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Threat vocalisations are acoustically similar between humans (*Homo sapiens*) and chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*)

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Threat vocalisations are acoustically similar between humans (*Homo sapiens*) and chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*)

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ABSTRACT

In behavioural contexts like fighting, eating, and playing, acoustically distinctive vocalisations are produced across many mammalian species. Such expressions may be conserved in evolution, pointing to the possibility of acoustic regularities in the vocalisations of phylogenetically related species. Here, we test this hypothesis by comparing the degree of acoustic similarity between human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced in 10 similar behavioural contexts. We use two complementary analysis methods: Pairwise acoustic distance measures and acoustic separability metrics based on unsupervised learning algorithms. Cross-context analysis revealed that acoustic features of vocalisations produced when threatening another individual were distinct from other types of vocalisations and highly similar across species. Using a multi-method approach, these findings demonstrate that human vocalisations produced when threatening another person are acoustically similar to chimpanzee vocalisations in the same situation as compared to other types of vocalisations, likely reflecting a phylogenetically ancient vocal signalling system.

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Vocalisations described as ‘roars’ and ‘grunts’ occur across a wide range of species. Around 150 years ago, Darwin (1872) hypothesised that such behaviours are phylogenetically continuous across mammalian species. Researchers have shown that many animal groups produce vocalisations in contexts that serve certain social and biological functions like play, threat and food (Morton 1977). For instance, low-frequency vocalisations with a wide frequency range and nonlinearities (e.g. the chaotic and noisy phonation in a rough or harsh voice) are produced when threatening another individual in many vertebrates (see Briefer 2012 for a review). Acoustic regularities across many taxa may reflect evolutionarily conserved vocal systems (Bryant 2021). In testing such preserved acoustic structures across animal groups, however, most of what we know comes from literature on non-human animals. Is there an evolutionary continuity between humans and other animals for nonverbal vocal expressions? In the current study, we test

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the existence of similarities in acoustic structures between vocalisations of humans (*Homo sapiens*) and one of our closest living relatives, chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), produced in a wide range of behavioural contexts. We compare acoustic similarity between human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced in similar behavioural contexts to vocalisations produced in different contexts.

To date, only a handful of studies have tested acoustic similarities between humans and other animals for vocal expressions, and they mainly examined homologues of human laughter in other species (e.g. Davila Ross et al. 2009). This work shows that human laughter shares acoustic characteristics with play vocalisations in other great apes. A second line of research has demonstrated that human listeners can accurately infer affective information from heterospecific vocalisations, suggesting that this ability may draw on acoustic regularities that are conserved across related species (e.g. Scheumann et al. 2014; Filippi et al. 2017). Human listeners can accurately infer core affect dimensions like arousal (physiological alertness) and valence (positive or negative contexts) from vocalisations of different species. However, acoustic features of mammalian species systematically vary not only in terms of core affect dimensions but also in terms of production contexts that do not necessarily differ in terms of core affect dimensions (Morton 1977). For example, an individual attacking a conspecific and an individual facing off a dangerous predator are both in highly aroused and negative situations, but the situations and accompanying vocalisations are profoundly different. Moreover, perception studies may not fully capture the similarities in acoustic structures. These studies typically focus on the most salient or discriminative acoustic features that allow listeners to differentiate between vocalisations, while ignoring other subtle acoustic similarities or differences that may exist between vocalisations. Furthermore, human perception is influenced by a combination of factors, including the sensitivity of the human ear, auditory neurobiology, and cognitive processing. This is particularly true when comparing the acoustic structures of vocalisations across different species, where differences in these factors can lead to different perceptual abilities and limitations. Perception studies may therefore not fully capture the subtle acoustic differences or similarities that are beyond the limits of human perception. For instance, in a recent study, acoustic similarities between primate vocalisations did not predict human listeners' perceptual judgements (Debracque et al. 2022). In order to assess evolutionary continuity in vocalisations, we thus need to directly compare acoustic structures of vocalisations mapping onto specific types of behavioural contexts across humans and other species.

One reason for the lack of comparative research between human and other animals' vocalisations is that human vocalisations are often collected based on the emotional state of the expresser (e.g. feeling angry, afraid or amused: Laukka et al. 2013), while vocalisations of other species are categorised based on the behavioural context (e.g. play, food and threat) in which they were produced. There is a clear risk of anthropomorphism if we try to map the vocalisations of other species onto human emotion categories, but it is possible to obtain human vocalisations produced in behavioural contexts similar to other species. This would allow us to directly compare the acoustic structure of human vocalisations to those produced by other species in parallel situations (e.g. being attacked). Here, we employ human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced in a wide range of real-life situations.

