement. When a honeybee finds a source of nectar and returns to the beehive, it can perform a dance routine to communicate to the other bees the location of this nectar. Depending on the type of dance (round dance for nearby and tail-wagging dance for further away), the other bees can work out where this newly discovered feast can be found. Doesn’t this ability of

the bee to indicate a location some distance away mean that bee communication has at least some degree of displacement as a feature? Yes, but it is displacement of a very limited type. It just doesn't have the range of possibilities found in human language. Certainly, the bee can direct other bees to a food source. However, it must be the most recent food source. It cannot be *that delicious rose bush on the other side of town that we visited last weekend*, nor can it be, as far as we know, possible future nectar in bee heaven.

### Arbitrariness

It is generally the case that **there is no "natural" connection between a linguistic form and its meaning.** The connection is quite arbitrary. We can't just look at the Arabic word **كلب** and from its shape determine that it has a natural and obvious meaning any more than we can with its English translation form *dog*. The linguistic form has no natural or "iconic" relationship with that hairy four-legged barking object out in the world. This aspect of the relationship between words and objects is described as **arbitrariness**. It is possible to make words "fit" the concept they indicate, as in [Figure 2.1](#), but this type of game only emphasizes the arbitrariness of the connection that normally exists between a word and its meaning.



**Figure 2.1**

**There are some words in language with sounds that seem to "echo" the sounds of objects or activities and hence seem to have a less arbitrary**

**connection.** English examples are cuckoo, crash, slurp, squelch or whirr. However, these onomatopoeic words are relatively rare in human language.

For the majority of animal signals, there does appear to be a clear connection between the conveyed message and the signal used to convey it. This impression may be closely connected to the fact that, for any animal, the set of signals used in communication is finite. Each variety of animal communication consists of a limited set of vocal or gestural forms. Many of these forms are only used in specific situations (to establish territory) or at particular times (to find a mate).

### **Cultural Transmission**

While we inherit physical features such as brown eyes and dark hair from our parents, we do not inherit their language. We acquire a language in a culture with other speakers and not from parental genes. An infant born to Korean parents in Korea, but adopted and brought up from birth by English speakers in the United States, will have physical characteristics inherited from his or her natural parents, but will inevitably speak English. A kitten, given comparable early experiences, will produce *meow* regardless.

This process whereby a language is passed on from one generation to the next is described as cultural transmission. It is clear that humans are born with some kind of predisposition to acquire language in a general sense. However, we are not born with the ability to produce utterances in a specific language such as English. We acquire our first language as children in a culture.

The general pattern in animal communication is that creatures are born with a set of specific signals that are produced instinctively. There is some evidence from studies of birds as they develop their songs that instinct has to combine with learning (or exposure) in order for the right song to be produced. If those birds spend their first seven weeks without hearing other birds, they will

instinctively produce songs or calls, but those songs will be abnormal in some way. Human infants, growing up in isolation, produce no “instinctive” language.

### **Productivity**

Humans are continually creating new expressions by manipulating their linguistic resources to describe new objects and situations. This property is described as **productivity** (or “creativity” or “open-endedness”) and essentially means that the potential number of utterances in any human language is infinite.

The communication systems of other creatures are not like that. Cicadas have four signals to choose from and vervet monkeys have thirty-six vocal calls. Nor does it seem possible for creatures to produce new signals for novel experiences or events. The honeybee, normally able to communicate the location of a nectar source to other bees, will fail to do so if the location is really “new.” In one experiment, a hive of bees was placed at the foot of a radio tower and a food source placed at the top. Ten bees were taken to the top, given a taste of the delicious food, and sent off to tell the rest of the hive. The message was conveyed via a bee dance and the whole gang buzzed off to get the free food. They flew around in all directions, but couldn’t locate the food. (It’s probably one way to make bees really mad.) The problem seems to be that bee communication has a fixed set of signals for communicating location and they all relate to horizontal distance. The bee cannot manipulate its communication system to create a “new” message for vertical distance. According to Karl von Frisch, who conducted the experiment, “the bees have no word for *up* in their language” and they can’t invent one.

This lack of productivity in animal communication can be described in terms of **fixed reference**. Each signal in the communication system of other creatures seems to be fixed in terms of relating to a particular occasion or purpose. This is particularly true of scent-based signaling, as in the pheromones (a chemical

substance) released by insects such as female moths as they try to contact a mate. It's a case of one scent, one meaning.

