[Review of D.L. Herzing (2024) Is Anyone Listening? What Animals are Saying to Each Other and to Us]

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IS ANYONE LISTENING? WHAT ANIMALS ARE SAYING TO EACH OTHER AND TO US

by Denise L. Herzing. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA, 2024. 217 pp. ISBN: 978-0-22-635749-2 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-22-635752-2 (e-pub). https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226357522.001.0001.

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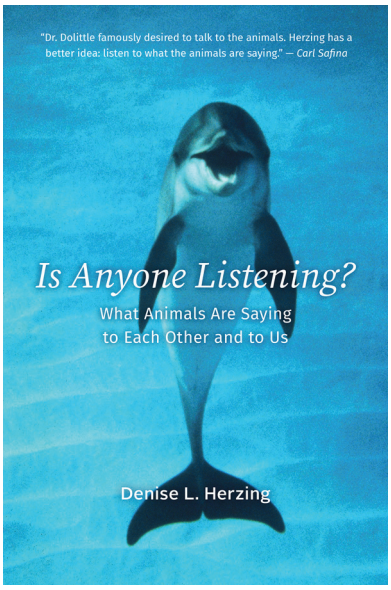
Is Anyone Listening? is Denise Herzing's exciting, well-written chronicle of a lifetime as a scientist studying dolphins. Inspired by pioneering researchers such as Jane Goodall (chimpanzees), Diane Fossey (mountain gorillas), and Cynthia Moss (African elephants), Herzing has always believed that learning about animals first requires interacting with them. Only in this way can useful theoretical models be built,



which in turn allow for testing in practice. The key questions in her book are: How do dolphins (and other animals) communicate with each other? How do they communicate with other species, specifically with humans? And what are the best ways to collect reliable data about both varieties?

A first theme in the book is that biologists have long been biased by their species-specific visual abilities, leading them to think that other species communicate primarily visually, too. While this works relatively well when studying chimpanzees' gestures, dolphins interact with each other mainly via sound. Their hearing far outperforms that of humans, and in water sound is a better mode for long-distance communication than visuals. It is only thanks to relatively recent advances in AI and other digital tools, Herzing points out, that it became possible to collect sonic data that in unmediated form simply were beyond humans' perception. Moreover, developing and fine-tuning an underwater keyboard helped initiate and record interactions both between dolphins and between the researchers and the dolphins.

Another theme is Herzing's emphasis on the nature of her interactions with the dolphins. For one thing, whenever possible, she engages in *playing* with them, since this is something they love to do. For another, she considers it essential for meaningful interaction that the researchers understand the rules and etiquette a dolphin pod adheres to—and to respect these in order to gain the group's trust. For instance, she and her team keep their distance when dolphins are fighting, foraging, or mating. Herzing's determination to consider dolphins and other animals as humans' equals runs throughout the book—with all the implications for animal rights that follow from taking such equality seriously.

The most fascinating strand in the book is Herzing's sustained efforts to understand the communication among dolphins—although she also devotes passages to animals such as dogs, corvids, elephants, vervet monkeys, and orcas. (She reports, for instance, that "some dogs comprehend over a thousand labels or words for toys" [p. 59]). Do these animals have a language? If so, does it make sense to equate certain sounds with words? And if yes, do these "words" have vowels or even phonemes? Are there sequences of sounds that recur and thereby suggest that dolphin

communication has a grammar? Herzing's views verge toward answering these questions affirmatively. She even claims that different groups of dolphins have different "dialects" (p. 26). Given that making progress in unraveling animal communication requires finding *patterns*, studying dolphins' communication is very promising. For a start, each dolphin has a unique "whistle." But it is the burst-pulse sounds, consisting of densely packed click trains, "that have the greatest bandwidth and comprise the bulk of dolphins' social communication" (p. 124).

Herzing suggests that a system to share information is particularly important for animals that live long and live in groups. Moreover, she proposes that communication is not only important to warn group members against predators or inform them where to find food but, perhaps even more importantly, to secure optimal social relations within the group. Sharing emotions, that is, is incredibly important. A dolphin equivalent to a human "hug" is mimicking. Such mimicry, and the synchrony needed for successfully performing it, presumably is also the basis for any interspecies communication involving humans: "Productive relationships may require an animal seeing you as a peer, or conspecific, and to be a conspecific you need to be able to communicate directly" (p. 58). With the dolphins this is achieved by imitating body postures and even vocalizations (p. 71).

