N'kisi (pet telepathy)

A successful telepathy experiment was carried out by Rupert Sheldrake and Aimée Morgana, a New York artist, with an African Grey parrot which she had taught to speak a large number of words.

Background

Aimée Morgana is an artist and researcher specializing in interspecies communication. In 1997 she began training N'kisi, a young African Grey parrot, to use language meaningfully, having seen examples of this being done by Irene Pepperberg and others. Her approach was to teach N'kisi 'as one would a child, by explaining things to him in context' and let him use language creatively.[1] By the age of five she said the parrot had a vocabulary of some 700 words and that she had recorded some 7,000 sentences spoken by him.[2]

Morgana began to notice that the bird sometimes said words that related to her thoughts, and this apparently telepathic faculty was observed independently by her husband. She contacted Rupert Sheldrake after reading about his psi research with animals, notably the dog Jaytee, and in 2000 began keeping a record of utterances by N'kisi that appeared to be telepathic. By January 2002 she had collected 630 instances, such as:

> I was thinking of calling Rob, and picked up the phone to do so, and N'kisi said, 'Hi, Rob'.

> We were watching the end credits of a Jackie Chan movie … 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 … and as an image of a car appeared, N'kisi said, 'There's my car' … He could not see the screen and there were no sources of reflection.

> I read the phrase 'The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice'. N'kisi said 'That's called black' at the same instant.

> I was looking at a deck of cards with individual pictures, and stopped at an image of a purple car. I was thinking it was an amazing shade of purple. Upstairs he said at that instant, 'Oh wow, look at the pretty purple'.[3]

N'kisi sometimes seemed to be telepathically aware of Morgana's dreams.

> I was dreaming that I was working with the audio tape 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.'[4]

Experiment

The experiment carried out by Sheldrake and Morgana is reported in a published in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* in 2003.

Morgana was able to demonstrate the parrot's ability to Sheldrake during his first visit: the bird accurately identified the image on a picture card that she was holding out of his sight. Noting from her records that N'kisi responded best to new sights or thoughts, Sheldrake designed an experiment using images that he had not previously seen. Thirty keywords were selected, which were both part of N'kisi's vocabulary and could be represented by visual images, for instance, 'phone', 'flower' and 'bottle'. A person otherwise unconnected with the experiment selected 167 stock photos using twenty of the keywords, then sealed each one in an opaque envelope, shuffled them thoroughly and numbered them.

For the experiment, Morgana entered a room in her apartment that was separated by about 55 feet and a flight of stairs from the room where N'kisi was in his cage. Cameras were placed in both rooms, recording video and audio in a synchronized manner. The parrot was unable to see or hear Morgana. However, she could hear him through a baby monitor, providing her with feedback in order to encourage an appropriate mindset.

Morgana opened an envelope, drew out the picture card and concentrated on the image for two minutes, going on to the next on a signal from a timer. Recording was continuous for thirty eight-to-ten-minute sessions, using 131 pictures and nineteen keywords ('camera' was eliminated so that N'kisi's frequent comments on the presence of a camera in the room would not confound the results). Three separate transcriptions of N'kisi's utterances, made independently by three people who knew nothing about the images, were found to be in good agreement with each other.

Seventy-one trials were included in the data analysis, those in which N'kisi uttered one or more of the keywords and which Sheldrake considered could properly be regarded as a hit or miss. Sixty trials were excluded in which he said nothing or uttered words that were not on the keyword list, or which were marred by mishaps such as an unclear picture or an interrupting phone call.

In the 71 trials, N'kisi uttered a total of 117 keywords. Of these, 23 were hits, not counting words frequently repeated. Statistical significance, calculated by an independent specialist, was found to be $p = 0.00025$. This did not include repetitions of keywords, which N'kisi was more likely to make when they were hits than when they were misses. Sheldrake's conclusion was that N'kisi scored 'very significantly' better than chance.

Sheldrake argued that the number of hits might have been underestimated: on some occasions the parrot used words or phrases that did not involve the prespecified keywords but that nevertheless indicated knowledge of the target picture. In one such instance, Morgana was looking at a photograph of a stationary car whose driver had his head out of the window: instead of using the word 'car', which would have counted as a hit, he said, 'Uh-oh, careful, you put your head out.'

Criticism and Controversy

The N'kisi experiment generated wide international media interest, including coverage by the BBC and *USA Today*. This brought it to the critical attention of sceptics.

