What we must do in order to test pictorial competence in animals

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Pictures are common in the experimental study of animal cognition and have been successfully used in perceptual and conceptual tasks for decades. A principal concern has been whether animals are able to recognize objects in pictures. The answer is positive (see [1], [2]). But recognition does not necessarily equal seeing the picture as a depiction, which entails reference.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is not recognition enough?
To demonstrate pictorial competence we are after recognition of a certain kind: where the function of a referential object (i.e. as a sign) comes first, and interpretation follows. This is most evident if we consider pictures where the expectation of a motif is needed for recognition to occur. We do not see likeness in a Rorschach blob because it immediately pops out for us, but because we look for it. Interpretation thus depends on expectation of similarity.

Why is not a “referential” use of pictures enough?
Because it is not necessary to see a picture as a picture in order to relate it to other instances of the depicted object. Just as one real object can be related to another real object. Such relations are not really referential, since there is no direction from picture to referent, no aboutness.

References

Bonnobos and Drawings
Based on the requirements in the criteria above, two language-competent bonobos at The Great Ape Trust of Iowa, USA, were tested in 2006 on a computerised delayed matching-to-sample task where linguistic labels (lexigrams) were matched to pictures, and vice versa. Performance was above chance (p<0.001) in all conditions, and there was no significant difference between photographs and drawings, or between subjects. Interpretation in a pictorial mode likely took place. See full report in [4].

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