A good candidate for finding patterns in communication in other species, and across species, Herzing submits, is *rhythm*. Indeed, rhythm is such a profoundly embodied phenomenon that presumably *all* animals have firsthand experience with it in one way or another: running, heartbeats, breathing, eating, drinking, the alternation between day and night, and the seasons. Moreover, rhythms characterizing communication can cross modes: The Morse system can be used both visually and aurally. And since sound is dolphins' primary mode of communication, speed, pitch, and loudness are highly informative.

Herzing proposes we can learn a lot about the intraspecies and interspecies communication of animals by comparing it with how parents interact with their babies and anthropologists with non-Western peoples: In both cases, there is no preexisting shared communication system. Here is another analogy: Having studied visual and multimodal communication for decades, I have often been frustrated by linguists' mistaken idea that "language" can, with minor adaptations, function as the basic model for studying communication in other modes. Just as Herzing, thanks to her long work among dolphins, has learned some of the basics of dolphins' species-specific ways of communicating, I have gradually come to appreciate how fundamentally differently visuals communicate than language.

Partly based on this experience, I have proposed that there is a phenomenon that governs communication in *all* its varieties, namely the expectation that an act of communication comes with the implicit promise that it will be *relevant* to whoever this message is addressed. This is the central idea of Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory (RT) [1]. In my proposals for how RT can be adapted to visual and multimodal mass communication [2], I have rephrased this idea as: Every act of communication comes with the presumption of optimal relevance to its envisaged audience. Taking RT seriously entails that "meaning" can never be studied without specifying (a) who/what is the communicator; (b) who is/are the envisaged addressees; (c) what are the affordances and constraints of the medium used to communicate; and (d) what presuppositions, background knowledge, and situational context are shared and mutually manifest to the communication partners. I am excited to find that many observations Herzing makes about communication both among dolphins and between dolphins and humans align perfectly with key ideas in RT [3].

I fully agree with Herzing that "every language has some kind of order and structure" (p. 112). Evidently, trying to lay bare *any* structures of coded signals used by dolphins will remain a crucial research goal: "We can ask questions like, do mothers produce longer signature whistles when their calf is out of sight? Or, do dolphins make shorter whistles when they are being chased by a predator? This is the acoustic equivalent of an animal speeding up or slowing down their body movements to communicate urgency or a relaxed state" (p. 114).

The author points out that work in this area can be helped by digging more deeply in the rudimentary "whistling" communication system among sheep herders in the Pyrenees mountains as well as using the understanding of how human "click" languages work (p. 118). That said, I would propose to use the label "coded signals" instead of "words" (as Herzing does), since the latter are a subcategory of the former: dolphins' name-whistles, shepherds' whistles, human "clicks," and pictograms are all coded signals. And although I prefer "structure" over "grammar" (because of the latter's strong linguistic connotations) for patterns that can be detected in recurring sequences of such coded signals, there is no arguing about labels—as long as there is agreement about the underlying *concept*.

But searching for patterned sequences of coded signals is only half the story. The other half of charting dolphin communication is focusing on how they *infer* relevant information. Herzing's many examples of how coded information is complemented by a mutually shared awareness of, for instance, greeting rituals in previous encounters and of mutually shared ad hoc physical context demonstrate that she is also looking for how dolphins infer—although she does not use that term. I fully endorse her idea that "the process of communicating socially is not about transfer of information but rather the emergence of mutual understanding through a shared action or thought. Meaning does not reside in

words but in the mutual construction of meaning between partners, created through interaction and coregulated by all participants. Increased coordination is seen between individuals as they reach meaning through negotiation" (p. 138).

So, I answer Herzing's question "Should we be merging decoding and interaction elements when looking at other species?" (p. 149) with a wholehearted "Yes!"

Is Anyone Listening? is a daring, unconventional monograph brimming with ideas and findings that resonate with many dimensions of communication—of the intraspecies as well as the interspecies variety.

References and Notes

1 Charles Forceville, *Visual and Multimodal Communication: Applying the Relevance Principle* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

2 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition,* 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 1995).

3 The online version of this review goes into more detail explaining how Herzing's findings are compatible with, and can be modeled by, relevance theory: https://leonardo.info/review/2025/03/is-anyone-listening-what-animals-are-saying-to-each-other-and-to-us.