

### **Can Animals Use Language?**

In 2004, reports came out about a border collie named Rico that has really remarkable abilities in understanding spoken words. This house dog in Germany seems to be able to recognize around 200 words. In one experiment, 10 of Rico's toys were put in a room and his owner told him to get 2 of the 10 items. The owner was out of sight, and so was not able to give any conscious or unconscious physical clues. In 40 tests, Rico got the right objects 37 times. A second trial was even more impressive. Seven of Rico's toys were put in the room along with an unfamiliar item. The dog's owner told him to fetch the thing he hadn't seen before, using a word he didn't know. Rico again passed with flying colors. He got the new object in seven out of 10 tries. "This tells us he can do simple logic," one of the researchers said. "It's like he's saying to himself, 'I know the others have names, so this new word cannot refer to my familiar toys. It must refer to this new thing.' Or it goes the other way around, and he's thinking, 'I've never seen this one before, so this must be it.' He's actually thinking." (Stein 2004).

The report on Rico's abilities led another expert on canine behavior, who had not worked with Rico himself, to say that although some scholars have argued that the perceptual and cognitive mechanism necessary for language acquisition are unique to humans, the study of Rico's performance shows clearly this is not so; that other animals possess those cognitive and perceptual abilities. More detail on Rico's abilities can be read at the following link:

<http://www.genomenewsnetwork.org/articles/2004/06/10/smartdog.php>

In fact, Rico is far from the only animal for which humanlike communicative and cognitive skills have been observed. The achievements of an African grey parrot named Alex studied by Irene Pepperberg are truly amazing. Follow this link to learn more about Alex:

[http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/pepperberg03/pepperberg\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/pepperberg03/pepperberg_index.html)

And check this one out for a Quicktime movie showing what the parrot can do:

<http://www.alexfoundation.org/alextheparrot.mov>

A bonobo named Kanzi at Georgia State University and studied by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh among others, has developed communicative abilities that these other animals haven't. A description of what Kanzi can do can be found at the following URL:

<http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwlrc/Apes/GreatApes/Ape%20bios/Apeskanztab2.htm>

So can animals use language? Perhaps the answer is "yes", depending on what definition of language you apply.

Nevertheless, many linguists do argue that the capacity for natural language really is exclusively human, and that includes the authors of Chapter 3 of the text. The abilities of Rico, Alex, Kanzi and quite a few other nonhuman animals, impressive though they are, have no bearing on the arguments linguists use. Linguists are saying something quite different and more profound. As we have tried to show in Chapter 3, there is evidence

An Introduction to Language and Linguistics  
Additional text – Chapter 3

that human children not only have a remarkable ability to acquire languages, but that there is a lot about their language that THEY DON'T EVEN HAVE TO LEARN. In fact, children couldn't learn it if they wanted to, because the evidence just isn't there in the language that they hear. This line of argument is called the argument from the poverty of the stimulus, and it shows not only are these properties of language unlearnable, but they reveal principles that are strikingly subtle and intricate. No one has ever claimed that a nonhuman animal has internal language-specific principles that they don't have to be taught. Other species have to be taught explicitly, either directly, or, in the case of Kanzi, indirectly. The principles we're talking about have very little to do with learning the meanings of words and even expressing seemingly-connected series of words. They go well beyond anything that these nonhuman animals show that they are capable of.

Reference:

Stein, Rob 2004, 'Common collie or uberpooch?', Washington Post, Friday, June 11, 2004, p. A1.