

Mimicry or Language?

*“Nothing that does not talk
Will enter this house”
Gabriel Garcia Marquez*

We are all familiar with the amazing ability of birds to mimic various sounds, including the human voice. Our fascination with this ability remains one of the most common catalysts for the decision to keep a bird as a pet. Traditionally it was believed that while birds could become superb imitators, they were doing just that, copying sounds without understanding their meanings.

Several different types of birds are known for their talking abilities. The African Grey, with its deep, serious voice is arguably the supreme talking bird. Amazons may also develop an enormous vocabulary and speak in a sweeter, more comical voice. Eclectus, Lories, Macaws, Cockatoos and even the humble Budgerigar are also prized for their vocal talents. In this second group, however, some individuals will excel and others learn very little human speech. Hen budgerigars, cockatiels and cockatoos are known to speak less than their male counterparts.

Mynah birds, Crows, Ravens etc will also talk well and are often less shy about using their voices in front of strangers than the sometimes temperamental parrots.

There is an enormous variation in talking ability even between birds of the same species. Some baby parrots will say their first word before weaning and some will only learn a few whistles throughout their whole lives.

Although many bird owners will swear that their pets know exactly what they mean when they verbalise, until fairly recently no scientific research had been performed to test this theory. It is very easy for a lay person to believe that the bird is communicating effectively while, in fact the bird is simply following clues in body language or repeating a learned sequence of sounds, as in (Owner removing cage cover) “Good Morning Pumpkin” (Owner placing food bowl in cage) “Mmm Yummy Food”.

Dr Irene Pepperberg, an American researcher into the evolution of thought has spent about twenty years working with African Grey parrots and teaching them to actually speak with intent and understanding. Alex, Dr Pepperberg’s first subject was a very ordinary bird, bought from a pet shop and can use over 600 words, can distinguish between different shapes, colours and textures and even make up his own descriptive words to name new objects.

As closely as can be approximated, intelligent parrots seem to have similar emotional development to that of a human toddler (which explains the occasional tantrums and sulking fits!)

Dr Pepperberg’s research has shown that birds learn much more readily by observing interaction and talking between others members of the flock (in this case, the human researchers).

Tapes and videos proved useless as teaching materials with the birds learning only the sounds made by the researchers as they set up the recordings.

Many owners are saddened by their birds fondness for mimicking only the voice of their spouse. Greys especially are fond of mimicking the voice of the least favourite owner (perceived to be a rival in their affections), in order to attract the attention of their favourite human.

I must say in conclusion: as a veterinarian who often admits avian patients to our hospital, one can gain a fascinating (and sometimes embarrassing) insight into the home life of a client by the things said by their birds in while in our care. So just remember that old saying: “Live as though you could sell the family parrot”.