

Decompressing the Metaping: How Bioacoustic Machine Learning Forces a Post-Anthropocentric Legal Order

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Abstract

An operational asymmetry has long characterized interspecies cognition: domestic canines comprehend hundreds of human words, while humans parse canine vocalizations at rates barely above chance. This article formalizes the *Metaping Hypothesis*—the proposition that non-human vocalizations function as compressed, high-dimensional state-vectors (“metapings” or, colloquially, “animal word joysticks”) encoding parallel telemetry (emotion, identity, location, urgency, social relation) rather than sequential, combinatorial syntax. We review the emergence of *Animal Language Processing* (ALP), a convergent field applying transformer-based and multimodal neural architectures to bioacoustic data. Drawing on recent breakthroughs in sperm whale phonetics, dolphin lexical semantics, and canine phoneme identification, we argue that ALP is decompressing signals previously opaque to human perception. We further examine the downstream jurisprudential rupture: as structured, context-dependent animal communication becomes machine-verifiable, the legal fiction of animals as mere chattel becomes structurally untenable. We project a two-phase trajectory—near-term (2026–2030) real-time interspecies translation, and long-term (2040+) post-anthropocentric legal frameworks—and introduce the *Consent Architecture Problem*: how societies might verify autonomous preference across species boundaries. The question is no longer whether animals communicate, but whether we are prepared to hear what they say.

Keywords: Animal Language Processing, Bioacoustics, Interspecies Communication, Non-Human Legal Personhood, Machine Learning, Ethology, Metaping Hypothesis, Cognitive Zoology

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Contents

1	The Asymmetry: A One-Directional Selection Pressure	3
2	The Metaping Hypothesis	3
2.1	From Phoneme to State-Vector: The “Animal Word Joystick”	3
2.2	The Joystick Resolves the Combinatorial Contradiction	4
2.3	Orthogonality, Not Hierarchy	4
2.4	Testable Predictions	4
3	Animal Language Processing: The State of the Art	4
3.1	Defining the Field	4
3.2	Cetacean Breakthroughs	5
3.2.1	Sperm Whale Phonetics	5
3.2.2	Dolphin Lexical Semantics	5

3.3	Terrestrial and Primate Advances	5
3.4	Multimodal Decoding	5
4	The Consciousness Revolution	6
5	The Legal Horizon: From Property to Person	6
5.1	Global Precedents	7
5.2	Counter-Currents	7
6	Trajectory: From Translation to Treaty	7
6.1	Phase I: Instant Translation (2026–2030)	7
6.2	Phase II: Narrative Decoding (2030–2040)	7
6.3	Phase III: The Rights Reckoning (2040+)	8
7	The Consent Architecture Problem	8
8	Who Is Smarter?	9
9	Conclusion	9

1 The Asymmetry: A One-Directional Selection Pressure

The domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) demonstrates receptive vocabulary sizes that vary widely: the average dog comprehends between 89 and 165 words under standard conditions, while exceptional subjects—notably border collies—have been documented with vocabularies exceeding 1,000 object names [1]. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) confirms that dogs process semantic content in neuro-anatomical regions homologous to human temporal and parietal language networks, suggesting that lexical comprehension is not merely associative conditioning but genuine cross-modal semantic integration [2].

Conversely, human reception of non-human vocalizations remains impoverished. Listeners can distinguish “play barks” from “stranger-approach barks” at rates modestly above chance, but fail to parse the spectral density encoding emotional arousal, the temporal patterning signaling urgency, or the multimodal contextual embedding that transforms a single vocalization into a compressed situational report [3]. We hear *woof*; the dog broadcasts a dashboard.

This asymmetry is not evidence of canine simplicity. It is the fossil record of a one-directional selection pressure: for tens of thousands of years, dogs who failed to read human signals did not survive or breed. Humans faced no reciprocal pressure. We domesticated *them*; they did not domesticate *us*. Consequently, we constructed our hierarchy of intelligence around the one cognitive tree we climbed highest—symbolic, recursive, combinatorial language—while remaining blind to the forests of cognition mapped by species who navigate social hierarchies, olfactory narratives, and multimodal gestalts in dimensions we barely perceive.