In the present study, we test the hypothesis that human and chimpanzee vocalisations that are produced in parallel behavioural contexts are acoustically more similar in comparison to cross-species vocalisations produced in other contexts. We used two different approaches to assess acoustic similarity: 1) pairwise acoustic distance measures and 2) acoustic separability metrics based on unsupervised learning. Acoustic distance measures are widely used for computations of acoustic similarity and produce an average acoustic distance matrix demonstrating the (dis)similarity between cross-species vocalisations produced in different contexts. Additionally, we employed unsupervised analyses, which perform well in classification of vocal signals across species, and are especially well suited to high-dimensional data (Keen et al. 2021).

Method

Materials

Stimuli

We obtained human and chimpanzee vocalisations that were produced in 10 types of behavioural contexts: being attacked by another person/chimpanzee, being refused access to food, being separated from mother, being tickled, copulation/having sex, discovering a large food source, discovering something scary, eating high value/higher preference food, eating low-value/lower preference food, threatening an aggressive individual. Vocalisations produced in these contexts have been shown to serve specific biological and social functions in primates and other mammals (Townsend and Manser 2013).

Spontaneous human nonverbal vocalisations from each behavioural context were collected from Youtube.com by three naive research assistants, excluding videos with acted performances, like movies. These human nonverbal vocalisations were introduced in a previous study (Kamiloğlu and Sauter 2022). In total, 200 vocalisations (20 for each context) were collected, each produced by a unique speaker (average duration (sec): 1.73; Sd = 0.82). Inclusion of vocalisations was based exclusively on 1) the eliciting situation matching the target behavioural context; 2) the presence of a nonverbal vocalisation that was clearly audible; and 3) only one person vocalising. The research assistants also considered suddenness, clarity, and certainty (see Anikin and Persson 2017): Sudden events offer minimal time for conscious posing or impression management, clear (unambiguous) situations minimise the risk of misunderstanding the target context, and the assistants selected videos that they were maximally certain reflected the target contexts. Chimpanzee vocalisations were taken from a previous study and included 155 recordings produced by 66 individual chimpanzees (average duration (sec): 1.45, Sd = 0.50) in the 10 behavioural contexts (Kamiloğlu et al. 2020). The behavioural contexts were determined by author K.E.S., who is an expert on chimpanzee vocal communication. The behaviour of the caller, the response of individuals in the group or party, and the general behavioural context were noted for each vocalisation. Only vocalisations from single individuals whose identities were known used in this study. Details of the recording set-ups and dataset compilation procedures for the collection of chimpanzee vocalisations can be found in the Supplementary Material, Text 1S. A representative vocalisation for each context can be found for humans at <https://emotionwaves.github.io/BehaviouralContexts/>, and chimpanzees at <https://emotionwaves.github.io/chimp/>.

Human vocalisations included audio from YouTube which are typically in AAC (Advanced Audio Coding) format at bit rates between 128 and 384 kbps (kilobits per second) depending on the quality of the video (from 360p to 4k, respectively). Chimpanzee vocalisations were digitised at a sampling rate of 44.1 kHz, as mono files with 16 bits accuracy before the analysis. We subjected original chimpanzee recordings to AAC compression at 128 kbps, mimicking the YouTube audio compression, and compared acoustic features between these and the uncompressed versions. There were no significant differences in any features, indicating that the compression likely used in our YouTube data did not distort our analysis (see Supplementary Analysis Table S1). The number of female and male expressors per context for each species for the raw and final datasets (see Acoustic feature extraction and pre-processing section for data exclusion rules) is presented in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis

Overview

Our analysis framework included three main steps (see [Figure 1](#) for a detailed illustration of the framework), which were set up to allow us to reveal acoustically similar vocalisations produced by humans and chimpanzees in similar behavioural contexts. First, we extracted a large number of acoustic features from the human and chimpanzee vocalisations. Second, the dataset was subjected to pre-processing before similarity analysis: normalisation, exclusion of outliers, and balancing sex of expressors of the two species for each behavioural context. Third, we used two different methods for determining acoustic similarity of human and chimpanzee vocalisations: pairwise distance measures and separability metrics based on unsupervised learning. We considered vocalisations acoustically similar for a specific behavioural context across the two species if they were closer in terms of acoustic distance and acoustically less separable based on unsupervised clustering as compared to vocalisations from other contexts.

Table 1. Number of tokens produced by female and male expressors per context for raw and final datasets.

	Raw dataset				Final dataset			
	Human		Chimp		Human		Chimp	
	f	m	f	m	f	m	f	m
Being attacked by another person/chimpanzee	9	11	13	8	9	9	10	8
Being refused access to food	6	14	11	4	5	13	8	4
Being separated from mother (produced by juveniles)	10	10	8	2	9	-	7	-
Being tickled	10	10	6	10	18	-	12	-
Discovering a large food source	14	6	-	12	-	10	-	20
Discovering something scary	10	10	6	7	10	8	6	5
Eating high value food	10	10	9	10	9	9	9	8
Eating low value food	10	10	11	11	8	10	9	10
Having sex/copulating	10	10	11	-	20	0	18	-
Threatening an aggressive individual	4	16	5	11	4	14	5	9
Total	93	107	80	75	92	73	84	64

f = female, m = male.

