

Seminar 3

Primate language evolution

César Ades

IEA - USP

“Surely one of the deepest and most important questions ... is how human cognition is similar to and different from that of other primates” (Tomasello & Herrmann, 2010). Linguistic capacity is commonly assumed to represent an evolutionary turning point and the very basis of the cultural achievements which set us apart from non-human animals.

I here intend to show the relevance of studies of animal communication and the importance of a comparative approach for the understanding of language and of its evolution. Uniqueness or speech-is-special hypotheses are not incompatible with the search for analogous or convergent features. I shall review the basic facts about primate vocal communication, starting with what can be called emotional or motivational communication (species-characteristic signals produced to regulate social interaction of individual and group behavior in foraging, courtship, aggression, dominance and affiliation episodes).

I shall then deal with the referential aspects of primate communication, reporting and discussing results from Cheney and Seyfarth’s classical research with vervet monkeys and their alarm calls to different predators, up to Arnold and Zuberbühler work on “meaningful call combinations” in putty-nosed monkeys. Combinatorial structuring of call elements and the possibility that there is some sort of syntax in non-human primate communication is a topic which has been intensely examined since Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch’s paper in *Science* (2002) and their hypothesis that recursive computation is uniquely human. Results which bear on this issue (including some of them from our own research on muriqui’s long-range vocalizations) will be presented.

A discussion about the relationship between communication, experience and culture will be the closing topic of the seminar.