

Gestural Origins: Linguistic Features of Great Ape Gestural Communication

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The emergence of language within the human lineage through a single recent genetic leap is extremely implausible. Instead, its precursors were likely present in the communication of our evolutionary ancestors, and are likely shared by our modern great ape cousins. Great ape gestural repertoires are particularly elaborate, with non-human apes employing over 80 different gesture types intentionally: that is towards a recipient and with a specific goal in mind. Intentional usage is a key feature of language and has rarely been described in other species. It allows us to ask not only what information is encoded in ape gestures, but what do apes mean when they use them. By employing a Pan-centric approach, that employs chimpanzee behaviour to define chimpanzee gesture types, we may be better able to describe their communicative capacities. I will review recent research on the gestural communication of great apes, with a particular focus on comparisons between wild Pan populations, and including recent data on human infants. Children aged 1-2 years, on the cusp of acquiring language, were found to employ 52 gesture types. Over 90% of the child gestural repertoire was shared with the repertoires of non-human apes. I will also explore recent evidence that chimpanzee gestures share some of the underlying organisation principles of language, including Zipf's and Menzerath's laws.