

ORANGUTAN PANTOMIME: ELABORATING ON THE MESSAGE

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Communication is usually defined as information exchange between signaler and recipient. This definition leaves out the background expectations that make information exchange possible and enable behavioral coordination with little or no intentional information exchange. Such behavior coordination occurs in familiar shared contexts, where the actions needed to show partners' intentions, attitudes, or wishes can be minimal. Such communication does not require intentional encoding and decoding of content, theory of mind, or understanding others' intentions. We expect that much communication within great ape communities takes this form. However, when background expectations break down and communication fails, intentional communication is called for and a signaler may deliberately send information that elaborates on the failed communication. Captive great apes do this, using iconic gestures. We hypothesize that they also use pantomime, a form of iconic gesture that involves transmitting information by acting it out. We identified ca 50 cases that suggest pantomime from 22 years of observational data on rehabilitant orangutans in four forests in Indonesian Borneo. Included were cases of pantomime used to elaborate on failed communication. Orangutan pantomime is rare, as would be predicted of communication designed against a background of shared expectations. When it occurs, however, it shows precise semantic meaning, on the spot creation of new gestures to suit the current situation, and rich understanding of what others do and do not know. We discuss the implications of pantomime for creating open communicative repertoires and the evolution of language.

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