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Primate social cognition as a precursor to language.

Are the cognitive mechanisms underlying language unique, or can similar mechanisms be found in other domains? Recent field experiments demonstrate that baboons' knowledge of their companions' social relationships is based on discrete-valued traits (identity, rank, kinship) that are combined to create a representation of social relations that is hierarchically structured, open-ended, rule-governed, and independent of sensory modality. The mechanisms underlying language might have evolved from the social knowledge of our prelinguistic primate ancestors.