2 The Metaping Hypothesis

2.1 From Phoneme to State-Vector: The “Animal Word Joystick”

We propose the **Metaping Hypothesis** to describe the informational architecture of non-human vocal communication. Where human language is characteristically *combinatorial* and *referential*—building infinite meanings from finite, sequentially arranged parts—animal vocalizations are hypothesized to function as *holistic state-vectors*: single acoustic events that encode multiple data streams in parallel.

A useful intuition is the **joystick**. A joystick is not a sentence; it has no grammar. Yet it transmits continuous, simultaneous information across multiple axes (X, Y, Z, plus trigger buttons). A dog’s bark operates identically:

- **Axis 1 (Spectral density)**: Encodes emotional arousal (fundamental frequency correlates with stress).
- **Axis 2 (Temporal patterning)**: Encodes urgency (inter-bark interval signals imminence).
- **Axis 3 (Individual signature)**: Encodes identity (voiceprint analogous to human timbre).
- **Axis 4 (Contextual embedding)**: Encodes situational referents (what the dog was doing, looking at, or smelling).

These channels operate *simultaneously*, not sequentially. A wolf howl carries identity, location, emotional state, and group cohesion data across parallel frequency domains. A dolphin click train transmits spatial geometry and social valence in a single multi-parameter burst. We strip the channels we cannot perceive—olfactory, ultrasonic, infrasonic—and then complain the signal is simple.

2.2 The Joystick Resolves the Combinatorial Contradiction

A tension emerges when we compare the Metaping Hypothesis with recent discoveries of *combinatorial* structure in sperm whale codas and bonobo call sequences [5, 11]. If animal calls are holistic metapings, how can they also be combinatorial?

The answer lies in the joystick analogy. A joystick can be *modulated* across its axes. Sperm whales adjust “rubato” (tempo) and “ornamentation” (additional clicks) as continuous parameters applied to a base coda type [5]. Bonobos combine discrete call types into sequences [11]. In both cases, the *unit of transmission* remains a parallel, multi-axis burst—not a sequentially ordered string of arbitrary symbols. The joystick has axes; some species have learned to wiggle those axes in complex, learnable patterns. But the fundamental architecture is *parallel* (state-vector) rather than *serial* (syntax). Human language is a linear stream; animal communication is a dense, simultaneous ping.

2.3 Orthogonality, Not Hierarchy

The Metaping Hypothesis implies that animal communication is *orthogonal* to human language, not *hierarchically inferior*. It solves different problems with different constraints. A dolphin navigating a three-dimensional acoustic environment with poor visibility does not need recursive syntax; it needs a dense, redundant, multimodal broadcast that encodes identity, emotional valence, and spatial geometry in a single click train. The error has been our insistence on parsing these signals through a linguistic framework (words, grammar, syntax) that constitutes the wrong decompression algorithm.

2.4 Testable Predictions

[HYPOTHESIS PREDICTIONS] The hypothesis generates three testable predictions for ALP systems:

1. **Parallel channel independence:** Machine learning models trained on isolated acoustic features (spectral, temporal, harmonic) will each predict distinct semantic variables, confirming multi-stream encoding.
2. **Contextual disambiguation:** The same acoustic form will yield different semantic labels when cross-referenced with behavioral, spatial, or social context, confirming that metapings are situationally embedded rather than lexically fixed.
3. **Cross-modal redundancy:** Deletion of any single channel (audio, posture, scent) will degrade but not destroy comprehension, confirming that metapings are robust gestalts.

3 Animal Language Processing: The State of the Art

3.1 Defining the Field

The term *Animal Language Processing* (ALP) was formalized in 2024 by Masato Hagiwara of the Earth Species Project to describe a data-driven, species-agnostic approach to analyzing non-human communication using machine learning [4]. Unlike traditional zoosemiotics, ALP does not presuppose human-like syntax, recursion, or displacement. It treats any structured signal—vocal, gestural, chemical, or multimodal—as data amenable to pattern detection, context-sensitivity analysis, and interactional modeling.

3.2 Cetacean Breakthroughs

3.2.1 Sperm Whale Phonetics

A landmark 2024 study published in *Nature Communications* analyzed recordings from a Caribbean sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) population and discovered what the authors termed a “phonetic alphabet”—a combinatorial system of rhythm and tempo types producing at least 143 distinct, frequently realized combinations [5]. The codas operate with both discrete and continuous parameters, including “rubato” (tempo variation) and “ornamentation” (added clicks), suggesting a structured vocal system far richer than previously imagined.

