

Monkeys have a regional accent

METHODS used by monkeys to communicate are being studied to solve the puzzle of how human language evolved.

French-born ethologist Alban Lemasson, who is at the heart of the research, is a specialist in decoding animal languages.

Animals do not have formalised languages like humans, he said, but monkeys can encode a complicated set of messages about their individual identity, sexual/breeding status, age, social affinity, position in the hierarchy, motivations and emotions, and about their environment.

Mr Lemasson spent most of his childhood in Cameroon and Ivory Coast, surrounded by wild animals.

He returned to France in 1993 to complete his education and got a job at Rennes University, researching communication among the institution's colony of Campbell's monkeys.

He went on to work with colonies in the wild in Africa, Japan and Mexico. He said: "It's really interesting to

compare the behaviour of different colonies in different locations, with different habitats and lifestyles, to discover what is universal," he said.

"If humans didn't always speak, how did they communicate? We can't tell from fossils whether or not they spoke, so we construct hypotheses about the evolution of human languages by studying animals. Monkeys don't use

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Alban Lemasson

formalised languages but they communicate by encoding messages as combinations of sounds and learn social rules of communication.

"They respect conversational structures and, from my research, I am convinced that some elements of language exist in monkeys."

Humans have a huge vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, he explained, which monkeys simply do not have.

"They cannot communicate about the past or the future but they do learn communication skills from each other.

"If a monkey is introduced to a foreign colony, it can alter its vowel sounds in order to integrate better.

"So yes, monkeys have regional dialects and their communication adapts to new situations.

"There are more than 260 species of monkeys and each has its own vocal repertoire but if they live together, they learn to decode and use each other's 'language.'"



Alban Lemasson learns how to communicate with a monkey in Kenya