



I Speak Animal

Animal Communicator James French on Channel 4

James French, 35, latter-day Dr Doolittle, states the announcer. This is a bad sign - 5 seconds into the programme and it has become obvious that not only is this going to be a programme about someone cashing in on two of the public's favourite obsessions, animals and psychics, but we are going to have to suffer the kind of smug, irritating voice-over not heard since the last Jimmy Carr attempt at humour.

James describes his fantasy of apparently becoming a singing Snow White, with the birds helping him with the washing up and ironing. I refuse to mock anyone's unusual preferences, after all we all have our little secrets, but at the first sign of a blue and yellow dress I'm changing channel.

"He's looking at what his life would be like if he didn't have this issue" he intones, whilst forcibly restraining a small white dog by the neck.

Apparently he uses telepathy to talk to animals, and they use telepathy to talk back to him. This startling fact is accompanied with shots of James fondling horses and for some reason by an operatic soundtrack - either by some spooky force or by the producer being too clever by half (hint - type horse opera into Wikipedia).

"Animal communication is simply picking up the feelings of animals" James informs us, a fraction of a second before being headbutted by a horse. "And interpreting those using our senses" he continues, without even pausing for breath or to put his nose back in its original place.

Randy the Horse

The first case takes place in a stables near Luton, where Nicole has a problem getting on Randy apparently. Come back Jimmy Carr, all is forgiven. Another 25 minutes of this innuendo driven rubbish and I'll be enjoying Carry On films. Apparently Randy is frustrated at the lack of communication between himself and his owner. "You're not understanding me, and I'm getting really nervous!" whines Randy (via James). The horse then attempts to eat James' remarkably straw-like hair, an act interpreted as gushing thanks from the desperate horse.

Apparently Nicole did something that reminded the horse of something that had happened before. Calling in Dr Doolittle perhaps. "I did fall off" Nicole informs us. James then mystically divines that she fell off the right hand side of the horse, an astounding feat that draws gasps from the entranced Nicole. Apparently this is the source of all her problems, as Randy is used to people getting on and off the left hand side. "Ooh, I'm getting really nervous" quavers James, presumably channelling the horse.

James then explains to the horse that people can get on and off on both sides - drawing the revelation from the horse that "I hurt her". Nicole is in tears by this point (as am I, but for very different reasons I suspect). James then reels off some pop-psychology counselling rubbish, and Nicole is converted to the psychic believer army. "I can see the horse getting calmer already" gasps Nicole.

Now there's nothing psychic about it, but like humans, animals can pick up on your mood and some-

one who's stressed about falling off is going to unsettle the horse, which will unsettle the owner, which will unsettle the horse - you can see where I'm going here, can't you? Read a horse whisperer book if you're interested (actually, read one anyway you'll learn a lot if you don't already know it).

We are then treated to a view of James' sad, lonely childhood, his only friends being the dogs, horses and sheep that were his constant companions. We don't learn however what made James think he was telepathically communicating with animals. Presumably the lack of human companions to beat such nonsense out of him.

Jumble the Dog

We are then introduced to James' partner Shelley who apparently provides the business brains to the enterprise. We follow them as they go to meet Jumble the terrier and his owner Jo.

Jumble is apparently a kleptomaniac, and also has a good line in bowling over cameramen and growling at them. Jo tells us of the time Jumble grabbed a toy in a shop and refused to let go, so had to be lifted onto the counter while the barcode was swiped and the toy bought for him. Jumble then runs off with the cameraman's microphone wind shield and refuses to let go, despite James dangling the dog by its teeth a couple of feet off the ground.

"Good boy" says James, as Jumble growls menacingly. Fearlessly, James continues (presumably the fear is considerably reduced by the fact that the dog is hanging in mid-air by its teeth). "That's an intense emotion" says James, whilst Jo stands, hand on hip, looking remarkably unimpressed. "Is that good for his teeth?" asks Jimmy Carr (as I will refer to him, as I have no idea who he is). "Not as bad as the underlying emotion" states James firmly, although his psychic powers must be kicking in as he takes the hint and lowers the dog to the ground.

Jumble then telepathically tells James that the stealing is deep-rooted in his psyche, caused by an alleged (spot the lawyer intervention!) incident with his previous owner. Tell that to the judge. Apparently Jumble used to steal children's toys, and the father of the family beat him for it.

In an astounding display of psychic ability, James says that the dog was beaten around the head, and Jo confirms that the dog had a broken jaw (presumably from being suspended by its teeth). James tries some psychology on the dog, who responds by eating the microphone wind shield. "We're not going to do it in one session" states James, leaving me with a sinking feeling and a possible psychic prediction of my own, it's unclear through the mists but, but, yes, it's coming though! I see a large pot of money changing hands!

