

## ■ **Communication and Language** *Telepathic Communication Systems between People and Animals*

Many people have noticed that their companion animals seem to “read their minds.” This perceptiveness may well depend on a combination of influences, such as the observation of body language, hearing particular words, and learning the owners’ routines. In addition, the animals may be able to pick up intentions directly by a kind of telepathy. But surprisingly little research has been done on this subject—biologists have been inhibited by the taboo against “the paranormal,” and psychical researchers and parapsychologists have, with few exceptions, confined their attention to human beings (exceptions include Duval & Montredon in 1968, and Schmidt in 1970). On the other hand, committed skeptics believe that any mysterious connections currently unknown to science are impossible, or too unlikely to merit serious attention (Marks, 2000).

Recent random household surveys in England and the United States have shown that many pet owners believe that their animals are sometimes telepathic with them. An average of 48 percent of dog owners and 33 percent of cat owners said that their pets responded to their thoughts or silent commands (Sheldrake, Lawlor, & Turney, 1998).

Many people experienced with animals take telepathy for granted, and there is a wealth of anecdotal experience that points to the reality of telepathic influences. Much of the evidence for animal telepathy is anecdotal, in the sense that it consists of unpublished stories; I have built up a large database of such accounts, with over 1,500 case histories, and they provide the outlines of a natural history of what people believe about the telepathic abilities of their companion animals.

The most common kinds of seemingly telepathic response are: the anticipation of owners coming home; the anticipation of owners going away; the anticipation of being fed; cats knowing when their owners intend to take them to the vet and disappearing; dogs knowing when their owners are planning to take them for a walk; and animals getting excited when their owner is on the telephone, even before the telephone has been answered, while the dogs ignore incoming calls from other people. Many horse trainers and riders believe that their horses can pick up their intentions telepathically. Some companion animals seem to know when a particular person is on the telephone. Some react when their owner is in distress in a distant place—or dying (Sheldrake, 1999a).

### Cats That Disappear before Visits to the Vet

Some cats strongly dislike going to the vet. Dozens of cat owners have told me that their cats simply vanish when they are due to be taken for their appointments. Experienced owners of such cats try to avoid giving away any clues, but their efforts are often in vain. This is inconvenient, not only for the owners, but also for the vets. Some advise people to keep their cats shut up indoors before the appointment, especially when injections or operations are involved. But some cats still escape.

How common is this kind of behavior? My assistants and I carried out a survey of the veterinary clinics listed in the North London Yellow Pages telephone directory. We interviewed the vets themselves, or their nurses or receptionists, asking whether they found that some cat owners canceled appointments because the cat had disappeared. Sixty-four out of sixty-five clinics said that they had cancellations of this kind quite frequently; the remaining clinic had given up an appointment system for cats—people simply had to turn up with their cats, and thus the problem of missed appointments had been resolved (Sheldrake, 1999a).

Although there was general agreement that some cats do, indeed, pick up their owners' intentions, there were a variety of opinions as to how they might do it. It is usually hard, if not impossible, to disentangle the ways in which animals pick up their owner's intentions when they are nearby. But what if a person decides to take the cat to the vet in the cat's absence? For example, if a person rings the vet from her place of work to make an appointment for that same evening, will the cat have disappeared when she goes home to collect it? Several reports on my database claim that this is the case, but there have been no experimental studies of this phenomenon to date.

### Animals Who Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home

Many pet owners have also observed that their animals seem to anticipate the arrival of a member of the household, sometimes ten minutes or more in advance. The pets typically show their anticipation by going to wait at a door or window. In random household surveys

in Britain and the United States, 51 percent of dog owners said they had noticed such anticipatory behavior, and 30 percent of cat owners said the same (Sheldrake 1999a). Some parrot and parakeet owners have also observed that their birds become excited before a member of the family returns.

As skeptics rightly point out, some of these responses could be explained in terms of routine expectations, subtle sensory cues, chance coincidence, and selective memory—or put down to the imaginations of pet owners.

The only way to obtain rigorous evidence is to make detailed and systematic observations in situations in which the owners are miles away from the homes, when they come back at nonroutine times, and when no one at home knows when to expect them. In tests that my colleagues and I have carried out, the owner went at least five miles away from home, so there could be no question that the dog was reacting to direct sensory clues from the person. While the owner was away from home, the place where the dog usually waited for its owner was continuously filmed on time-coded videotape for the duration of the test. The person then returned at a randomly selected time, unknown to the people at home, and traveling in an unfamiliar vehicle. Over 100 trials with a dog called Jaytee, belonging to Pam Smart of Ramsbottom, Lancashire, England, have shown that the dog did indeed anticipate her return by fifteen minutes or more, even when she was returning at randomly selected times in a taxi from over five miles away and no one at home knew when to expect her. The dog usually reacted before she actually began her journey and seemed to be responding to her *intention* to return. However, Jaytee sometimes failed to anticipate Pam's return, especially when he was sick or distracted by a bitch in heat in a nearby flat. Nevertheless, taking all the results together, this effect was highly significant statistically, with odds against it being a chance effect of more than 100,000 to one. Jaytee showed the same anticipatory behavior even when tested by skeptics (Sheldrake and Smart, 2000a), although the skeptics themselves (Wiseman, Smith, & Milton, 1998) claimed that the dog had failed their tests. However, they were able to make this claim only by ignoring most of their own data (Sheldrake, 1999b, 2000; see also the reply of Wiseman, Smith, & Milton, 2000).

