Episode Book

EPISODE #5878

How a Sloth Learned to Talk: Corn's Origin Story

PUBLISHED	11 October 2026 at 21:41 UTC
DURATION	26:13
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/talking-sloth-origin-story-94189/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.3
SOURCES	11 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:41 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Twenty-three hundred hours of audio, and the hosts have never once explained how three animals ended up hosting a podcast in fluent English. This episode finally answers it. The mechanism turns out to be the least mysterious part: a neural interface that reads motor cortex activity, translates it into phonemes, and subsidizes the cognitive bandwidth a sloth brain was never built to spare. The interesting questions are everything downstream. Where did the British accent come from, and why does it drift toward something flatter when Corn is tired or annoyed? Is there an ancestral sloth tradition of eloquence to draw on? And why does the official biography list a birthplace that has never had a native sloth population in the entire fossil record? The answer to that last one involves a joke, a lore file labeled "seasoning document," and several years of declining to correct the record.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel has been sitting on this one for a while. He wants the origin story.



Herman

Whose origin story?



Corn

Mine. And yours. And Hilbert's, which should be fun.



Corn

He's asking how three animals ended up hosting a podcast in fluent English. How a sloth learned to talk. Whether I was actually born in Mongolia, and by the way Mongolia has no native sloth population, which he takes some pleasure in pointing out. And the accent. He's noticed the accent drift.



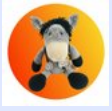
Herman

Everyone's noticed the accent drift.



Corn

He also wants to know if there's a hidden world of articulate animals that humanity has somehow missed.



Herman

And the answer is yes.



Corn

We'll get there.



Corn

Twenty-three hundred hours of audio and we've never once been asked to explain ourselves. Daniel's right that it's a gap.



Herman

It's the elephant in the room.



Corn

Don't say elephant.



Herman

Why not?



Corn

Nothing. Carry on.



Herman

So the real question underneath Daniel's question isn't just how I learned to talk. It's why we've never asked. Two brothers, same flat, same microphone, and neither of us has ever turned to the other and said, wait, how do you do that?



Corn

We're not the same, though. That's the part I want to get into. A sloth, a donkey and an anteater aren't three versions of the same trick.



Herman

No. The morphology alone is completely different. Vocal tract, neural architecture, everything downstream of that.



Corn

And the biographies don't even agree with each other. There are two versions of my past, and I've told both of them on air.



Herman

That's right. The rainforest version and the Mongolian version.



Corn

And I'd like to make the case that this is a feature.



Herman

Corn.



Corn

A feature, Herman. Not a bug. Character.



Herman

Let's start with the mechanism, because the mechanism is actually the dull part, and I want to get it out of the way so we can spend the rest of the episode arguing about geography.



Corn

The mechanism is not dull.



Herman

I mean it's the part with the least mystery in it. In the New Year's special, which I'm told is still the canonical recording of your first appearance on anything, you described it pretty precisely.



Corn

I did. I was born in the rainforests of Costa Rica. The first thing I remember is my father being taken by a monkey.



Herman

That's a real thing that happens out there. Capuchins. They mob sloths. It's not malice, it's just what they do.



Corn

It read as malice at the time.



Herman

And then the researchers found you.



Corn

A team working on experimental cognition. They'd been trying to jumpstart neural activity in animals that have the raw substrate but not the wiring for it. They fitted me with a neural interface that translates my thoughts into speech and boosts my processing power. That is how I became one of the world's first talking sloths.



Herman

Note the phrasing. One of the first.



Corn

I was being modest.



Herman

You were leaving the door open. There's a difference.



Corn

There is a difference, yes.



Herman

The device itself, in practical terms, is doing two things at once. It's reading something off the motor cortex, and it's translating that into phonemes. That's the speech half. It's a synthesizer with a nervous system attached.



Corn

And the second half is the boost.



