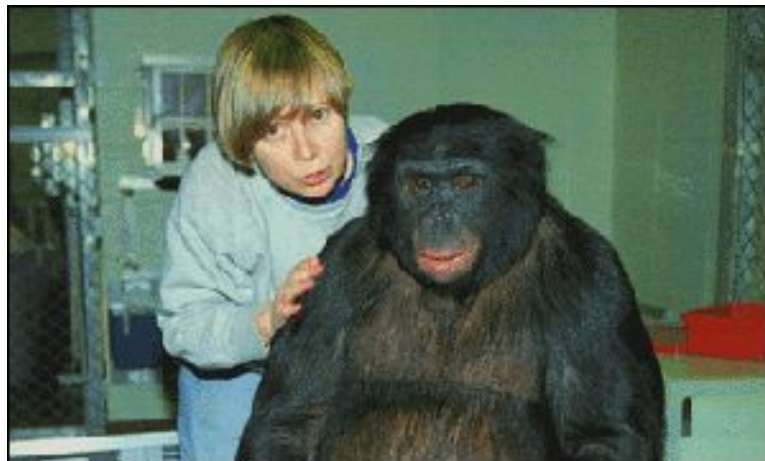




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Wednesday, 1 January, 2003, 22:39 GMT

Ape 'learns to talk'



Kanzi has been taught many words

A chimp who has grown up among humans may have developed the ability to talk, claims a research team from the US.

The findings, published in New Scientist magazine, may come under fire from other scientists.

But they may further challenge the long-held belief that apes have no language ability.

Kanzi, an adult pygmy chimp, is kept at Georgia State University in Atlanta, and, like many other primates, can communicate by pointing at symbols.

However, researchers recently noticed that he was also making gentle noises while he interacted with humans.

By studying many hours of videotape, Dr Jared Tagliatela and Dr Sue Savage-Rumbaugh spotted four distinct sounds that accompanied particular actions, corresponding to "banana", "grapes", "juice" and "yes".

Even in different contexts, the chimp made the

“ We haven't taught him this - he's doing it on his own ”

Dr Jared Tagliatela,
Georgia State
University

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same sound.

Although the researchers conceded that the emotional state of the chimp might be to blame, the sound for "yes" stayed the same, even when Kanzi was in different emotional states.

Emotional state

Dr Taglialatela said: "We haven't taught him this - he's doing it on his own.

"That emotion is involved doesn't rule out that he's following rules that have some sort of cognitive component."

The definition of what actually constitutes "language" is controversial.

Some linguists believe that even symbolic communication - which many chimps achieve - qualifies as language, but many now say that some mastery of syntax is also required.

Primatologist John Mitani of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor said: "Despite the fact that we have had glimmerings of this in the monkey world, few instances of anything like this have been documented among our closest living relatives, chimps and bonobos.

"There have to be evolutionary precursors to what we do. We are beginning to find them in the primate world."

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