

CONTINUITY BETWEEN NON-HUMAN PRIMATES AND MODERN HUMANS?

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The question of continuity vs. discontinuity between the communication systems used by non-human primates and by humans is central to the study of language evolution. In this paper, I argue that there is continuity between these systems but that traces of continuity will not be found by comparing non-human primate vocalizations and articulated human language.

The first part of the paper will present the main characteristics of vocalizations as well as the distinctive features of human language. It will be shown that vocalizations are strongly connected to emotional states and are generally not controlled by the individual as opposed to language in which acoustic signals produced by humans are less controlled by emotions and do not depend solely on the immediate environment.

In the second part of the paper I will show that:

- Contrary to vocalizations, communicative gestures used by primates (Call and Tomasello, 2007) are intentional and not controlled by emotional states
- Some of the acoustic signals produced by humans (cries, laughs, some interjections) are clearly related to emotional states.

Neural control of these two systems will be compared.

In conclusion, continuity between non-human primate communication systems and language is obvious when compared in the following manner:

- Non-human primate vocalizations > "non-linguistic" human vocalizations
- Non-human primate communicative gestures > articulated human language

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