National Geographic

A 2005 documentary broadcast by *National Geographic Channel UK* claimed to invalidate the experiment. It featured a similar test of telepathy carried out by Tony Youens, a British sceptic, with a talking African Grey named Spaulding, in which the parrot scored at chance. Youens went on to critique Sheldrake's experiment, pointing out that Sheldrake had omitted from statistical analysis trials in which the parrot gave no response or which involved words it had never previously been heard to use. This, Youens argued, increased the proportion of hits and effectively 'stacked the deck'.[5]

In a detailed response to the programme, Sheldrake pointed out that the failure of the test with Spaulding was predictable, since this particular parrot had never been shown to make any kind of telepathic response in the first place.[6] With regard to the omission of certain data, he stated that it was normal practice in experiments that involved animals, young children or autistic people to omit trials in which the subject made no response, because of their limited attention spans and inability to understand the testing situation. One of the peer reviewers of his original paper had made the same complaint but withdrew it when he found that adding the data for these trials, supplied by Sheldrake at his request, made little different to the statistical result.[7]

Similarly, Sheldrake pointed out that in the paper he had explicitly shown that it made 'practically no difference' to the overall results when eighteen trials involving rarely heard words were excluded, and that Youens's claim to the contrary was 'deceitful'.

> Our results were highly significant statistically whatever method of analysis we used. The points Youens raised were all fully addressed in our paper. National Geographic knew this and they deliberately misled viewers in a way that gave a damaging and false impression of our work.[8]

Sheldrake lodged a complaint with the British regulator of broadcast content, the Office of Communications (Ofcom). Ofcom partially upheld it, affirming the right of the programme to express a contrary view while considering its failure to give Sheldrake the right of reply to have been unfair. A summary of Ofcom's decision can be read here, and the full text here (page 36).

Robert T Carroll

In an entry on N'kisi in his *Skeptic's Dictionary*, Robert T Carroll ridicules the notion of language-using parrots, which he considers likely to be based on 'self-deception, delusion, and gullibility'.[9] He maintains that the parrot's words are 'gibberish until you are told what to look for' and can only be made out if the listener has seen a transcript. Sheldrake responded that this is refuted by the fact, recorded in his paper, that three separate transcripts of the parrot's utterances during the

experiment hade been made by three people working independently, with no knowledge of the images involved in the experiment, and that these were in close agreement with each other.[10]

Carroll suggested that Sheldrake and Morgana should have carried out a control activity, taping the parrot for two-minute periods outside the context of the experiment and comparing these to the clips used for analysis.[11] Sheldrake responded that such a method would have been justly questioned by 'more scientifically minded sceptics than Carroll'. He further drew attention to the application in his experiment of the well-established 'Monte Carlo' simulation, in which the parrot's utterances were randomly assigned to the photo cards in a total of some 20,000 random permutations. This 'showed that N'kisi said words corresponding to pictures that Aimee was looking at very significantly more than could be explained by chance (p = 0.0003).'[12]

Lewis Wolpert

To support his claims of telepathy, Sheldrake showed video clips from the N'kisi experiment during a public debate in which he clashed with Lewis Wolpert, a biology professor and vocal sceptic of psychic phenomena. Sheldrake noted that Wolpert turned away from the screen as the video was playing, refusing to watch it, as he had also done earlier when asked to comment on the footage for a documentary (to the surprise of the filmmakers). Audio and transcript of the debate may be found here.

Video

Video of Sheldrake presenting select side-by-side simultaneous videos of Morgana viewing photos and N'kisi responding to them, drawn from the experimental video recordings, can be viewed on YouTube here.

Audio

For a recording of N'kisi and Morgana conversing (non-telepathically) click here.[13]

KM Wehrstein

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Morgana (2002).
- [2.](#) Sheldrake & Morgana (2010). All information in this section and the next is drawn from this source unless otherwise noted.
- [3.](#) Sheldrake & Morgana (2003), 602.
- [4.](#) Sheldrake & Morgana (2003), 603.
- [5.](#) Sheldrake (2011), 327-28.
- [6.](#) Sheldrake (2011), 326.
- [7.](#) Sheldrake (2011), 327.
- [8.](#) Sheldrake (2011), 328-29.
- [9.](#) Carroll (2015).
- [10.](#) Sheldrake (n.d.).
- [11.](#) Carroll (2015).
- [12.](#) Sheldrake (n.d.).
- [13.](#) Listening to the recording prior to reading the transcript is recommended, in view of Carroll's claim that the words cannot otherwise be understood.