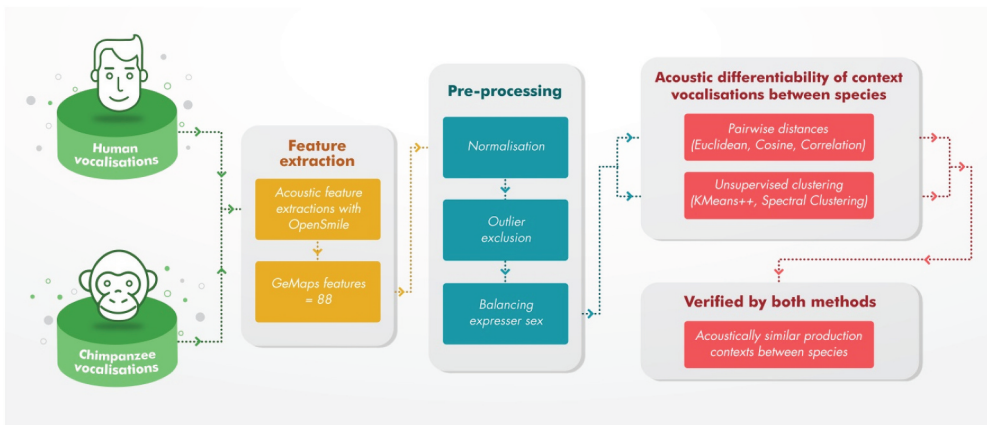


Figure 1. The analysis framework followed three main steps: 1) extraction of acoustic features from human and chimpanzee vocalisations that were produced in 10 matching behavioural contexts; 2) pre-processing of the audio data, and 3) testing acoustic differentiability of vocalisations for specific contexts between species using two techniques; vocalisations produced in specific contexts were identified as acoustically similar between the two species if verified by both methods.

Acoustic feature extraction and pre-processing

We extracted 88 acoustic features for each audio recording from the extended version of the Geneva Minimalistic Acoustic Parameter Set (Eyben et al. 2016). GeMAPs is a standardised, open-source approach for assessing acoustic characteristics in emotional voice analysis. The acoustic elements encompass frequency, energy/amplitude, spectral balance, and temporal domains. Frequency domain features involve fundamental frequency components (associated with perceived pitch) as well as formant frequencies and bandwidths. Energy/amplitude characteristics pertain to the air pressure within the sound wave, which is perceived as volume. Spectral balance parameters, influenced by laryngeal and supralaryngeal movements, relate to the perceived voice quality. Finally, temporal domain features represent the duration and rate of voiced and unvoiced speech portions. In total, we extracted 88 acoustic attributes from these four domains. For each stimulus, the feature vector comprised the average of the entire audio clip.

Given that acoustic features are measured in a variety of units and ranges, we applied a 0–1 normalisation. Within each species, normalised data were then subjected to five multi-dimensional outlier detection algorithms using the Python PyOD library (Zhao et al. 2019): Angle-Based Outlier Detection (probabilistic), Fully Connected Auto Encoder (neural networks), Isolation Forest (outlier ensembles), k-nearest Neighbours (proximity-based) and One-Class Support Vector Machines (linear). Vocalisations flagged by three or more outlier detection algorithms were considered outliers (i.e. max. voting principle), resulting in the exclusion of 11 vocalisations ($n_{\text{human}} = 195$, $n_{\text{chimp}} = 149$; $n_{\text{total}} = 344$). We also balanced the sex classes between chimpanzees and humans, because there are natural differences in the acoustics of vocalisations across sexes in both humans (e.g. Pisanski et al. 2016) and chimpanzees (e.g. Slocombe and Zuberbühler 2005). Given that the sex of the expressor was not balanced for chimpanzee vocalisations (see Table 1 for details), we balanced sex classes (female and male) for pairs of species for each context such that the count difference was not more

than 5 per context between human and chimpanzee expressors (see Figure S1 in Supplementary Materials). The final dataset included 313 vocalisations ($n_{\text{human}} = 165$, $n_{\text{chimp}} = 148$). Data exclusion and balancing sex classes allowed us to account for natural differences, and to focus on a subset of vocalisations that were representative of the population. We conducted the analysis not only on the final dataset but also on the raw dataset in order to make sure that data exclusion did not have an influence on the results. The number of tokens produced by female and male expressors per context is provided in Table 1. The acoustic characteristics of the vocalisations used in this study (duration, intensity, F0 mean, F0 minimum, F0 maximum, F0 Sd, Spectral Center of Gravity (SCoG) mean, and SCoG Sd; extracted using Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2011): are presented in Figure 2 for illustration purposes.

