

Doma Doma Doma Blum Blum Blum: Conversations with Other Animals. Luke Thompson. Ortac Press, 2024, pp. 254.

Comments on an uneven, wide-ranging book on 'conversations with other animals'.

This book is an addition to the now extensive literature on the quasi-linguistic communication systems of non-human animals. Much of this material is produced by non-linguists and thus offers a range of novel and indeed often fanciful perspectives on the topic. (Some linguistically qualified authors have also discussed these matters, including me in the now slightly dated summary in Chapter 8 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, qv.) Thompson covers a great deal of ground in an eclectic and often structurally casual manner; it is not possible to discuss all of his points in a brief review. After the Introduction the book contains 8 chapters plus short excursions.

Thompson is described as a writer and publisher from Cornwall, UK. He has written books and other works on a range of topics but does not claim any professional expertise in linguistics or in the other technical domains which are relevant here.

The title of this present book refers specifically to **conversations**, which suggests a narrower focus than is usual in discussions of animal communication. This is partly fulfilled, but mainly in the context of fantasy fiction – which is arguably less relevant to a skeptical linguist than are quasi-factual claims; see below on Dr Dolittle. Where non-fictional claims are in question, there is rather little discussion of reports of actual conversations (as has been noted in brief review comments).

Interestingly, Thomson refers in his title to 'other animals', which presumably indicates that, unlike some thinkers, he regards human beings as animals.

I myself first became of this book through the review in *Fortean Times* 452 (December 2024) (p. 56). The reviewer, Matt Salisbury, was not hostile but noted that the author appeared more interested in (summarily) reporting a wide range of claims and supposed facts than in assessing them. He also referred warily to Thompson's interest in John Lilly's work with dolphins, which skeptics regard as increasingly dubious in character and indeed as fanciful in places, but which Thompson (though not altogether uncritical) takes more seriously. On these fronts I agree with Salisbury. His review piqued my skeptical interest.

Other reviews of the book on the web are by non-linguists and are generally positive. Some of them evince a largely emotional response to this matter; reviewers are engaged by the romantic, partly ecologically-inspired allure of the possibility of 'deeper' communication with animals than has hitherto been acknowledged in the scholarly world, involving the greater-than-recognised sophistication of animal communication systems. This has been a factor in earlier discussion of communication with whales and dolphins in particular (for comment see *Strange Linguistics*), and Thompson's own treatment certainly encourages this response on a broader front, including his introductory discussion of communications with cephalopods (currently 'flavour of the month' in some circles). His extensive analysis of Hugh Lofting's fantasy fiction featuring Dr Dolittle, clearly a personal favourite for him, also commences early in the book (accompanied by the first of his repeated references to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's important but insufficiently expanded aphoristic comment that if a lion could speak we would not understand it – upon which Thompson himself does enlarge a little at later stages). This is not to say that the Dr Dolittle books, movies etc. are not of any interest here. But some scenarios which arise in such fantasy works (e.g. the sudden, quasi-magical acquisition of the ability to understand the languages of **all** animals) may be altogether infeasible in the real world and thus, as noted, of limited relevance in non-literary contexts.

By way of theoretical background, it must be observed that the notion of 'language' is more specific than that of 'communication' – a point which escapes many linguistically-untrained commentators. The mainstream consensus is that only *Homo sapiens* of all known animals **certainly** uses language as

strictly defined, or indeed any system of comparable complexity and flexibility. The two most salient distinguishing features of human language are i) ‘double articulation’ (it is structured into a) words or morphemes and b) sounds or phonemes; this enables a given language to manifest rich grammatical systems and a vocabulary of indefinitely large size despite having a modest number of phonemes, and in consequence to permit a potentially infinite number of sentences etc.) and ii) grammar and especially syntax.

Claims in the popular press and in popular books regarding animal communication are often rendered more dramatic in *prima facie* appearance by the use in titles etc. of the term *language*. However, in many such cases the term *language* is in fact clearly being used in a looser sense, to refer to systems with much less complexity and flexibility and without double articulation or grammar; the idea is merely that more has been learned about the non-linguistic communication system of some species. On the other hand, where the reference to language in such a report **does** involve the strict sense of the term, the claims are very serious and dramatic indeed and require close examination.

Naturally, creatures with physiologies (and psychologies) very unlike those of human beings might manifest physically **different** but equally complex/flexible ‘linguistic’ forms. Isaac Asimov’s editor John Campbell induced him to write his fine science-fiction novel *The Gods Themselves* by challenging him to invent a species which thinks as well as a human but not **like** a human. The same could be said for putative non-human **communication** systems such as those of cetaceans or cephalopods - **if** it really appears that they meet the criteria for language status (as in i) and ii) above).