Among our closer relatives, there are lemurs (similar to small monkeys) in Madagascar that have only three basic calls. In the vervet monkey's repertoire, there is one danger signal *CHUTTER*, which is used when a snake is around, and another *RRAUP*, used when an eagle is spotted nearby. These signals are fixed in terms of their reference and cannot be manipulated. What might count as evidence of productivity in the monkey's communication system would be an utterance of something like *CHUTT-RRAUP* when a flying creature that looked like a snake came by. Despite a lot of laboratory research involving snakes suddenly appearing in the air above them (among other weird experiences), the vervet monkeys didn't produce a new danger signal. The human, given similar circumstances, is quite capable of creating a "new" signal, after initial surprise perhaps, by saying something never said before, as in *Hey! Watch out for that flying snake!*

### Duality

Human language is **organized at two levels simultaneously**. This property is called **duality** (or "double articulation"). When we speak, we have a physical level at which we produce individual sounds, like *n*, *b* and *i*. As individual sounds, none of these discrete forms has any intrinsic meaning. In a combination such as *bin*, we have another level with a meaning that is different from the meaning of the combination in *nib*. So, at one level, we have distinct sounds, and, at another level, we have distinct meanings. This duality of levels is one of the most economical features of human language because, with a limited set of sounds, we are capable of producing a very large number of sound combinations (e.g. words) that are distinct in meaning.



Among other creatures, each communicative signal appears to be a single fixed form that cannot be broken down into separate parts. Although your dog may be able to produce *woof* (“I’m happy to see you”), it does not seem to do so on the basis of a distinct level of production combining the separate elements of  $w + oo + f$ . If the dog was operating with the double level (i.e. duality), then we might expect to hear different combinations with different meanings, such as *oowf* (“I’m hungry”) and *foow* (“I’m really bored”).

## Talking to Animals

If these properties make human language such a unique communication system, then it would seem extremely unlikely that other creatures would be able to understand it. Some humans, however, do not behave as if this is the case. Riders can say *Whoa* to horses and they stop, we can say *Heel* to dogs and they will follow at heel (well, sometimes), and a variety of circus animals go *Up*, *Down* and *Roll over* in response to spoken commands. Should we treat these examples as evidence that non-humans can understand human language? Probably not. The standard explanation is that the animal produces a particular behavior in response to a sound stimulus, but does not actually “understand” what the noise means.

If it seems difficult to conceive of animals understanding human language, then it appears to be even less likely that an animal would be capable of producing human language. After all, we do not generally observe animals of one species learning to produce the signals of another species. You could keep your horse in a field of cows for years, but it still won’t say *Moo*. And, in some homes, a new baby and a puppy may arrive at the same time. Baby and puppy grow up in the same environment, hearing the same things, but two years later, the baby is making lots of human speech sounds and the puppy is not. Perhaps a

puppy is a poor example. Wouldn't it be better to work with a closer relative such as a chimpanzee?

## **Chimpanzees and Language**

The idea of raising a chimp and a child together may seem like a nightmare, but this is basically what was done in an early attempt to teach a chimpanzee to use human language. In the 1930s, two scientists (Luella and Winthrop Kellogg) reported on their experience of raising an infant chimpanzee together with their baby son. The chimpanzee, called Gua, was reported to be able to understand about a hundred words, but did not “say” any of them. In the 1940s, a chimpanzee named Viki was reared by another scientist couple (Catherine and Keith Hayes) in their own home, as if she was a human child. These foster parents spent five years attempting to get Viki to “say” English words by trying to shape her mouth as she produced sounds. Viki eventually managed to produce some words, rather poorly articulated versions of *mama*, *papa* and *cup*. In retrospect, this was a remarkable achievement since it has become clear that non-human primates do not actually have a physically structured vocal tract that is suitable for articulating the sounds used in speech. Apes and gorillas can, like chimpanzees, communicate with a wide range of vocal calls, but they just can't make human speech sounds.

### **Washoe**

Recognizing that a chimpanzee was not likely to learn spoken language, another scientist couple (Beatrix and Allen Gardner) set out to teach a female chimpanzee called Washoe to use a version of American Sign Language. As described later in [Chapter 15](#), this sign language has all the essential properties

of human language and is learned by many congenitally deaf children as their natural first language.