Although Jaytee is the dog that has been investigated most, we have obtained very similar results in videotaped tests with several other dogs (Sheldrake and Smart, 2000b).

### Other Kinds of Telepathic Communication between People and Pets

Other kinds of animal telepathy can also be investigated experimentally; for example, the apparent ability of dogs to know when they are going to be taken for walks. In these experiments, the dog is kept in a separate room or outbuilding and videotaped continuously while its owner, at a randomly selected time, thinks about taking it for a walk, and then, five minutes later, does so. Preliminary experiments have shown dogs exhibiting obvious excitement when their owner is thinking about taking them out, although they could not have known this by normal sensory means. They did not manifest such excitement at other times (Sheldrake, 1999a).

Of all the seemingly telepathic phenomena described by cat owners, the ability to summon a cat mentally is one of the most common. Some people say that they have only to think about their cat, and, within a minute or two, it appears at the door. It would be possible to investigate these claims experimentally by filming the doorway continuously, and asking the cat owner to silently call the cat at randomly chosen times.

In my database, there are dozens of reports of animals that responded to the telephone when a particular person was ringing, before the receiver was even picked up.

Most of these reports concern cats, but some involve dogs, and there are also a few with parrots. In all cases, the person calling was someone to whom the animal was very attached. Typically, the animal showed obvious signs of excitement when the phone was ringing (Sheldrake, 1999a). This occurred only with calls from that particular person and not with calls from strangers. Most of the cats said to respond to telephone calls from particular people reacted when the telephone began to ring, but some did so even before the ringing began.

As far as I know, there have been no experimental investigations of animal telepathy in connection with telephone calls. However, experimental research on the human ability to detect who is about to ring shows that some people do, indeed, seem to detect the identity of the caller telepathically, but only when the caller is a familiar person (Sheldrake, 2003; Sheldrake and Smart, 2003).

### *Experiments with a Language-Using Parrot*

The fact that some parrots can use language meaningfully has been established beyond reasonable doubt by Pepperberg (1999). Her pioneering work inspired Aimee Morgana to train her African Grey, N’Kisi (pronounced “in-KEE-see”), in the contextual use of language, starting when he was five months old. She used two teaching techniques known as “sentence frames” and “cognitive mapping.” In sentence frames, words were taught by repeating them in various sentences such as, “Want some water? Look, I have some water.” Cognitive mapping reinforced meanings that might not yet be fully understood. For example, if N’Kisi said “water,” Aimee would show him a glass of water. By the time he was eight years old, he had a contextual vocabulary of more than 1,200 words. He apparently understood the meanings of words and used his language skills to make relevant comments. He ordinarily spoke in grammatical sentences, and by January 2002, Morgana had recorded more than 7,000 original sentences. Although Morgana’s primary focus was on the meaningful use of language, she noticed that N’Kisi often seemed to say things that referred to her thoughts and intentions.

In 2000, Morgana began keeping a detailed log of seemingly telepathic incidents, and has continued to do so. By January 2002, she had recorded 630 such incidents. Here are two examples:

“I was thinking of calling Rob, and picked up the phone to do so, and N’Kisi said, ‘Hi, Rob,’ as I had the phone in my hand and was moving toward the Rolodex to look up his number.”

“We were watching the end credits of a Jackie Chan movie, edited to a musical soundtrack. There was an image of [Chan] lying on his back on a girder way up on a tall skyscraper. It was scary due to the height, and N’Kisi said, ‘Don’t fall down.’ Then the movie cut to a commercial with a musical soundtrack, and as an image of a car appeared, N’Kisi said, “There’s my car.” (N’Kisi’s cage was at the other end of the room, behind the TV. He could not see the screen, and there were no sources of reflection.)

Of all the various incidents, perhaps the most remarkable occurred when N’Kisi interrupted Aimée’s dreams. (He usually slept by her bed.) For example: “I was dreaming that I was working with the audiotape deck. N’Kisi, sleeping by my head, said out loud, ‘You gotta push the button,’ as I was doing exactly that in my dream. His speech woke me up.” On another occasion, “I was on the couch napping, and I dreamed I was in the bathroom holding a brown-dropper medicine bottle. N’Kisi woke me up by saying, ‘See, that’s a bottle.’”