Human signed languages, indeed, also differ from spoken/written languages in some such respects. Phonetic forms, two-dimensional linearity (as in speech or writing), etc. are not *sine qua non* for systems qualifying as languages. But intra-species systems of these kinds can be readily investigated. Where still more major differences exist, and where it is difficult to obtain confirmation of analyses (from members of other species), researchers may struggle to convince themselves or others that the systems they are studying (for example those of cetaceans or of Pepperberg’s parrots, on which see below) are indeed language-like in the key respects, and may find it even more difficult actually to analyse and comprehend details of structure and ‘vocabulary’.

It is possible that some animals have not actually developed systems qualifying as languages but can be taught to use human languages. Thompson has less to say about this aspect of the matter than might be expected given his interest in **conversations** with animals. But he does have something to say – albeit, inevitably, by way of speculation – about figures such as St Francis whose human speech could supposedly be **understood**, at least, by wolves, birds, etc.

Strikingly, some authors sidestep the entire question of the details of linguistic form & meaning by adducing **telepathic** communication between humans and other animals. Mary Getten’s claims about the beliefs of orcas, allegedly learned through telepathy, are rehearsed by Thompson in Chapter 6. Getten’s telepathy is said to be ‘rooted in language’, but this seems to involve only how the orca messages manifest themselves in her mind (in the forms of her own English). Unlike Lilly, who came to believe that dolphins had their own (predictably quite different languages) but were talking with him in English, Getten suggests that ‘we all already speak the same language’, communicating between species through telepathy. The idea that there is (at root?) only one language has been advanced by earlier thinkers as diverse as Josephus (talking of the Garden of Eden) and the C20 science-fiction author W.A. Harbinson; but (even if Universal Grammar exists, as Chomskyan linguists hold) this position seems to understate the profound, often initially obscure differences that can obtain even among unrelated human languages, where translation can at times be so fraught and complex as to be intensely frustrating or worse. And from a skeptical point of view it must be said that there is no compelling evidence that telepathy, specifically, **ever** occurs, even between members of the same species. Furthermore, the **truth**-values of purported animal beliefs which are (allegedly) communicated in this way are untestable, except where they are simply clearly false, e.g., the reported orca view that the species once lived ‘in the stars’.

Chapter 6 of Thompson's book also deals with such 'animal whisperers' on a broader front. Someone whose work surely ought to be foregrounded here is the unusual but serious scholar Temple Grandin, known for her theories and her often effective practices involving communication with non-human primates, cows, horses, cetaceans, birds, etc.; she holds that many such animals, like some autistic humans (including herself), think and communicate pictorially rather than linguistically.

Others discussed in the book who have reported intense communication with animals include the 'psychic' William Lyons Mackenzie King (Chapters 5 and 8) and, in a very different vein, the impressive scholarly researcher Irene Pepperberg, who worked with African grey parrots (notably 'Alex') and became persuaded that members of this species possess the capacity for syntax and other key aspects of language. Pepperberg, in fact, holds that linguists and other scholars skeptical of her claims have now re-defined the notion of 'language' in such ways as to allow themselves to continue to deny that her parrots are behaving linguistically. Thompson apparently agrees with Pepperberg here, and the matter certainly warrants further examination.

Thompson for his part accepts not only telepathy (see above) but other 'fringe' ideas, which reduces one's confidence in his thought. For instance, he affirms more than once his belief that Ouija boards 'work', while not being especially confident as to how the resulting material might be interpreted. He also discusses alien abduction, the Aetherius Society, etc, raising in these contexts the question of extraterrestrial languages, which – while not entirely irrelevant to animal communication – is arguably a topic-area for a separate book. And he also refers to 'angelic' communications, notably John Dee's channelled 'Enochian' language; but his main source on Enochian, Donald Tyson, has published chiefly on the occult and here adopts an 'esoteric' approach to the matter rather than an empirical one as employed in the main linguistic work on the subject by Laycock.¹ And in Chapter 8 Thompson discourses upon the C19 work of Friederike Hauffe and Justinus Kerner on 'spirit languages'. Almost inevitably, there is also reference to the famous case of Gef, the supposed talking ghost-mongoose on the Isle of Man. Etc., etc. Apart from the story of Gef, who at least had once (allegedly) been a living animal, these matters too are relevant to the main theme of the book only methodologically or by way of analogy. For one thing, non-human animals certainly exist and communicate in ways which might or might not count as 'language'; in contrast, the very existence of angels, spirits, ghosts, extraterrestrial aliens encountered by humans, etc. is controversial.

Readers of this book will need to work through its arguably undisciplined structure, and many may find frustrating the relative lack of argumentation and hard evidence. But it is not without value or interest in the context of human-animal communication.

REFERENCE

1 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Enochian-Magic-Beginners-Original-Llewellyns/dp/1567187471>