

Fun Facts Friday: Do Elephants Understand Human Language?

Elephants do learn human language, but not the way people learn a second language. They are not translating human words into their own language. They learn through association, connecting particular words, sounds, gestures, tones, and routines with specific meanings, actions, or outcomes. They can also detect other information carried in a human voice.

A 2014 study of wild African elephants in Kenya found that elephants distinguish human voices using acoustic cues linked to age, sex, and ethnicity, reacting more defensively to the voices of Maasai men than to those of Kamba men, Maasai women, or Maasai boys.

The Maasai are cattle-herding people whose grazing land and water sources have historically overlapped with elephant habitat, sometimes leading to elephants being speared. The Kamba are farmers with far less history of confrontation with elephants.

The elephants were not decoding the words being spoken. They were connecting the sound of each voice to what they had learned about the people with whom they share the landscape.

Video: Tarra responds to Carol's words, tone, touch, and familiar routine.

<https://youtu.be/sFsdtfXPNSk>