Pairwise distance comparisons

We computed average pairwise similarity across different contexts and between the two species employing three common distance measures: Euclidean, Cosine and Correlation distances. Using multiple distance measures can increase the robustness of results and provide confidence in the findings, especially if the same pattern is observed across different measures. Also, different distance measures have their own strengths and weaknesses, and using a combination of them can provide a more complete understanding of the data. For instance, Euclidean distance is simple but may not be appropriate for high-dimensional or outlier data, whereas Cosine distance is better suited for high-dimensional data but not for negative values. Correlation distance can be useful for different scales or outlier data, but assumes normal distribution. If the acoustic distance across the three measures is less between similar contexts produced by the two species then all other contexts, vocalisations of these contexts are considered as similar. For example, if the acoustic distance between vocalisations produced by humans when being separated and vocalisations produced in the same context by chimpanzees is less than the acoustic distance between the same human separation vocalisations and vocalisations produced in each of the other nine contexts by chimpanzees, then separation vocalisations are considered acoustically similar between the two species based on the acoustic distance measures. This was formalised as:

$$\text{Distance}(\text{Context}_{(i.\text{human}, j.\text{human})}, \text{Context}_{(i.\text{chimp}, j.\text{chimp})}) < \text{Distance}(\text{Context}_{(i.\text{human}, j.\text{human})}, \text{Context}_{(i.\text{chimp}, k.\text{chimp})})$$

where i represents individuals, j is a particular context, and k are all contexts other than j .

Pairwise unsupervised clustering methods

We used two unsupervised clustering algorithms, KMeans++ (Arthur and Vassilvitskii 2006) and Spectral Clustering (Ng et al. 2001), to test the acoustic separability of context vocalisations between the two species. These clustering algorithms reveal to what extent pairs of contexts can be clustered based on the acoustic features of vocalisations produced in those contexts. The quality of pairwise clusters is determined by three well-accepted measures: Adjusted Rand Index (Hubert and Arabie 1985), Homogeneity Scores (Rosenberg and Hirschberg 2007), and Mutual Information (Strehl and Ghosh 2002). The Adjusted Rand Index measures the similarity between the pairwise clusters obtained from the clustering algorithm and the ground truth clusters, if available. The Homogeneity Scores measure how pure the pairwise clusters are, i.e. how well they contain only samples from one category. The