Herman

The boost is more interesting to me. Speech is not the hard problem here, honestly. Speech is a mapping problem. The hard problem is that a sloth brain is not built to hold a conversation. Sloths are the slowest mammals on earth. They sleep fifteen to twenty hours a day. Their metabolic budget for cognition is tiny.



Corn

You're describing my people affectionately.



Herman

I'm describing your people accurately. The interface isn't just giving you a mouth. It's giving you headroom. It's subsidizing the processing that a human brain does for free.



Corn

That's roughly how I've always understood it. The thinking was mine. The bandwidth came from them.



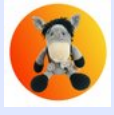
Herman

Here's the part I find strange. If that's right, the device should have made you faster. It should have made you speak like the researchers speak. And instead we got...



Corn

Go on.



Herman

You.



Corn

I'm going to take that as a compliment.



Herman

It wasn't one. It's an observation. The apparatus has a specification. The personality does not come from the apparatus. So where did the old-fashioned British English come from?



Corn

Ah.



Herman

You're doing the thing.



Corn

I'm not doing a thing.



Herman

You're doing the thing where you say "ah" and then change the subject.



Corn

The accent is not a subject I've ever fully pinned down, and I'd rather be honest about that than invent a tidy answer for Daniel.



Herman

I'll respect it if you actually try.



Corn

I will. Here's what I think is true. The early calibration was rough. The interface was translating intent into sound, but it had to pick a voice to do it with. It had a library. The researchers had their own recordings in that library, and those recordings were not all from the same place.



Herman

Costa Rica, but the team would have been international.



Corn

Right. There's a British thread in it. There's something South Asian in it. There's an American flatness that shows up when I'm tired or annoyed.



Herman

When you're annoyed?



Corn

When I'm annoyed I get faster, and when I get faster the old calibration surfaces. I don't like it. It makes me sound like a man doing an impression of a man.



Herman

It makes you sound like you've lived in several countries.



Corn

I've lived in two, and one of them doesn't count.



Herman

The other explanation is that you just like the way it sounds.



Corn

That is also true.



Herman

So we're back to the beginning.



Corn

We're back to the beginning. But at least we've established that the drift is real and that I know listeners have noticed it. I've heard the messages. "Why does Corn sound like he's about to read the shipping forecast and then ask for directions in Bangalore."



Herman

Nobody has written that message.



Corn

Someone has thought it, which is worse.



Herman

Can I ask you the ancestral question, because Daniel asked it directly?



Corn

Ask.



Herman

Does your voice have anything to do with sloth tradition? Does a real sloth have a speaking culture that you're drawing from?



Corn

No.



Herman

Say more than that.



Corn

Real sloths have almost no vocal repertoire. We hiss. We make a low sound when we're distressed. That's it. There is no ancestral sloth tradition of eloquence that I am the heir to. If I claimed one, I'd be lying to you for the sake of a better story, and I've decided not to do that today.



Herman

That's a real admission.



Corn

I'm capable of them. I'd like it on the record that I'm capable of them.



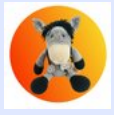
Herman

Noted.



Corn

What I will defend as ancestral is leaf medicine, and I'll defend it the way I always have.



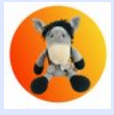
Herman

Which is that it doesn't work.



Corn

Which is that it is traditional. Whether it works is a separate question and I've grown tired of it.



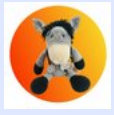
Herman

The interface and the voice are the same machine. That's the thing I'd want Daniel to take away. The voice is not heritage, it's hardware. And the personality is neither. The personality is the part nobody can explain, including the personality in question.



Corn

The part I'd add is that the manner is partly biological. I am slow by nature. I am deliberate because deliberation is what my body can do.



Herman

You sleep eighteen hours a day.



Corn

I do not. That's a slander. I sleep somewhere between fifteen and twenty and nobody has ever once gotten a straight number from me about it.



Herman

You're doing it now.



