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Alex the African Grey

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Science's best known parrot died on September 6th, aged 31

Brandeis University



① THE last time Irene Pepperberg saw Alex she said goodnight as usual. "You be good," said Alex. "I love you." "I love you, too." "You'll be in tomorrow?" "Yes, I'll be in tomorrow." But Alex (his name supposedly an acronym of Avian Learning Experiment) died in his cage that night, bringing to an end a life spent learning complex tasks that, it had been originally thought, only primates could master.

② In science as in most fields of endeavour, it is important to have the right tool for the job. Early studies of linguistic ability in apes concluded it was virtually non-existent. But researchers had made the elementary error of trying to teach their anthropoid subjects to speak. Chimpanzee vocal cords are simply not up to this—and it was not until someone had the idea of teaching chimps sign language that any progress was made.

③ Even then, the researchers remained human-centric. Their assumption was that chimps might be able to understand and use human sign language because they are humanity's nearest living relatives. It took a brilliant insight to turn this human-centricity on its head and look at the capabilities of a species only distantly related to humanity, but which can, nevertheless, speak the words people speak: a parrot.

④ The insight in question came to Dr Pepperberg, then a 28-year-old theoretical chemist, in 1977. To follow it up, she bought a one-year-old African Grey parrot at random from a pet shop. Thus began one of the best-known double acts in the field of animal-behaviour science.

⑤ Dr Pepperberg and Alex last shared a common ancestor more than 300m years ago. But Alex, unlike any chimpanzee (with whom Dr Pepperberg's most recent common ancestor lived a mere 4m years ago), learned to speak words easily. The question was, was Alex merely parroting Dr Pepperberg? Or would that pejorative term have to be redefined? Do parrots actually understand what they are saying?