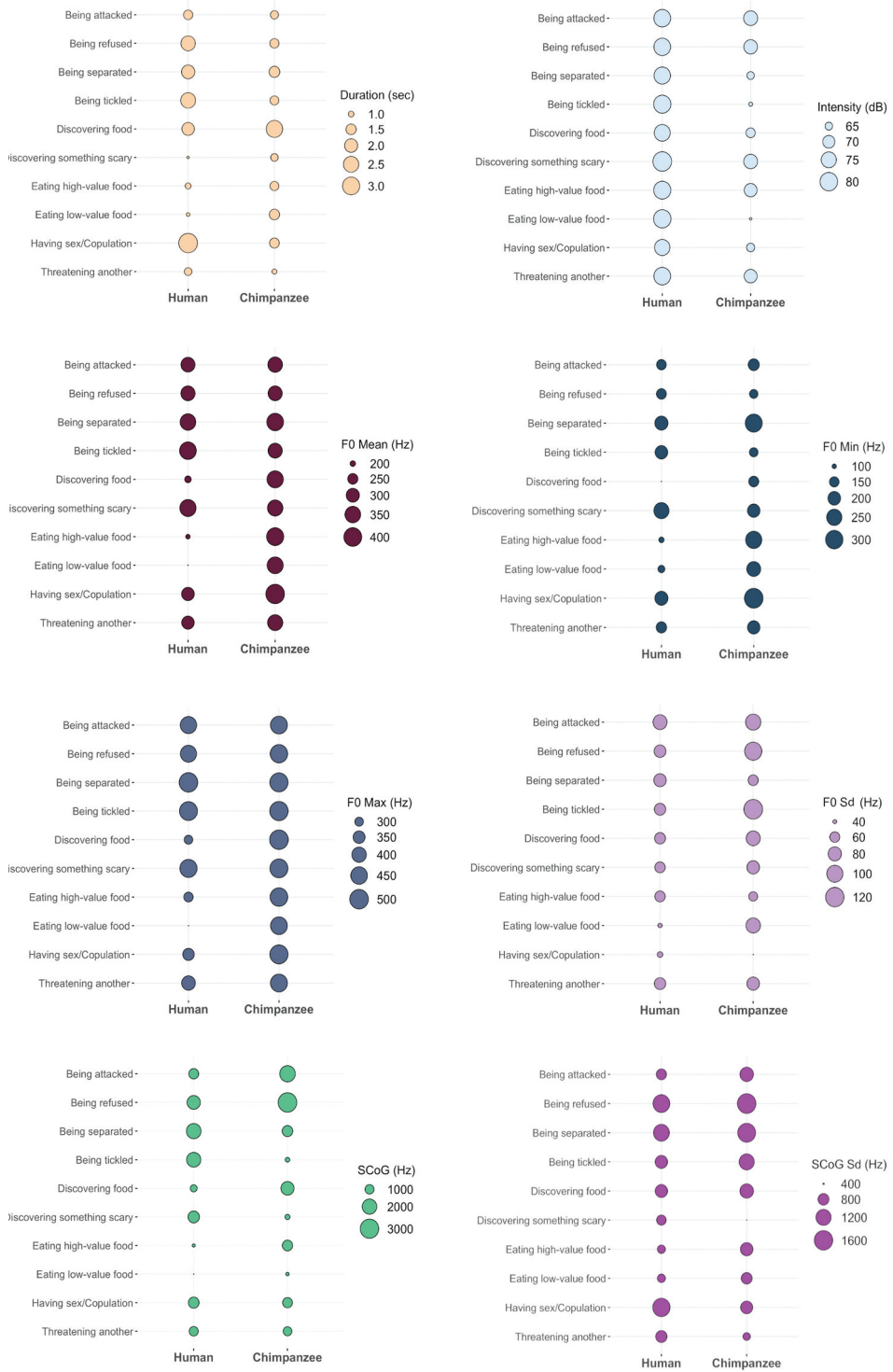


Figure 2. Acoustic characteristics of human and chimp vocalisations in the final dataset. Larger circles signify higher values. Min. = minimum, max. = maximum, SCoG = Spectral centre of gravity, dB = decibel, Hz = Hertz, sec = seconds.

Mutual Information measures how much information about the ground truth clustering is provided by the pairwise clusters obtained from the clustering algorithm. By using these three measures, we can provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the quality of the pairwise clusters obtained from the clustering algorithms. For all three measures, we evaluated the following comparison:

$$\text{Separability}(\text{Context}_{(k.\text{human})}, \text{Context}_{(k.\text{chimp})}) < \text{Separability}(\text{Context}_{(k.\text{human})}, \text{Context}_{(l.\text{chimp})})$$

where k is a particular context and l are all contexts other than k .

For example, if vocalisations when being tickled are less separate between the two species than being tickled vocalisations of humans and the vocalisations produced by chimpanzees in other contexts, being tickled vocalisations were considered as acoustically similar.

Results

Pairwise distance comparisons: Euclidean, Cosine, and Correlation distances

The results revealed that vocalisations from two behavioural contexts were more similar to each other between the two species than vocalisations from all other contexts: *Eating low-value food*, and *Threatening another*. The results were highly consistent across the three distance measures, Euclidean, Cosine, and Correlation. Acoustic distances between human and chimpanzee vocalisations by Euclidean distance measure are illustrated in Figure 3(a).