Incidentally I've just realised there might be more problems in this household - Jo appears to have a Siamese twin with a terrible birth defect that makes it resemble a horse. She has certainly been sporting a fetching equine accessory in every shot. She then tells us that she has a science background so can't see how James's talent could work, but it definitely does seem to work.

OK, time for a short break here. This woman is presumably intelligent, has a science background (although unspecified), yet appears to know nothing whatsoever about terriers. Dogs that are famous for menacing, fighting, chasing, being independent, fearless, ignoring pain (comes in handy for the teeth-dangling). Dogs that can be wonderful companions if you understand them and train them, but will otherwise display most of the problems that Jumble is displaying. But why let the facts get in the way of a good story.

James then shows us how he can telepathically communicate with animals via their photograph sent over the internet, how he connects with the animal and finds out their feelings and their character. And presumably their startled surprise at suddenly finding some random psychic invading their heads without warning. He apparently asks them how they are physically, emotionally and spiritually (I suppose

animals have lots of free time to sit and ponder their spiritual side).

Mousie the Rat

We then move on to Minky and Mousie the rats, whose owner is concerned about their mental state. Poor Mousie appears to be troubled by something, we are told that Minky was being so violent towards Mousie that he was sent back to the pet shop. Mousie is now nervous and biting his owners. But James has had a psychic chat with Mousie, and it's all down to the fact that Mousie thinks he will also be sent back to the pet shop. "I've tried to tell him he's staying" emotes the owner. James reassures Mousie that his home is secure, and tells the owner to firmly tell him that he is staying. Can anyone here spell anthropomorphism, for some reason the word keeps crashing into my mind.

The Training Session

We are then treated to the horrifically scary sight of a room full of middle-aged women, all training to be psychic pet communicators. "I feel I'm being called by other kingdoms to do it" states one lady. What kingdoms would they be, then? Cambodia? The Magic Fairy Kingdom? Apparently James' workshops runs every other weekend, at a cost of £50 per head. The narrator joins in a class with 40 other people, which means (bear with me whilst I mentally calculate)if he only runs one class a month, he will be earning a decent yearly wage, without taking into consideration all the private consultations. But back to the class. "I know they're trying to tell me something, but I don't know what" says one earnest lady. "I've always communicated with my animals" states a frankly scary looking lady "but I've had trouble with them communicating with me. I've misunderstood what they wanted".

The participants are paired up, and have to swap photos of each other's pets and tell their partner their animal's name. Which appears to confuse the scary looking lady who completely forgets what her animals are called, no wonder she has trouble communicating with them. Everyone then has to tune in to the animal they have a photo of, and write down anything they psychically receive. A glimpse at some of the notes shows us such revelations as "I love my mummy". One lady appears stunned by the success of the experiment, and describes how her cat "went off cat food" and she had to cook him chicken, which she hated as she is a vegetarian. I fail to see the difference between a tin of meaty chunks and a piece of chicken to a vegetarian, but remind myself that these people are obviously missing the common sense gene to begin with. James is lauded for not only being very gifted, but for being willing to share his knowledge (don't worry, I'm saving all this up for a rant at the end). One lady very carefully says that she doesn't seem to be "tuned into what the others are tuned into", but she believes what she hears other people saying. Stop being tactful and just say you think they're all bonkers, we'd love you for it.

Apparently 750 people have so far taken the course. The tax man must be overjoyed.

Jumble the Dog Part 2

We then return to Jumble, but I'm not sure if James has got confused by this point, as he appears to be talking to the dog over the phone. Maybe it's a psychic phoneline. Anyway, James then gives the dog some Reiki healing (the fallback for every psychic, put your hands on it and it will solve everything). James is asked how many sessions he thinks it will take, but appears unwilling to commit. Presumably for as many as he can. A suspicion that becomes stronger when the owner is asked the same question. "It's the cost, really" she says. She is unsure how much it has cost so far, as she hasn't had a bill, but apparently the treatment costs £1 a minute.

When asked if the treatment is working, the owner appears very unsure and seems to have realised she might have been duped but is trying really hard to save face. "He ignored your microphone..... a bit....." she says before admitting that the dog did have a teddy in his mouth so probably wouldn't have attacked the microphone anyway. If you want to see a woman who has suddenly realised an awful truth

but cannot admit it on television, then watch that bit of the show. On cue, Jumble then runs over and attacks the microphone. The owner attempts to distract Jumble with a whole bag full of teddies, but Jumble just stuffs them into his mouth next to the microphone wind shield. In a master stroke though, the owner manages to snatch the microphone windshield from the dog whilst it is stuffing teddy number 6 into its mouth. The owner says “that’s a good game” whilst grinning in triumph. Not for long though, Jumble hoovers up the last of the teddies then stands defiantly in the middle of the floor, looks up at its owner, and wees all over the carpet.

