

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
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Talking monkeys



Finn: Hello, I'm Finn. This is 6 Minute English and I'm joined this week by Neil. Hello Neil.

(Monkey sounds)

Finn: Err, Neil?

(Monkey sounds)

Finn: Neil, are you OK?

(Monkey sounds)

Finn: Actually that wasn't Neil, you'll be glad to know, he is safe and sound here in the studio with me.

Neil: Hello. Yes, that wonderful sound you just heard was in fact a gelada – a kind of monkey – which we'll be hearing more from later in the programme.

Finn: Yes. Could the gelada monkey provide an important clue about the development of human language? But first, as always, we have a question. Neil – could you please tell me what geladas eat?

- a) fish
- b) grass
- c) ice-cream

Neil: Well, I can see you're trying to trap me with ice-cream here, because the name of the monkey sounds like the Italian word for ice-cream. So, I'm not that stupid, I'm going to go for 'b', grass.

Finn: Wonderful knowledge of Italian there Neil. Don't worry I'm not trying to make a monkey out of you – I'm not trying to make you look stupid. Now let's listen to the gelada monkey again. How would we describe that sound?

(Gelada monkey gurgling)

Neil: Well, it sounds a bit like a **gargle** – a gargling noise.

Finn: Yes, it does. Gargle is a great word because it's an example of what we call **onomatopoeia** – a word which sounds like its meaning. Neil, gargle is the word, could you please demonstrate a gargle?

Neil: *(Neil gargles)*

Finn: Very good. Neil is gargling – and the sound it makes is a gargle. That's lovely!

Neil: Can I stop now?

Finn: Yes, you can stop now. Thank you very much. How about another quick example of onomatopoeia:

(Clicks mouse)

A click. Listen again. Click.

Neil: Or this, oops:

(Crash sound)

A crash.

Finn: Now, anyway, let's get back to the gargling monkey. Behind the fun sound is some serious science - about the **origins**, or beginnings, of human speech.

Neil: Scientists from the University of Michigan believe that these gelada calls might be similar to the **primitive noises** – early and simple sounds – that our **evolutionary ancestors** made, that is – what we, humans, were before we developed into modern humans.

Finn: Dr Thore Bergman, who was the main author of the study, said that geladas make sounds which have "**speech-like properties**" – they have qualities which are like... speech.

Neil: And the interesting thing is – most monkeys and apes can only make the most basic noises because they don't have the **vocal anatomy** required – that is they don't have the physical mouth and throat parts needed – to make more complex sounds.

Finn: All other monkeys and apes can do is called **lip smacking** – rapidly moving their jaws, lips and their tongues. And I think, Neil, it's time for another demonstration please.

Neil: *(Neil making lip smacking noises)*

Finn: Lip smacking, very nice.

Neil: The gelada, on the other hand, is the only one that can produce **vocalisations** – or sounds from the vocal chords in the throat while doing this.

Finn: That's it! So – lip smacking and vocalisations – together are maybe a possible step between the sounds of other monkeys – and human speech.

Neil: Though there is a question – the scientists don't know yet what the noises mean exactly. They believe the noises might be used the way humans use **small talk** – chatting about things that are not really important – to help the monkey societies feel more closely bonded or connected.

Finn: That's right, so, small talk, things like saying: "Fine day, isn't it?"

Neil: "Not bad, not bad. How are the kids, Finn?"

Finn: "Oh yeah, keeping me awake all night."

Neil: "Oh yes, I know the feeling."

Finn: Or as you would say in gelada:

(Gelada gargle)

Finn: I think that's quite enough **monkey business** for one day – quite enough of us being silly, wouldn't you say? Neil, earlier I asked you what geladas eat. Was it:

- a) fish
- b) grass
- c) ice-cream

Neil: And I am not stupid so I'm going to go for 'b' grass.

Finn: And you're right, they are herbivores, they eat grass. Anyway, before we go let's run through the words and phrases one more time.

Neil: gargle
onomatopoeia
origins
primitive noises
evolutionary ancestors
vocal anatomy
lip smacking
vocalisations
small talk
monkey business

Finn: Thanks Neil. Sadly, it's time to go. So please join us again soon for more 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English.

Both: (*Gargle*).

Vocabulary and definitions

gargle	the noise made when liquid is moved around at the back of the throat
onomatopoeia	(using) words which sound like their meaning
origins	beginnings
primitive noises	early and simple sounds
evolutionary ancestors	early types of plant or animal before they developed into their modern forms
speech-like properties	qualities that are like speech
vocal anatomy	the physical structure of the inside of the mouth and throat
lip smacking	making sounds with the lips, tongue and teeth without using the voice
vocalisations	sounds made using the voice
small talk	conversation that is not really important, but helps people who do not know each other well pass the time
monkey business	behaviour that is silly, unacceptable or dishonest

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