After a recent trip to the zoo, my 5-year-old son, Mario, asked me, “Mama, who decided that the gorillas should be inside the cage and the people should be outside the cage?” He had a point. The 3-year-old gorilla was very well behaved, while the 3-year-old humans around us threw objects, yelled, and banged on the glass. I was reminded of this conversation as I opened *The Onset of Language* and started to read about the fascinating parallels of early communicative ontogeny in human and nonhuman primates. It can be easy to ignore these parallels when you consider only the end state of human language and nonhuman primate call systems. But, under Masataka’s microscope, the similarities in early vocal and manual behaviors in human and nonhuman primate infants and their caretakers are striking.

Among the recent books on the earliest stages of language development, this volume is truly focused on *early* developments. The first 200 pages of the 250-page text cover birth through babbling. Only in the final chapters does Masataka address the comprehension or production of single words; even then, he focuses on the continuous relationship between earlier behaviors and first words or signs. Masataka dissects each of the early developments that contribute to the infant’s preparedness for language, such as turn-taking, vocal imitation, babbling, and even laughter. Across each domain, he compares human and nonhuman primate behaviors and demonstrates how species-specific routines become shaped, often unintentionally, by caretaker responses. For example, human infants nurse in a pattern of bursts and pauses. Caregivers often jiggle their infants in the pause to make sure they are not falling asleep. Infants learn to expect the jiggling movement and begin to wait for it. In this way, a behavior that is initially biologically driven becomes socially contingent. The roots of turn-taking, by this account, are much deeper than previous explanations suggest.

Masataka’s analysis of early communicative development is grounded in dynamic systems theory (Thelen, 1992) with its focus on the complex interaction of multiple factors during development. He describes communicative behavior in the first year of life in meticulous detail, demonstrating how infants follow individual paths to a common entry point into language. One of those paths concerns the shaping of early bimanual motor behavior into manual babbling constrained to the signing space, the increasing control of manual movements until they become sufficiently similar to adult signs that deaf caretakers treat them as linguistic productions. Only a single chapter of the book is devoted entirely to signed language development, and yet, this book provides a valuable perspective for readers interested in signed languages because Masataka pushes us to see not only the parallels between spoken and signed communication, but between all communicative behaviors in human and non-human primates. On your next trip to the zoo, take a closer look at the primates—the ones inside the cages, that is.

**Reference**


Jill P. Morford

Department of Linguistics, University of New Mexico