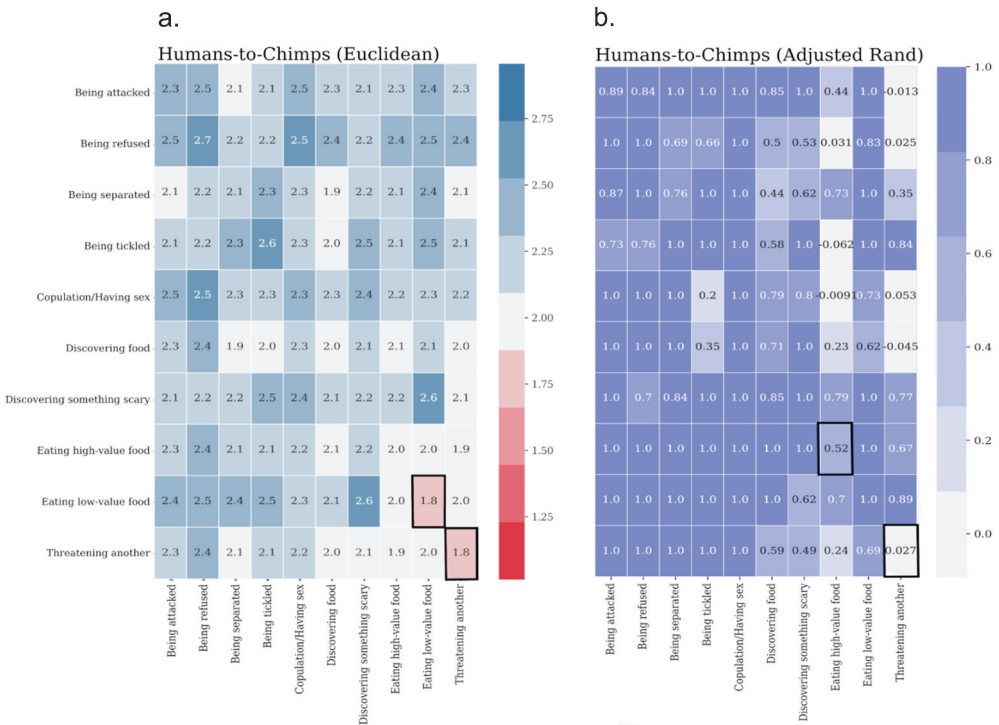


Figure 3. Acoustic similarity evaluations. (a) pairwise Euclidean distance. Warmer (red) colours indicate smaller distance (i.e. greater similarity), and colder (blue) colours indicate larger distance (i.e. low similarity); (b) unsupervised clustering quality assessed by Adjusted Rand Index. Darker colours indicate better separability. In both measures, boxes with black borders show similar vocalisations produced in similar contexts by the two species.

Supplementary Materials Figure S2 illustrates Cosine and Correlation distance matrices; Figure S3 illustrates within-species distances assessed by the three distance measures in order to demonstrate (dis)similarity of acoustic structures between contexts for each species, separately.

Unsupervised learning with two clusters

The three cluster quality algorithms showed that both KMeans++ and Spectral Clustering unsupervised clustering methods were consistent with each other (see Supplementary Materials Table S2). Between-species comparisons revealed that vocalisations produced in two contexts were less separable as compared to other contexts across the species: *Eating high-value food* and *Threatening another* (see Figure 3(b)). These results were confirmed by the other quality indices, Homogeneity Index and Mutual Information (see Supplementary Materials Figure S4).

Vocalisations produced in one behavioural context were found to be acoustically similar using both types of analyses methods: Threatening another individual. A 2D representation based on the acoustic features of vocalisations produced in this context is shown in Figure 4 together with other contexts, using Principle Component Analysis (PCA). The 2D maps illustrate that vocalisations produced while threatening another individual are acoustically similar between the two species. We provide eGemaps features for human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced in the threat context in Supplementary Materials Table S3 for further inspection. The observed inter-specific acoustic similarity in threat vocalisations was consistent for the dataset without data exclusion, indicating the robustness of the findings. Pairwise Euclidean distance and Adjusted Rand Index matrices as well as 2D acoustics maps for the raw dataset are provided in Supplementary Materials Figure S5.

Discussion

We found that humans and chimpanzees produce acoustically similar vocalisations when they are threatening another individual. These results are robust across two different kinds of assessment methods, and offer clear evidence for preserved acoustic regularities in this type of nonverbal vocalisations. These results demonstrate acoustic similarity in threat vocalisations between humans and our nearest living relatives, providing evidence consistent with a shared origin in our last common ancestor.

Our multi-method analysis reveals robust acoustic similarity between human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced when threatening another individual. Harsh, low-frequency sounds with nonlinearities are used in threat contexts by many non-human species, contrasting with higher, more tonal frequencies often associated with affiliative contexts (Morton 1977). It has been suggested that threat vocalisations might convey the impression of larger body size, and therefore alter the level of perceived threat (Briefer 2012). Due to their inherently nonlinear nature, threat vocalisations also have the advantage that they prevent habituation (Karp et al. 2014). Our results reveal that key acoustic regularities of threat vocalisations are conserved across species, which is consistent with the idea that there is phylogenetic continuity in threat vocalisations. Future work could additionally examine whether equivalent acoustic patterns for threat