From the beginning, the Gardners and their research assistants raised Washoe like a human child in a comfortable domestic environment. Sign language was always used when Washoe was around and she was encouraged to use signs, even her own incomplete “baby-versions” of the signs used by adults. In a period of three and a half years, Washoe came to use signs for more than a hundred words, ranging from *airplane*, *baby* and *banana* through to *window*, *woman* and *you*. Even more impressive was Washoe’s ability to take these forms and combine them to produce “sentences” of the type *gimme tickle*, *more fruit* and *open food drink* (to get someone to open the refrigerator). Some of the forms appear to have been inventions by Washoe, as in her novel sign for *bib* and in the combination *water bird* (referring to a swan), which would seem to indicate that her communication system had the potential for productivity. Washoe also demonstrated understanding of a much larger number of signs than she produced and was capable of holding rudimentary conversations, mainly in the form of question–answer sequences.

### **Sarah and Lana**

At the same time as Washoe was learning sign language, another chimpanzee was being taught (by Ann and David Premack) to use a set of plastic shapes for the purpose of communicating with humans. These plastic shapes represented “words” that could be arranged in sequence to build “sentences.” This chimpanzee was called Sarah and she preferred to arrange the shapes into a vertical order, as shown in [Figure 2.2](#). The basic approach was quite different from that of the Gardners. Sarah was not treated like a human child in a domestic environment. To begin with, she was over five years old when the training began. She was systematically trained to associate the plastic shapes with objects

or actions. She remained an animal in a cage, being trained with food rewards to manipulate a set of symbols. Once she had learned to use a large number of the plastic shapes, Sarah was capable of getting an apple by selecting the correct plastic shape (a blue triangle) from a large array. Notice that this symbol is arbitrary since it would be hard to argue for any natural connection between an apple and a blue plastic triangle. Sarah was also capable of producing “sentences” such as *Mary give chocolate Sarah* and had the impressive capacity to understand complex structures such as *If Sarah put red on green, Mary give Sarah chocolate*. Sarah would get the chocolate.



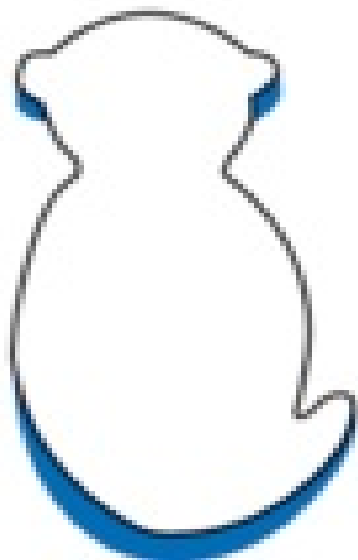
MARY



GIVE



CHOCOLATE



SARAH

## Figure 2.2

A similar training technique with another artificial language was used (by Duane Rumbaugh) to train a chimpanzee called Lana. The language she learned was called Yerkish and consisted of a set of symbols on a large keyboard linked to a computer. When Lana wanted some water, she had to find and press four symbols to produce the message *please machine give water*, as illustrated in [Figure 2.3](#).



Figure 2.3

## The Controversy

Both Sarah and Lana demonstrated an ability to use what look like word symbols and basic structures in ways that superficially resemble the use of language. There is, however, a lot of skepticism regarding these apparent linguistic skills. It has been pointed out that when Lana used the symbol for “please,” she did not have to understand the meaning of the English word *please*. The symbol for “please” on the computer keyboard might simply be the equivalent of a button on a vending machine and, so the argument goes, we could learn to operate vending machines without necessarily knowing language. This is only one of the many arguments that have been presented against the idea that the use of signs and symbols by these chimpanzees is similar to the use of language.

On the basis of his work with another chimpanzee called Nim, the psychologist Herbert Terrace argued that chimpanzees simply produce signs in

response to the demands of people and tend to repeat signs those people use, yet they are treated as if they are taking part in a “conversation.” As in many critical studies of animal learning, the chimpanzees’ behavior is viewed as a type of conditioned response to cues provided (often unwittingly) by human trainers. Herbert’s conclusion was that chimpanzees are clever creatures who learn a certain type of behavior (signing) in order to get rewards and are essentially performing sophisticated “tricks.”