The Advanced Class

We are now informed that James runs special advanced classes for a special, handpicked group of people who will form a group of animal communicators across the country. This comes at the bargain price of £450, but we are not allowed to see it due to its “sensitive nature”. We are however allowed to hear from some of the people undertaking the course. Apparently the course is “intense, hard work, rewarding, emotional, takes you to your limits, explores boundaries”. Quite right too, for £450. These women (yes, they are all women) have all been communicating with animals for a while, but these brave and courageous ladies are undertaking a “spiritual growth”. James tells the ladies over dinner how we all grow up with an incorrect perception of animals, and it doesn’t matter whether you’re communicating with a spider or a rat. This slightly unnerves one of the ladies who cannot imagine ever communicating with a spider. But it’s OK, apparently you just get a glass and explain to the spider that it needs to go into the glass, and approach it slowly, it will indeed go into the glass for you. I still think it’s quicker to use a rolled up newspaper, and if spiders are that clever and psychic why don’t they pick up on the sound of a woman screaming and leave the building before getting squashed?

We then move onto the case of Pamela and her cat Basil. James does his usual trick of talking to the animal apparently over the phone, but this time with an added twist - Basil is in fact dead. Still, James manages to move Basil towards the light via the telephone - that must be a wonderful party trick.

Tiptoe the Cat

And so onto the final case - Tiptoe the cat, who has been hiding in a greenhouse for 2 weeks. Sarah, her owner, is desperate to get the cat back in the house as it must be uncomfortable in the cold and wet in the greenhouse. I should point out here, as a long-term cat person, that cats actually love greenhouses as they get lovely and toastie, even in the depths of winter, if there is a bit of sun. James states that he can feel the “essence” of another cat with Tiptoe, and it is revealed that the cat’s mother has recently died. James explains how when an animal dies, sometimes its spirit can “get stuck”. While trying to reach the light through a telephone presumably. Apparently if there is a lot of emotion it can find it hard to move on, in one sweeping statement James manages to make a whole legion of bereaved pet lovers feel guilty about grieving for their pet. In a surprise moment, Tiptoe the cat exits the greenhouse and wanders back into the house, drawing admiration and disbelief from Jimmy (or whatever his name is) who states that the only explanation was that James must have talked the cat into it. In fact the word “gobsmacked” is even mentioned.

Now I can’t help but notice that not once during the clip do we see the greenhouse door open, except when James squeezes in and out, carefully making sure the door does not open too far. So forgive me if I’m not “gobsmacked” that when the greenhouse door was opened and James, the owner and the cameraman all attempt to get in the greenhouse with the cat, Tiptoe decides her nice comfortable hide-out is getting somewhat crowded and leaves. A cheque passes hands, and everyone leaves happy.

The faux Jimmy explains how James is offering his clients something they want to believe in, probably the truest thing said on the entire programme.

And the show ends with James explaining how he wants to give back what the animals have given him, or somesuch explanation. Not for the money then.

Summary

So, what to make of it all? I guess in some way you have to admire James, he has successfully tapped into an almost unlimited market of not only desperate pet owners who have absolutely no understanding of animals, but also an army of middle aged ladies all ready to strike out like a modern Salvation Army, spreading the word of Jesus, sorry, I mean James. He may indeed have some ability to understand animals, but what really gets my goat (sorry, couldn't resist) is when someone dresses one thing up as another, in this case pretending a rudimentary understanding of how animals behave is actually psychic communication with them. There is no doubting the sincerity of James' love for animals, but like a lot of people he appears to mistake anthropomorphic love for animals with real love for animals. Animals thrive best when being treated as animals, and having their particular needs being met, not by being treated as baby substitute human beings.

Animals are animals, not humans. No matter how much we may love them, they do not think or behave like humans. They are different. They do not think "I love my mummy". If they have conscious thought at all, it would be along the lines of either "sex, food, sex, sex, food" or "food, sleep, food, sleep" depending on the state of their nether regions.

The kindest thing you can do for an animal is understand its needs from its unique animal perspective and treat it accordingly - treat it like a human and, as the owners featured all found out, you end up with all sorts of problems. The cure is not to pretend (consciously or otherwise, let's give them the benefit of the doubt) that putting human interpretations on their actions and putting human words into their mouths will solve all problems. It won't. The only thing you'll end up with is a problem animal and a lighter pocket. And I hope they all realise this before they make their first attempt to psychically connect with a psychotic rottweiler, as I know who will come out on top in that situation, and it won't be the middle aged deluded lady.