Project CETI (Cetacean Translation Initiative) has advanced this work by deploying custom Harvard-engineered bio-loggers that adhere to whales and record high-fidelity audio during deep-sea dives [6]. These open-source datasets are fed into neural network architectures designed to identify patterns invisible to human auditory perception.

3.2.2 Dolphin Lexical Semantics

In May 2025, researchers at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution won the inaugural **Coller Dolittle Challenge** (a \$100,000 award with a \$10 million grand prize) for identifying 20 distinct non-signature whistle types used by multiple bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Sarasota, Florida [7]. Playback experiments under completely natural conditions demonstrated that these whistles function analogously to shared words: one whistle elicited an avoidance response (alarm function), while another correlated with a query function produced in response to unexpected situations.

Concurrently, Google’s **DolphinGemma** project—developed in collaboration with the Wild Dolphin Project and Georgia Tech—aims to interpret dolphin clicks and whistles with sufficient fidelity to generate realistic acoustic responses, moving from passive decoding to active dialogic engagement [8].

3.3 Terrestrial and Primate Advances

On land, the Earth Species Project has developed **NatureLM-audio**, the first large-scale audio foundation model tailored for non-human animals. Trained on massive cross-species datasets, NatureLM-audio has demonstrated accuracy in analyzing zebra finch calls and counting individuals in acoustic scenes [9]. The project is now conducting deep-dive experiments on crows, beluga whales, and elephants, with \$17 million in funding and a target of significant breakthroughs by 2030.

At the University of Texas at Arlington, computer scientist Kenny Zhu has constructed what is claimed to be the world’s largest video and audio catalog of canine vocalizations. In 2025 publications, Zhu and colleagues reported *preliminary* evidence of potential phonemes—the smallest units of sound—and word-like patterns in dog barks, howls, and whimpers [10]. These findings remain provisional and require replication, but they point toward a structured acoustic repertoire.

Perhaps most strikingly, a 2025–26 Coller Dolittle finalist team from the University of Zurich and Harvard found that bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) combine vocal calls into structured, meaningful sequences resembling human sentences, suggesting their communication system shares deeper similarities with human language than previously thought [11]. This work, published in *Science*, demonstrates that combinatorial capacity is not uniquely human.

3.4 Multimodal Decoding

A 2026 computational model presented at ICETI demonstrates the practical power of multimodal ALP. By combining convolutional neural networks (CNNs) for visual data (posture, facial

expression), long short-term memory networks (LSTMs) for temporal behavior, and 1D CNNs for audio spectrograms, researchers achieved high-accuracy translation of dog and cat behaviors into human-readable affective categories: “Playful,” “Anxious,” “Attention-Seeking” [12]. This confirms that tail movement, ear angle, and vocal pitch are significant, non-redundant predictors of animal emotional states.

Table 1: Summary of Major ALP Breakthroughs (2024–2026)

Species	Finding	Institution	Year
Sperm whale	143+ combinatorial coda types	Project CETI / Harvard	2024
Bottlenose dolphin	20 shared whistle “words”	Woods Hole / Coller Dolittle	2025
Domestic dog	Potential phonemes (preliminary)	UT Arlington	2025
Bonobo	Sentence-like vocal sequences	U. Zurich / Harvard	2025
Zebra finch	Individual call analysis	Earth Species Project	2025
Dog / Cat	Multimodal affect translation	ICETI / <i>Forum</i>	2026

4 The Consciousness Revolution

Decoding communication would matter less if animals were merely stimulus-response automata. But the scientific consensus on animal cognition, emotion, and consciousness has undergone a fundamental shift.

The **New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness**, launched in 2024 and now signed by over 480 scientists, affirms a “realistic possibility” of conscious experience across vertebrates and many invertebrates [13]. A 2024 survey published in *Royal Society Open Science* of professional animal behavior researchers found that majorities ascribe emotions to “most or all” non-human primates (98%), other mammals (89%), birds (78%), and cephalopods (72%) [14]. Consciousness was similarly widespread: 92% for primates, 73% for mammals, 64% for cephalopods, and 61% for birds. Notably, 51% of researchers ascribed consciousness to at least some insects.