In response, the Gardners argued that they were not animal trainers, nor were they eliciting conditioned responses from Washoe. In complex experiments, designed to eliminate any visual cues, they showed that in the absence of any human, Washoe could produce correct signs to identify objects in pictures. They also emphasize a major difference between Washoe and Nim. While Nim was a research animal in a complex environment, dealing with a lot of different researchers who were often not fluent signers, Washoe lived in a more limited domestic environment with a lot of opportunity for imaginative play and interaction with fluent signers who were also using sign language with each other. They also report that another group of younger chimpanzees learned sign language and occasionally used signs with each other and with Washoe, even when there were no humans present.

### **Kanzi**

In a more recent set of studies, an interesting development relevant to this controversy came about almost by accident. While Sue Savage-Rumbaugh was attempting to train a bonobo (a pygmy chimpanzee) called Matata how to use the symbols of Yerkish, Matata’s adopted baby, Kanzi, was always with her. Although Matata did not do very well, her son Kanzi spontaneously started using the symbol system with great ease. He had learned not by being taught, but by being exposed to, and observing, a kind of language in use at a very early age.

Kanzi eventually developed a large symbol vocabulary (over 250 forms). By the age of eight, he was reported to be able to demonstrate understanding of spoken English at a level comparable to a two-and-a-half-year-old human child. There was also evidence that he was using a consistently distinct set of “gentle noises” as words to refer to things such as bananas, grapes and juice. He had also become capable of using Yerkish to ask for his favorite movies, *Quest for Fire* and *Greystoke* (about the Tarzan legend).

## Using Language

Important lessons have been learned from attempts to teach chimpanzees how to use forms of language. We have answered some questions. Were Washoe and Kanzi capable of taking part in interaction with humans by using a symbol system chosen by humans and not chimpanzees? The answer is clearly “Yes.” Did Washoe and Kanzi go on to perform linguistically like a human child about to begin pre-school? The answer is just as clearly “No.” Yet, even as we arrive at these answers, we still don’t seem to have a non-controversial definition of what “using language” means.

One solution might be to stop thinking of language, at least in the phrase “using language,” as a single thing that one can either have or not have. We could then say there are (at least) two ways of thinking about “using language.” In a broad sense, language serves as a type of communication system in different situations. In one situation, we look at the behavior of a two-year-old human child interacting with a caregiver as an example of “using language.” In another situation, we observe very similar behavior from chimpanzees when they are interacting with humans. It has to be fair to say that, in both cases, we observe the participants “using language.”



However, there is a difference. Underlying the two-year-old's communicative activity is the capacity to develop a complex system of sounds and structures, plus computational procedures, that will allow the child to produce extended discourse containing a potentially infinite number of novel utterances. No other creature has been observed "using language" in this sense. It is in this more comprehensive and productive sense that we say that language is uniquely human.

## Study Questions

- 1 What is displacement?
- 2 What is the difference between a communication system with productivity and one with fixed reference?
- 3 Why is reflexivity considered to be a special property of human language?
- 4 What kind of evidence is used to support the idea that language is culturally transmitted?
- 5 Which English words was Viki reported to be able to say?
- 6 What property did Washoe's language seem to have when she used an expression such as "water bird" to refer to a swan?
- 7 How did the Gardners try to show that Washoe was not simply repeating signs made by interacting humans?
- 8 If Sarah could use a gray plastic shape to convey the meaning of the word *red*, which property does her "language" seem to have?
- 9 What was the name of the "language" that Lana learned?
- 10 What was considered to be the key element in Kanzi's language learning?

## Tasks

**A** In studies of communication involving animals and humans, there is sometimes a reference to “the Clever Hans phenomenon.” Who or what was Clever Hans, why was he/she/it famous and what exactly is the “phenomenon”?

**B** We recognized a distinction early in the chapter between communicative and informative signals. How would “body language” be characterized? Also, what kind of signaling is involved in “distance zones”? What about “eye contact” and “eyebrow flashes”?

**C** What is meant by “sound symbolism”? How does it relate to arbitrariness?

**D**

**(i)** In the study of animal communication, what are “playback experiments”?

**(ii)** Which forms of animal communication described in this chapter were discovered as a result of playback experiments?

**E** It has been claimed that “recursion” is a key property of human language, and of human cognition in general. What is recursion? Could it still be a universal property of human language if one language was discovered that had no evidence of recursion in its structure?

**F** We reviewed studies involving chimpanzees and bonobos learning to communicate with humans. Can only African apes accomplish this task? Are there any studies involving the Asian great ape, the orangutan, learning how to use a human communication system?

