Communication Among Chimpanzees and Humans

Chimpanzees, regarded by many as the animal with most in common to man, definitely have "language", but in examining the criteria established by man that is used to determine whether or not an animal has the capacity for language, one realizes that this process is a prime example of anthropomorphism. Instead of using the strict guidelines in the book for determining whether or not chimps have the capability for language, and measuring the chimps' ability to communicate against a human's ability to do so, we should examine similarities between humans' and chimpanzees' communication, along with the differences; not comparing the two's capacity for language, but instead seeing both types of communication as separate and unique entities, and seeking out where the similarities end and the differences begin.

All animals, ranging from bees, to horses, to humans have some form of communication. The bee with it's peculiar "waggle dance" is able to communicate with other bees in the same way that humans are able to communicate with each other. The chimp communicates with others of its kind in the same fashion; by representation. Even humans are unable to express exactly what we mean when we communicate with someone. We are forced to use representations, or words to describe what we are trying to get across to other people. The signing chimp, (We'll assume that all chimps have the ability to sign if taught properly, just as humans have the ability to write or speak if they are taught properly.) does the same thing, it gives representations of what it's feeling or thinking in the form of signs.

There exist many similarities between human communication and communication in signing chimps. Although chimps can't communicate through speech, a fact that to many indicates chimps don't have the capability for "language", it is a well known fact that thousands of years ago humans could not "speak", but rather through signs and grunts could communicate. It stands to reason therefore that according to Darwinian philosophy, chimps may evolve, and have vocal chords that support speech. Since the speech factor is ruled out, it is far easier to see the similarities between chimp and human communication.

Washoe as a baby clearly had an understanding of what she was talking about. Her signing of open when confronted with a closed door or box although she was not taught the sign open in relation to the box indicates that she had the ability to adapt her knowledge of learned patterns of communication to new things. This is similar to the human baby. For instance, it is common for a human baby to learn the word daddy, referring to the the baby's actual father, and then have the baby use the word daddy when referring to a male babysitter, since the two perform some of the same functions. The adaption of representations is then an important similarity between humans and chimps.

Washoe also had the ability to comprehend her self. It is a widely held belief that one thing that separates human communication from chimp communication is the comprehension of the self. We as humans are able to know that we as an entity exist, and as Jane Goodall says, "demand an explanation of the mystery of being". Chimps also have an awareness of the self, albeit not as advanced as humans. When Washoe was confronted with a reflection of herself in a mirror and asked, "Who's that?" she replied, "Me.....Washoe." This reveals another similarity between chimps and humans, but also demonstrates that some of the similarities exist in degrees, but are there nonetheless.
Toolmaking is another example of similarity in degree. Humans are able to make tools, and adapt these tools in new situations. For example, a human with a leg injury may use a cane to help them walk. While the person is walking down the street, he or she might spy an apple on a high limb of a tree, normally out of reach. If the person thought for a moment, he or she would probably realize that they could use the cane to knock down the apple. Sure enough, by using the cane, the person was able to get the apple. Problem-Analysis of Options-and Solution. In a human, this process comes as second nature, and the solution is usually easily within grasp. With a chimp on the other hand, the thought process is more drawn out, and often, the chimp is unable to comprehend all the options. Although not as sophisticated as a human's thought process, the chimpanzee still has the capability to get the solution, as evidenced by Goodall's observations of chimpanzees using sticks to capture insects, modifying it if it is not the proper size.

From these examples, a pattern of similarities of general ideas, but differences in degree emerges, enabling us to finally see what characterizes human and chimp communication. Human communication is admittedly more "advanced" than chimp communication; with a greater ability to comprehend data and process it, but it nevertheless relies on representation. Adaptation of these representations to new situations, awareness of the self, and the ability to deal with a problem and come up with a solution are all key points of communication among humans. Communication among chimpanzees also contains these points, although not to the degree that communication among humans does. In essence then, chimpanzee and human communication is very similar. Both share similarities and differences to a degree, but in the end, both remain very much the same. It is therefore not a question of whether or not chimpanzees have the capability for language, but rather, how human and chimpanzee communication developed this difference in degree, and whether or not the differences will exist in the future.