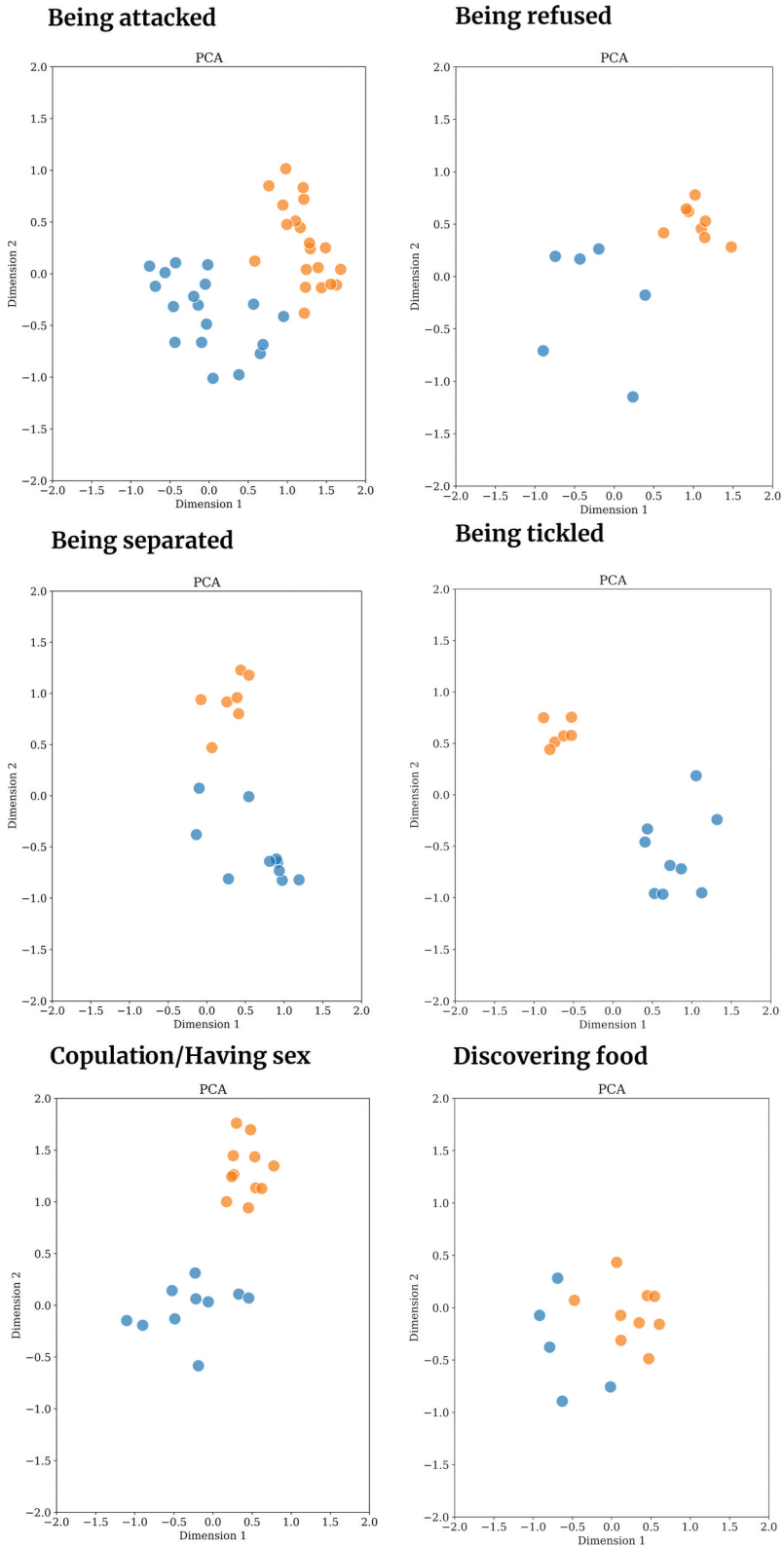


Figure 4. (Continued).