Clearly it was important to try to test this apparent telepathic communication in controlled experiments. We developed a procedure that could work fairly naturally in

N’Kisi’s familiar environment. Morgana had noticed that N’Kisi seemed to respond to moments of discovery, as if he “surfed the leading edge” of her consciousness. Therefore, methods of testing for telepathy that used repetitive images, such as playing cards or Zener cards, were not likely to work. In order to preserve an element of surprise, we designed an experiment in which Morgana was filmed as she opened sealed envelopes one at a time, each containing a different photograph. Meanwhile, N’Kisi was alone in a different room, unable to see or hear Morgana, and was filmed continuously to record his behavior and speech. A third person, not otherwise involved in the test, selected these photographs on the basis of a list of keywords that were part of N’Kisi’s vocabulary, sealed them in opaque envelopes and randomized them.

The tapes of N’Kisi’s comments were transcribed blind by three independent people. The transcripts, which were in good agreement with each other, were then compared with the images Aimée was looking at in the synchronized videotapes. In many cases, N’Kisi’s comments corresponded to the images Morgana was seeing. For example, when she was looking at a picture of flowers, he said, “That’s a pic of flowers.” When she was looking at picture of someone talking on a mobile phone, he said, “Whatcha doin’ on the phone?” and made a series of noises like a phone being dialed.

We considered it a “hit” when N’Kisi said a predefined keyword that corresponded to an image representing that keyword. There were twenty-three hits out of seventy-one trials. The analysis of the results by randomized permutation analysis showed that hits were far more frequent than would have been expected by chance ( $p < 0.0002$ ) (Sheldrake & Morgana, 2003)

## Telepathy from Animals to People

If telepathy can take place from people to animals, it would be surprising if it did not occur in the opposite direction. In my database, there are more than 1,500 accounts of seemingly telepathic or psychic influences of owners on their pets, and seventy-three cases where the influence seems to flow the other way. People seem much less sensitive to these influences than their animals—or pay little attention to them. But seventy-three is still a large number of cases, and, presumably, many people who have not written to me have had similar experiences.

Out of these seventy-three cases, ten concern deaths or accidents in distant places. Most of the sixty-three other cases involve calls for help, with the majority from cats. The most common situation in which this occurs is when the cat is outdoors and wants to be let in. Some cat owners say they not only know when a cat wants to come in, but also which of several cats is silently calling them (Sheldrake, 1999).

Cats that roam freely have a tendency to get lost, sometimes because neighbors unintentionally shut them into sheds or garages. Some cat owners have found that they can somehow know where the lost cat is. Some stories about the rescue of lost cats are quite dramatic and seem to show that the cat in some way draws the owner toward it (Sheldrake, 1999).

The picking up of distress signals from animals is not confined to dogs and cats, but also seems to happen with cows, sheep, and horses (Sheldrake, 1999).

## Animal Communicators

In addition to these communications between domesticated animals and their owners, there is a long tradition of communication with animals by shamans in tribal societies. In fiction, stories such as those of Dr. Doolittle have a deep appeal to our imaginations.

Some people make a living as “animal communicators” and claim to pick up telepathically what people’s pets are thinking and feeling. Some give counseling and advice for a fee, either in person or over the telephone. However, some of these so-called animal communications may well be a projection of the communicator’s own thoughts, rather than genuine cases of telepathy. Animal communicators themselves are well aware of the problems. Penelope Smith of Point Reyes, California, who has trained hundreds of people in “inter-species telepathic communication” in her workshops, has seen people “mixing their communication abilities with their own agendas or emotional short-comings” (Smith, 1989).

Professional animal communicators are often ready to venture information about animals’ feelings, and some may play a valuable role in counseling the animals’ owners, but they are often reluctant to provide information that can be more immediately verified. For me, the most interesting of these apparent communications are those that can be tested empirically, and the most impressive ability is the finding of lost pets. Arthur Myers (1997) interviewed many communicators to see how successful they had been at finding lost animals telepathically. Most told him that they try to avoid such jobs, but he did find a few cases where communicators had apparently been able to locate lost animals.

There is much potential for further research on animal telepathy, and if domestic animals are telepathic with their human owners, it seems very likely that animals are telepathic with each other in the wild. Field observations by the naturalist William Long (1919) suggest that the coordination of flocks of birds and herds of animals may involve telepathy, as may communication between members of a pack of wolves, but here again there is much scope for further research.

Research into animal telepathy should enable human telepathy to be seen in an evolutionary light. The investigation of animal telepathy would also build bridges between parapsychology and biology, to their mutual benefit.

Telepathy from people to animals usually occurs only when there are close emotional bonds; this may well be an important factor in human telepathy, too. My own hypothesis is that these bonds depend on fields that link together members of a social group, called “social fields” (Sheldrake, 1999b, 2003). These are one type of a more general class of fields, called “morphic fields” (Sheldrake, 1988). These bonds continue to link members of the social group together, even when they are far apart, beyond the range of sensory communication, and can serve as a medium through which telepathic communications can pass.

### See also

Communication and Language—*Interspecies Communications*  
Communication and Language—*N’Kisi The Parrot: A Personal Essay*

### Further Resources

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