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...and they could talk to me

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...and they could talk to me

For people of my age, the character of Dr Dolittle is forever embodied by Rex Harrison *sprachsinging* his way through “*If I Could Talk to the Animals*” in the good doctor’s eponymous 1967 musical. My favorite line of that song contains his earnest wish: “...and they could talk to me”.

Of course, some animals can “talk” to us about some things. A trumpeting African bull elephant with his head down and ears played makes his meaning perfectly clear. We all understand a rattlesnake’s rattling, and you certainly know your dog is happy to see you when you come home. Some animals have even been taught to communicate with us at a level far beyond these lingua franca messages of normal behavior. For example, the world-famous Koko, a gorilla born at the San Francisco Zoo, has been taught to use more than 1000 words of American Sign Language, and the equally famous Kanzi, a bonobo, now at the Language Research Center of Georgia State University, has learned to communicate via lexigrams. But can animals *initiate* complex communication with us without first being taught any skills? Or as Harrison’s Dr Dolittle might ask, can we start *chatting to a chimp in chimpanzee*?

I have twice had the unnerving experience of feeling “talked to” by our closest relative.

Once, when approaching the thick windows of a chimpanzee enclosure at a zoo, one of its occupants came up to me on his side of the divide and looked at the apple I was munching. I shrugged my shoulders; with the glass between us, there was no way I could share my fruit. The animal then began to climb a pole a little distance away, checking on me all the while. He then stuck his arm out of a skillfully concealed ventilation hole within easy throwing distance, and began waving to attract my attention. He looked at me and then at his arm, and then again at me. Was he *instructing* me about how to give him my lunch? Could he really have reasoned that I did not know the solution to our problem, and then supplied it to me?

My second conversation occurred when I was being shown around a wildlife park. The owner took me to see Tito, a very old male chimpanzee who lived on an island in a wooded enclosure. With my host’s permission, I threw a banana to him. On hearing it crash into the bushes, Tito came out of his hut to investigate. After finding the treat, he placed it carefully on the open ground, walked over to the water’s edge, and stared at me. He then clapped his

hands loudly before thrusting his left hand forward. His meaning was crystal clear: “OK, I’m ready. You can throw again.” One by one I threw him my remaining pieces of fruit, with him telling me each time when he was ready to catch again. My host told me no one had ever taught him that behavior.

Like a good scientist, I tried to stand detached and explain these experiences with this and that theory, but I have never been able to escape the feeling that those chimpanzees “talked” to me. Could that really have happened? I thought that it was time to ask someone who might know:

Heidi Lyn, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi, whose research interests include the evolution of language and primate cognition.

“Of course it happened!”, she told me. “There are many examples of complex communication in chimpanzees – particularly the kind of gestural communication that you describe. There is no reason to assume that this type of communication would not cross species boundaries and many reasons to suspect that it would. For example, many studies in zoos and research facilities show that apes will follow a human’s gaze

(even around obstacles) and will initiate and follow communicative exchanges using gestures and vocalizations. Particularly when in human care, many animals learn to effectively communicate, especially when there is something in it for them, like a tasty apple or banana.”

I should have known. In the December 1965 issue of *National Geographic*, Jane Goodall wrote: “One incident points strikingly to the fact that some of the gestures used by both man and chimpanzee either have a common origin or have evolved along closely parallel lines...for on this particular occasion my old friend [the chimpanzee] David Greybeard actually communicated with me, by a chimpanzee gesture.” David finally took a nut Jane was insistently offering, but which David didn’t want. As the encounter took place, David squeezed her hand before letting the morsel fall to the ground, reassuring her “that although he disdained my gift, he had not misinterpreted my gesture in offering it to him”.

Dr Dolittle hoped that he might one day *grunt and squeak and squawk with the animals*. Little did he – or I – know that with some, we already could.

Adrian Burton



Jane Goodall chatting with her friend, Freud.