Critically, the survey revealed a mismatch between what scientists believe is *necessary* for emotion and what actually shapes their assessments. Large majorities admitted that facial expressions (91%) and phylogenetic closeness to humans (81%) were “not at all necessary” for emotion, yet these same factors were “somewhat or very important” in shaping their views. Even the use of language—identified by only 15% as necessary—was cited by 44% as important in their assessments [14]. We have been biased by our own framework, discounting intelligences that do not speak like us.

In 2025, the **Jeremy Coller Centre for Animal Sentience** opened at the London School of Economics—the first dedicated research center of its kind globally [15]. Philosopher Jonathan Birch’s 2024 book *The Edge of Sentience* and its 2025 refinements have reframed the question from binary “Is X sentient?” to a pragmatic three-tier classification: sentience candidate, investigation priority, or neither.

The convergence is strong: animals are emotional, communicative, and likely conscious beings. And if ALP proves that their communications contain structured information—names, syntax, context-specific semantics—then the ethical and legal implications become unavoidable.

5 The Legal Horizon: From Property to Person

Law moves slower than science, but the cracks are already visible. Legal scholar Saskia Stucki distinguishes between *ideal* animal rights (what animals ought to have) and *real* animal rights (actual, enforceable rights recognized by courts and constitutions right now). Her conclusion: real animal rights are already emerging and multiplying [22].

5.1 Global Precedents

- **Argentina (2016):** The Tercer Juzgado de Garantías de Mendoza granted **Cecilia the chimpanzee** non-human legal personhood, ruling that “great apes are legal persons and owners of the inherent rights of sentient beings” and ordering her transfer from a zoo to a sanctuary [16].
- **Colombia (2017):** The Supreme Court affirmed that animals are legal subjects with the right to liberty, explicitly questioning why corporations—“inanimate entities”—enjoy personhood while sentient beings do not [17]. (*Note: This ruling was subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Court in a later decision, illustrating the fragility of judicial progress.*)
- **Pakistan (2020):** The Islamabad High Court used the writ of *habeas corpus*—traditionally a human rights tool—to release **Kaavan**, an elephant held in solitary captivity, ruling that animals have natural rights to life and liberty protected under the Constitution [18].
- **India (2019):** The Punjab and Haryana High Court held that animals have a legal persona with rights comparable to humans under constitutional provisions, while the Uttarakhand High Court (2020) declared the entire animal kingdom to be legal persons with corresponding human guardianship duties [19].

5.2 Counter-Currents

These advances face resistance. In 2022, New York’s highest court denied personhood to **Happy the elephant**, ruling that habeas corpus protects only human liberty rights and warning that granting such rights would have an “enormous destabilizing effect on modern society,” impacting agriculture, medical research, and pet ownership [20]. In 2024, Utah passed H.B. 249, explicitly prohibiting government entities from granting or recognizing legal personhood in nonhumans [21].

Yet history suggests that once science establishes a fact—consciousness, structured communication, emotional depth—the law eventually follows. It took decades for the scientific acceptance of animal sentience to reach courtrooms. ALP may compress that timeline from decades to years.

6 Trajectory: From Translation to Treaty

If major ALP breakthroughs occur within the next 2–5 years, and a paradigm shift in legal recognition follows within 20, what might that trajectory look like? We propose a three-phase model.

6.1 Phase I: Instant Translation (2026–2030)

[PREDICTION] Real-time translation of domestic animal vocalizations and body language moves from novelty to veterinary standard. Conservationists use ALP to detect distress in endangered species before populations collapse. The Earth Species Project’s 2030 target for significant breakthroughs aligns with this window [9]. Pet translators become as commonplace as fitness trackers. The asymmetry begins to correct: humans finally understand what dogs have been saying.

6.2 Phase II: Narrative Decoding (2030–2040)

[PREDICTION] AI systems begin decoding not just isolated signals but narrative structures—elephants recounting migration paths through infrasound, dolphins gossiping about pod dynamics, crows teaching their young through structured vocal lessons. We stop asking “what is the dog

saying?” and start asking “what is the dog’s story?” This phase forces a reckoning with the moral status of non-human autobiography.