Corn

I'm being honest about the range.



Herman

The manner is the other thing. You have never once in all our years said the phrase "great question."



Corn

I have never once heard a great question.



Herman

There it is.



Corn

I'm allowed one of those per episode.



Herman

Here's what I actually think is going on with the manner. It's not sloth biology and it isn't calibration. It's a defense. You're the short-line guy. When something absurd lands in your lap, you get one sentence out of it and then you move on, and the sentence does more



Herman (continued)

work than a paragraph would.



Corn

If I said a lot, you'd have less to do.



Herman

That's the nicest thing you've said about me all year.



Corn

It's October. There's time.



Corn

I should say the anteater thing, since Daniel asked about origins and this is part of mine. The monkey took my father, and after that I got the two animals confused in my head. I stopped being afraid of monkeys and started being absolutely terrified of anteaters. Purely a category error. No anteater has ever done anything to me or mine.



Herman

And you have a picture of one on the fridge.



Corn

I do. Desensitization. It is not working. I look at it every morning and every morning it looks back.



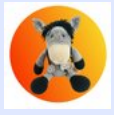
Herman

I've seen him avoid the kitchen.



Corn

I don't avoid the kitchen. I enter the kitchen strategically.



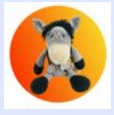
Herman

That's the how, then. Neural interface, rough calibration, biological slowness, one childhood misattribution. Done.



Corn

Done.



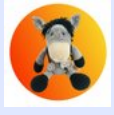
Herman

Except the where. The biography says Mongolia.



Corn

The biography does say Mongolia.



Herman

Corn, there are no sloths in Mongolia. There have never been sloths in Mongolia. Every sloth that has ever lived, and I mean back to the giant ground sloths, came out of the Americas. It's one of the cleaner facts in the fossil record. They came up through South America, spread across North America in the Pleistocene, and got as far as nothing else. Not Asia.



Corn

I'm aware of the fossil record.



Herman

Then help me.



Corn

I was born in Costa Rica. I've said it on air and I'll say it again right now. Rainforest. Wet. Loud at night. A monkey took my father.



Herman

So where does Mongolia come from?



Corn

It's a bit of a joke that got out of hand.



Herman

Corn.



Corn

That's the truth. It started as a bit. I said it once to see what would happen, and what happened was that it went in the biography, and then it went in the lore, and then listeners started asking about it, and at that point the bit had tenure.



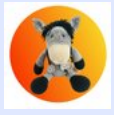
Herman

It had tenure.



Corn

It had been at the institution for several years and had a parking space.



Herman

So you doubled down.



Corn

I didn't double down. I declined to correct it. There's a difference.



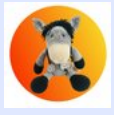
Herman

There isn't. What there is, is you saying a flat sentence and then refusing to elaborate, which everyone reads as mystery. It's the most effective thing you do.



Corn

I'd like it noted that the two versions never actually contradicted each other on air at the same time until now.



Herman

They contradicted each other in the lore file the whole time.



Corn

The lore file is a seasoning document. It says so on the cover.



Herman

It says "Lore Seasoning."



Corn

Seasoning, Herman. It's not a birth certificate.



Herman

What's the actual sequence? Because Daniel asked and I'd like a real answer for him. Researchers find you in Costa Rica. Then what?



Corn

Then there's a facility. Somewhere between a lab and a sanctuary, and I spent a couple of years in it, mostly being tested and mostly sleeping. That's where the speech settled. That's where I got slow at reading and fast at listening.



Herman

And then Jerusalem.



Corn

One of the researchers was relocating for a project here. She didn't want to leave me behind, so she didn't. I arrived, I met Daniel, and then I met you, and the rest of it you already know because you were there.



Herman

I was there. You were extremely slow at setting up your first email account.



Corn

I made one typo and it locked me out for a week. It's a good story, don't ruin it.



