

August 6, 2007

EDITORIAL

We Never Really Talk Anymore

Experts on language — the real ones, not those of us who merely use it — are having an intense debate about which species can talk. On one side are those who believe that only humans converse. On another side (this kind of debate can have many sides) are those who say, what about dolphins and whales and certainly the amazing Koko, the gorilla?

Koko has a sign language vocabulary of at least 1,000 words. She can recognize about 2,000 spoken words. And people pay attention. Once when she had a bad tooth, Koko signed the word for pain and pointed to her mouth and a medical team was rushed in immediately. The rest of us mammals can only envy her.

In a new book called “The First Word,” Christine Kenneally catalogs the complex debate over language and includes one particularly revealing experiment in which scientists put two male apes who knew sign language together. One might have expected these guys to start grouching about their keepers, to wonder at beings that are all thumbs and actually seem to enjoy giving away bananas. But, no, they started madly signing at each other, a manual shouting match, and in the end, neither appeared to actually listen to the other.

So, are two creatures actually conversing if they’re both talking and nobody is listening? Where does talking-without-listening put one in the animal brain chain?

Let’s see, talking without listening. Many wives can think of someone who might qualify. Teenagers do, easily. And parents of teenagers. Also, a lot of successful politicians and talk show hosts.

With a hot August and a long political season ahead, we might venture that what really separates human from ape is not the ability to talk in complete sentences. It is our underused capacity to listen.

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