

The Who, Why And How of Parrot Talking - Page Two

A look at pet bird talking abilities.

By Rebecca Sweat

Talking Versus Mimicking

Whether pet birds simply mimic human speech or actually know the meaning of the words they are repeating is still a debated topic in the scientific and avicultural communities. One person who has spearheaded the concept that parrots are capable of cognitive speech is Dr. Pepperberg. She had been doing research with an African grey parrot named Alex for more than 30 years, originally at the University of Arizona and currently at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Pepperberg had taught Alex to not only identify the names of hundreds of objects, but also many of their other characteristics such as color, shape, texture, how many there are and how they compare to other objects. This, maintains Pepperberg, demonstrates that parrots can learn to understand the meanings of the words and phrases they are saying.

There are many veterinarians and parrot owners who obviously have not conducted the extensive research that Pepperberg has but still claim they have witnessed cognitive speech in their own birds. Dr. Burkett, for one, believes he has seen evidence of this in his African grey parrot, Candy.

An illustration that stands out in his mind is the day he walked into the kitchen where Candy's cage is located and began making some coffee. When Candy saw what he was doing, she said "Candy wants." Burkett told her that she could not have coffee. Candy then repeated "Candy wants!" Again, Burkett told her that she could not have coffee, and this time added that coffee has caffeine.

Candy then said, "Candy wants Coke," and Burkett replied that Coke has caffeine too. Candy then said, "It's OK; Candy likes it." At that point, Burkett was laughing too hard to continue the conversation. "Of course she was laughing with my laugh – including the accidental snorting – only with her it was no accident," he said. "She was intentionally making fun of me."

Parrot owner and pet trade consultant Gayle Soucek of Illinois is convinced that her blue-fronted Amazon parrot knows the meaning of "Gimme" and understands the word "Here" to mean wherever he is. Once, Soucek was trying to coax the bird to come to her by offering him a treat. He wanted the treat but didn't want to come. Finally, the bird said "Gimme here!" "He managed to process his want and combine two separate words to communicate that," Soucek said.

But not everyone in avicultural circles is convinced that birds can actually learn the literal meanings of the words. Hartman asserts that what's really happening is that the parrots are simply learning habituated responses. "A bird might be able to learn to say certain phrases in particular situations, but it probably doesn't understand the actual meaning of the words," he said. Case in point would be Benny the cockatoo (mentioned in the beginning of the article) that tells his owner's kids to "Stop that!" when they're being boisterous. "The bird is probably not thinking, 'Okay, I want those kids to be quiet, and if I say those words, they might settle down.' The bird has simply learned to repeat that phrase when the kids are being loud," Hartman speculated.

The Non-Talker

While it's true that any psittacine species "can" learn to mimic human speech, not all species that can talk will. You could very well have an African grey parrot or a yellow-naped Amazon parrot – both species known for talking – that is simply not interested in learning human speech.

Just like people, some individual parrots are going to be more loquacious and enjoy talking more than others. "Some parrots just don't have a lot to say or prefer to speak in their own language," Pepperberg said. Or, she speculated, "A parrot may be getting all the attention it wants from its bird calls and doesn't see the need to repeat human speech."

It can also go the other way. "A bird that has never gotten much attention from its owners and isn't played with and attended to isn't going to talk because it's learned that none of its vocalizations gets it anything," Pepperberg said. Parrots that are not well-socialized have no incentive to talk, she said, because they may not want attention from people, and may not desire to be part of the human flock.

Another factor is the number of birds that are owned. Single-kept birds are often the best talkers. If a parrot has another bird companion, it may not be interested in “talking,” as it is probably already getting the attention it craves. This is especially true with smaller species like budgies and cockatiels. However, there are always exceptions to the rule. In Soucek’s experience, birds that are already talking before getting a cagemate will continue to talk and often teach their new friend some words.

Two other factors are the physical and mental health of the bird. Physical health is obvious. “A sick or malnourished bird is going to need all its strength to survive, so talking is a luxury that it can’t afford,” said Brian Speer, DVM, an avian veterinarian in California.

A bird in poor mental health may be suffering from boredom, stress, abuse, fear, anger or depression. Any of these might prevent a bird from being vocal.

“It’s no different than it is with people,” said Michelle Karras, a bird behavior consultant in Illinois. “A depressed person doesn’t open his or her mouth, but a happy person never stops talking. When you’re happy, you talk. When you’re not, you don’t.” She has seen many parrots that suddenly stopped talking due to some kind of change in the household that made them feel uncomfortable or anxious. Often it was a matter of “feeling” the tension of fighting between family members. “Your parrot’s not going to talk if it’s stressed, unhappy, abused or not well cared for,” Karras said. “Birds talk when they’re healthy and happy.”

No Matter What

Love your bird no matter what. While a talking parrot can be a lot of fun, look at the whole parrot and not just speech potential. “Buying a parrot strictly for speech potential is the absolute worst reason in the world to buy a pet,” Soucek said. “A parrot is so intelligent, so loving, so sentient, that just focusing on its ability to mimic is infuriating to me. Speech should be an enhancement to an already wonderful relationship.”

In reality, the majority of parrots never become proficient talkers, and there’s a chance yours may not either. Love your parrot no matter what, Soucek stressed. “Ironically, it seems like the people who have the highest expectations and demands from a pet bird are the ones that wind up with neurotic birds that are the poorest pets,” she said. “I think that a bird that is loved unconditionally and treated with respect will respond to that and do what it can to reciprocate, including saying funny stuff to make its owner laugh!”