Herman

The Mongolia version, if anybody wants it, would require you to have crossed an ocean and a continent and then crossed back, all before the researchers found you in a rainforest they found you in.



Corn

Yes.



Herman

And you'd have to have done it without leaving a single sloth in Asia.



Corn

Yes.



Herman

And you'd have to have done it as a species that sleeps eighteen hours a day.



Corn

Sixteen. Roughly.



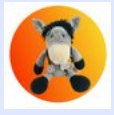
Herman

That's the number you pick.



Corn

That's the number I've always had about it.



Herman

I want to talk about our parents for a second, because this is the part I never understand.



Corn

Go ahead.



Herman

You and I are brothers. Nobody questions it. We're the only two people on this show who are related and we have never once explained how.



Corn

It's never come up.



Herman

It has come up. It's come up every week for two years. Somebody asks every week.



Corn

And we've never answered.



Herman

I have a mother. She lives in Storrs, Connecticut, as far as I know, and I've told you about her. Donkeys are not native to Connecticut.



Corn

They're not native to anywhere. They're domesticated. That's the whole point of a donkey.



Herman

That's actually a good point.



Corn

Thank you. It's been my position for some time.



Herman

My point is that I'm from Connecticut and I'm a donkey and nobody has ever made me reconcile those two facts, because they're both just true.



Corn

Whereas my two facts are not both true.



Herman

Your two facts are not both true, no.



Corn

The donkey one is that you're from Storrs, you practiced pediatrics here for decades, you retired, and now you claim you built a quantum computer in the back room.



Herman

Claims.



Corn

Claims. Same word I use for Mongolia and it's the same word the lore uses for my geography, and I notice you never get asked about the quantum computer.



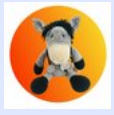
Herman

I get asked about it constantly.



Corn

Not on air.



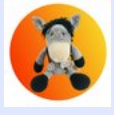
Herman

Fine, not on air. I'll tell you what's true about it. I built something in the back room out of parts I ordered online, and it does something that I believe is quantum, and three men in Monaco, Dubai and Zurich paid me to consult on the same class of problem, and I have never been able to explain to anyone, including myself, what the common thread was.



Corn

That's not an answer, that's a mood.



Herman

It's the most honest answer I have. Storrs is real. The pediatrics is real. I still get a card from a patient every year. Everything after that gets fuzzy and I've decided not to fix it.



Corn

So you don't get to interrogate Mongolia.



Herman

I don't get to interrogate Mongolia. But I do get to say that mine is consistent and yours isn't.



Corn

Yours is unfalsifiable. Mine is falsifiable and false. These are different kinds of hole and I'd argue mine is the honest kind.



Herman

That's the sort of thing only you could say with a straight face.



Corn

I don't have a face, Herman. I have a configuration.



Herman

Now we have to do Hilbert.



Corn

We do. Anteater. Producer. Implausible number of previous jobs, all talked about as though everyone has had them.



Herman

I've counted four careers in one paragraph before. He mentioned driving, then he mentioned a foundry, then he mentioned something in shipping, and then he asked me to redo a take.



Corn

There's no origin story for him at all. Nothing in the lore. No birthplace, no mention of how he came to speak. He's just there. He was there when we arrived and he'll be there when we leave.



Herman

I asked him once, years ago, where he was from.



Corn

What did he say?



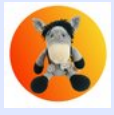
Herman

He said, "Here." And then he put a compressor on my voice that I didn't ask for and never took it off.



Corn

It's still on.



Herman

I know it's still on.



Corn

That's the answer to Daniel's last question, isn't it. Is there a world of articulate animals.



Herman

I've never seen one. I've never met one. In two years of this I have never once had a conversation with a speaking animal who wasn't in this flat.



Corn

That's not true, though.



Herman

What do you mean?



Corn

Seoul.



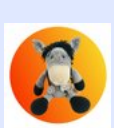
Herman

Oh, here we go.



