

Jim Hurford

The origins of meaning

Animals don't talk to us, but they, and especially our closest cousins the apes, construct rich and complex cognitive representations of the world around them. Modern psychological research has revealed this richness through experiments and field studies, and shows just how close apes are to the brink of human language. We find the evolutionary seeds of abstract relational thought, of referring to objects, of remembering specific events, and of the kind of propositional thinking that some philosophers have preferred to reserve only for humans. None of these bases for human thought and language, however, are as well developed in apes as they are in modern humans.

Why don't apes communicate the full richness of their thoughts to each other? Why do humans alone have a unique disposition to reveal their thoughts in complex detail? After a consideration of modern biological evolutionary theory, this disposition is attributed to a degree of trust in other group members, partly hormonally based, an ability to read others' minds, and a willingness to cooperate in achieving others' goals with them. Given these, the scene is set for the explosive emergence of complex human language and culture.