

# How a coughing ape is changing our ideas about animals, humans and language

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## *The Washington Post:*

The 280-pound gorilla fits awkwardly in the lab at the Gorilla Foundation, her domed head brushing up against the cabinets that hang just below the ceiling. She looks into the camera and touches a lone, large finger to her lips, waiting.

“How about when you’re, um, coughing?” researcher Penny Patterson asks from off screen.

Koko the gorilla raises a hand to her mouth, waits a beat, then wheezes into it, sounding every bit like an aging smoker.

“That was good!” Patterson cheers, while Koko holds a massive hand out to her, as though accepting the praise.

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For a recent study in the journal *Animal Cognition*, language researchers Marcus Perlman and Nathaniel Clark mined Gorilla Foundation recordings to identify nine distinct “vocal and breathing behaviors,” that Koko has learned from more than 40 years living with humans, including coughing, blowing into the recorder and “speaking” into the phone.

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“There’s a longstanding idea that nonhuman primates they have an extremely limited ability to learn new vocalizations and to control those vocalizations voluntarily,” Perlman, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Wisconsin and the paper’s lead author, told *The Washington Post*. “But the Koko case study shows that’s not true. She was able to acquire new vocal behaviors and also breathing, and that suggests there’s a basic capacity in place with great apes, that maybe this capacity over millions of years evolved into what we now know as speech.”

Read the whole story: [The Washington post](#)