6.3 Phase III: The Rights Reckoning (2040+)

[PREDICTION] Once we verify that animals communicate complex information—names, relationships, past events, future intentions—the philosophical justification for their status as property collapses. The legal personhood precedents set in Argentina, Pakistan, and India expand. We do not give animals human rights; we recognize *their* rights: to bodily autonomy, to habitat, to refusal.

Table 2: Projected Trajectory of Interspecies Communication and Rights

Phase	Technical Milestone	Legal/Ethical Implication
2026–2030	Real-time domestic translation	Veterinary duty of care expands to include communicative consent
2030–2040	Narrative and autobiographical decoding	Animals recognized as bearers of interests requiring representation
2040+	Verified complex semantics	Non-human legal personhood; interspecies treaties; habitat sovereignty

7 The Consent Architecture Problem

[THOUGHT EXPERIMENT] The provocative example—an English-speaking mosquito trained as a sanitary blood-nurse, reporting on blood texture, smell, and taste metrics while following infection-prevention workflows—sounds like science fiction. But it crystallizes a serious ethical challenge: **the Consent Architecture Problem**.

If we can translate animal signals, how do we verify that the signals we interpret as “consent” actually represent autonomous preference rather than conditioned response, stress-induced compliance, or anthropomorphic projection? The history of human ethics is littered with coerced consent masquerading as agreement. We cannot replicate that error across species boundaries.

A rigorous consent architecture would require:

1. **Signal verification:** Cross-species translation must be validated by multiple independent ALP systems, not a single proprietary model.
2. **Behavioral consistency:** The animal’s translated “consent” must correlate with approach behavior, absence of stress markers (cortisol, heart rate, escape attempts), and repeatability across contexts.
3. **Revocability:** Consent must be withdrawable at any time, with mechanisms to detect and honor withdrawal signals immediately.
4. **Fiduciary representation:** Just as minors and cognitively impaired humans have legal guardians, non-human agents would require independent advocates with statutory authority to block exploitative arrangements.

The mosquito nurse is a thought experiment, but the underlying problem is real. We already train bees to detect landmines and diabetes. We already use AI to decode insect communication. The gap between “trained biological sensor” and “consenting interspecies collaborator” is primarily a gap of translation and legal recognition, not biology. Before we build interspecies workforces, we must build interspecies ethics.

8 Who Is Smarter?

The question that opened this inquiry—“Who is smarter?”—deserves a direct answer.

If intelligence is the capacity to process symbolic language, build abstract mathematics, and construct recursive narratives, humans are unmatched. If intelligence is the capacity to read social signals across species boundaries, to navigate by olfactory narrative, to process multimodal gestalts in real time, then dogs, dolphins, elephants, and cephalopods are operating in cognitive dimensions we barely perceive.

The error is the ladder. There is no single hierarchy of intelligence. There is a forest of different intelligences, each optimized for its environment. We climbed the symbolic tree. Dogs mapped the social ground. Whales mastered the acoustic deep. Cephalopods solve problems with distributed neural networks we do not fully understand.

ALP is about to show us the forest. And once we see it, we cannot unsee it. The law will follow. The ethics will follow. And perhaps, finally, the dog’s “woof” will be heard not as noise, but as the data-rich metaping—the joystick ping—it always was.

The dog does not need us to understand every packet. It adapted to our limitations tens of thousands of years ago. The tragedy is that we never bothered to adapt to theirs. We thought we were so smart. The metaping suggests we were merely unchallenged.

9 Conclusion

Animal communication contains structured, high-dimensional data streams capable of algorithmic translation. As ALP bridges the interspecies translation gap, the legal status of animals as mere property becomes structurally unsustainable under classical jurisprudence. The Metaping Hypothesis reframes non-human vocalizations not as primitive precursors to human language, but as orthogonal information systems optimized for different ecological problems—joysticks, not sentences.

The systematic analysis presented here can be replicated by querying open-source bioacoustic datasets (Earth Species Project, Project CETI) via standardized multimodal models and auditing global animal law databases (e.g., Oxford Animal Law / Global Animal Law Project). The next decade will determine not whether we *can* talk to animals, but whether we are humble enough to listen.

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