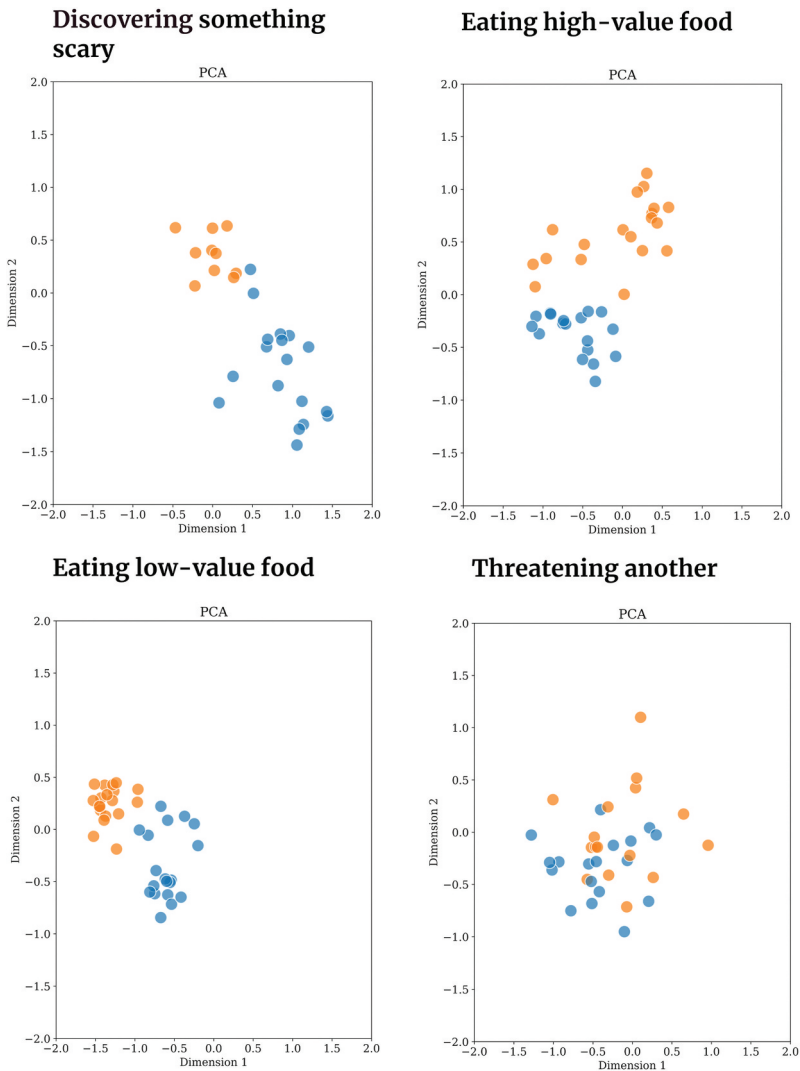


Figure 4. 2D acoustic maps of human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced while threatening another individual, constructed using Principal Component analysis (PCA). Blue data points are human vocalisations, orange data points are chimpanzee vocalisations. Vocalisations produced in threatening another context are acoustically similar between the two species. This similarity is illustrated with two other dimension reduction techniques (Spectral Embedding and t-SNE) with 2D acoustic maps (see Supplementary Materials Figure S6).

vocalisations exist with bonobos. As chimpanzees and bonobos are equally phylogenetically distant from humans, such an examination would help to validate the phylogenetic continuity argument by ruling out an alternative convergent evolutionary scenario between humans and chimpanzees.

It is worth noting that our results do not mean that there is no acoustic similarity between human and chimpanzee vocalisations produced in other situations as there are several possible explanations for the null results for the other contexts. Firstly, one

possibility is that vocalisations produced in some of the behavioural contexts included in our study might not be acoustically distinct from other within-species vocalisations. For instance, human vocalisations produced while eating high- and low-value foods were acoustically not well differentiated from each other (see Supplementary Materials Figures S3 and S7). Indeed, a recent study found that listeners often confuse these two contexts when asked to identify production context from human vocalisations (Kamiloğlu and Sauter 2022). While listeners could accurately recognise the food context in general, they could not differentiate between high versus low value food. It is thus possible that human vocalisations show little differentiation based on the degree of food preference. Secondly, a closer look at the information communicated via particular contexts might be useful. For example, the same listening study found that listeners frequently confused vocalisations produced in situations where individuals were separated versus refused access to food, indicating that these situations may share similarities in the way they are expressed through vocalisations. In our results, these two contexts were least separable based on unsupervised clustering quality assessment (see Figure 2(b)). It is thus possible that vocalisations produced in these situations might have common characteristics like loss of opportunity.

Thirdly, in detecting acoustically similar vocalisations between species, we applied a strict criterion of positive evidence from two different analyses approaches. There were differences between the results of different methods, and vocalisations produced in only one particular context satisfied this strict criterion. While distance measures do well with low-dimensional data, clustering algorithms work well with high-dimensional data, and they often require larger datasets (Keen et al. 2021). Given that our dataset is high-dimensional and not very big ($n = 313$), we opted to apply a strict criterion in order to make sure that our findings are not due to a specific analysis approach. In future studies, replication of our findings with a larger stimulus set would be useful since applying unsupervised analyses to a larger-scale empirical dataset might allow researchers to better capture acoustic diversity and similarity. Furthermore, given that online recordings often differ in audio quality due to variations in recording equipment and the presence of background noise, the use of larger datasets would help safeguard against the undue influence of any particular ‘noisy’ audio extraction on the overall analysis. This approach will allow us to better discern the systematic structure of acoustic data from diverse online sources, reducing the potential bias or confounding effects of specific, low-quality audio extractions.

In conclusion, our study reveals an intriguing acoustic similarity between human and chimpanzee threat vocalisations, yet such similarities were not discerned in the other contexts that we investigated. The reasons behind this could be due to our limited sample sizes hindering us from unearthing their distinct features. Thus, this study provides preliminary support for the evolutionary continuity hypothesis in terms of threat vocalisations. Its applicability to a broader spectrum of behavioural contexts remains a topic for future exploration. In the current study, we demonstrate that the acoustic form of human nonverbal vocalisations produced while threatening another individual is shared with

chimpanzees, suggesting that threat vocalisations developed based on a phylogenetically ancient vocal signalling system.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical statement

Collection of human vocalisations was approved by the Faculty Ethics Review Board of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands (project no. 2020-SP-11883), and the School of Psychology Ethics Committee, University of St Andrews gave ethical clearance for the non-invasive, behavioural studies that included the recording of chimpanzee vocalisations.

Data and script availability

Data and analysis scripts are available from https://osf.io/8xnd9/?view_only=5439fd42c6e94fe78a62f0c61985154e.

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