**G** What was the significance of the name given to the chimpanzee in the research conducted by the psychologist Herbert Terrace ([1979](#))?

**H** Consider these statements about the symbol-using abilities of chimpanzees in animal language studies and decide if they are correct or not. What evidence can be used to argue for or against the accuracy of these statements?

(1) They can create combinations of signs that look like the telegraphic speech produced by young children.

(2) They can invent new sign combinations.

(3) They can understand structures with complex word order, such as conditionals (i.e. *if X, then Y*).

(4) They overgeneralize the references of signs, using one sign for many different things, just as human children do in the early stages.

(5) They don't use signs spontaneously and only produce them in response to humans.

(6) They have complex concepts such as time because they produce sign combinations such as *time eat*.

(7) They use signs to interact with each other, just as three-year-old children do with speech.

(8) They steadily increase the length of their utterances, so that their average utterance length of 3.0 is equivalent to that of a three-and-a-half-year-old child.

## Discussion Topics/Projects

**I** Listed below are six other properties (or “design features”) that are often discussed when human language is compared to other communication systems.

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**vocal-** (language signals are sent using the vocal organs and

<b>auditory channel use</b>	received by the ears)
<b>specialization</b>	(language signals do not serve any other type of purpose such as breathing or feeding)
<b>non-directionality</b>	(language signals have no inherent direction and can be picked up by anyone within hearing, even unseen)
<b>rapid fade</b>	(language signals are produced and disappear quickly)
<b>reciprocity</b>	(any sender of a language signal can also be a receiver)
<b>prevarication</b>	(language signals can be false or used to lie or deceive)

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**(i)** Are these properties found in all forms of human communication via language?

**(ii)** Are these special properties of human language or can they be found in the communication systems of other creatures?

(For background reading, see chapter 18 of O’Grady *et al.*, [2009](#).)

**II** The most persistent criticism of the chimpanzee language-learning projects is that the chimpanzees are simply making responses like trained animals for rewards and are consequently not using language to express anything. Read over the following reports and try to decide how the different behaviors of these chimpanzees (Dar, Washoe and Moja) should be characterized. Signs are represented by words in capital letters.

*After her nap, Washoe signed OUT. I was hoping for Washoe to potty herself and did not comply. Then Washoe took my hands and put them together to make OUT and then signed OUT with her own hands to show me how.*

*Greg was hooting and making other sounds, to prevent Dar from falling asleep. Dar put his fist to Greg's lips and made kissing sounds. Greg asked WHAT WANT? and Dar replied QUIET, placing the sign on Greg's lips.*

*Moja signed DOG on Ron and me and looked at our faces, waiting for us to "woof." After several rounds I made a "meeow" instead. Moja signed DOG again, I repeated "meeow" again, and Moja slapped my leg harder. This went on. Finally, I woofed and Moja leapt on me and hugged me.*

*Moja stares longingly at Dairy Queen as we drive by. Then for a minute or more signs NO ICE CREAM many times, by shaking her head while holding fist to mouth, index edge up.*

(For background reading, see Rimpau *et al.*, [1989](#), which is the source of these examples. There is also a film with the title *Project Nim* (Lionsgate) that describes the unfortunate experiences of the chimpanzee Nim.)

### *Further Reading*

## **Basic Treatments**

Aitchison, J. (2011) *The Articulate Mammal* (chapter 2) Routledge Classics

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Friend, T. (2005) *Animal Talk* Simon and Schuster

## **More Detailed Treatments**

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## **General Properties of Language**

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## **Glossolalia**

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## **Animal Communication and Consciousness**

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von Frisch, K. (1993) *The Dance Language and Orientation of Bees* Harvard University Press

## **Lemur and Vervet Monkey Communication**

Cheney, D. and R. Seyfarth (1990) *How Monkeys See the World* University of Chicago Press

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Jolly, A. (1966) *Lemur Behavior* University of Chicago Press

## **Chimpanzee Gestures**

Hobaiter, C. and R. Byrne (2014) “The meaning of chimpanzee gestures”  
*Current Biology* **24**: 1596–1600 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.05.066>

## **Individual Chimpanzees and Bonobos**

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(Viki) Hayes, C. (1951) *The Ape in Our House* Harper

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(Nim) Hess, E. (2008) *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human* Bantam Books

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