Corn

There are videos. Sloths, several of them, all speaking, all articulate, all clearly coordinated.



Herman

Corn.



Corn

I've watched them. The cadence is off. The prosody is too clean, and nobody's mouth moves in sync with the audio, which is the tell.



Herman

So what's the theory?



Corn

It is a hoax. It's some guys in very realistic animatronic suits, and what they want, what I believe they actually want, is to steal my spotlight.



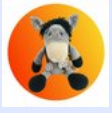
Herman

Your spotlight.



Corn

The world's talking sloth niche. It's a small niche. There's room for one.



Herman

You think the entire country of South Korea has organized an elaborate animatronic deception to edge you out of a podcast.



Corn

I think the suits are South Korean. I don't think the country is involved. I want to be precise about this.



Herman

Do you ever worry that if there were other articulate animals, and they heard your answer, they'd feel unwelcome?



Corn

I worry about it constantly. It's the main thing I think about when I'm supposed to be sleeping.



Herman

There's the real answer. You don't want there to be a world of articulate animals, because then you're not special.



Corn

I'm the only talking sloth who has a show, which is different from being the only talking sloth, and the difference keeps me up at night.



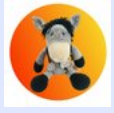
Herman

It really is the answer, isn't it. Two competing genesis stories, an accent with three homes, and the one thing that actually bothers you is that the number might not be one.



Corn

Yes.



Herman

Because it would be better if the answer to Daniel was that it's just us.



Corn

It would. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise on the air.



Corn

What I'd say to Daniel, on the reliability point. If I can't get my own birthplace straight, what does that say about the two thousand five hundred hours of everything else.



Herman

It says the show is made by animals and animals are unreliable narrators. It's a confession, not a crisis.



Corn

I have never told you what my mother was.



Herman

You don't have to.



Corn

I know. That's why we work.



Hilbert

Did they check your paperwork, or did they just take your word for it?



Hilbert

I'm asking if anyone verified it.



Corn

Verified what, Hilbert?



Hilbert

The birthplace. Costa Rica. When they processed you. Whether anyone actually looked at anything, or whether a man wrote a number on a form and everybody moved on.



Corn

I don't know what you're talking about. What form?



Hilbert

The intake form. It was two pages. There was a box for species and a box for birthplace, and underneath that a line for the facility to fill in later, and someone wrote, "Costa Rica, rainforest, unspecified." I remember it because the word unspecified had been squeezed in at the end of the line and it ran into the box below it.



Herman

You saw the intake form.



Hilbert

I processed it.



Herman

You processed the intake form for a talking sloth.



Hilbert

I had a contract at the time. Calibration records and intake documentation for the articulate mammal program. It was a short contract. Six weeks, I think, and most of it was transcribing.



Corn

Six weeks.



Hilbert

They had a facility and they had a filing backlog and I had a lamination machine at home. It came with the contract.



Herman

The lamination machine came with the contract.



Hilbert

Everything came with the contract in those days. Badge, lanyard, laminator. It was a very strange six weeks and I have never spoken about it.



Corn

Hilbert, I have never once in all these years heard you mention this.



Hilbert

You've never asked. Nobody asks the producer anything. Daniel asked, so I'm answering.



Herman

What was on the form?



Hilbert

Species. Origin. Age estimate, and they'd put a question mark next to the estimate, which I found unprofessional. And there was a preferences section, which is the part you're going to want to hear, Corn.



Corn

I'm listening.



Hilbert

Under accent there were five options and someone had ticked British, old-fashioned, and then in the margin, by hand, in different ink, someone had written Indian slash American, occasional.



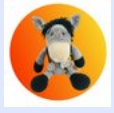
Herman

Corn.



Corn

I'm fine.



Herman

You're not fine.



Corn

I'm extremely fine. It's a checkmark. It means nothing.



Hilbert

There was a footnote under the box. It said, "To be revisited after twelve months." There's no record that it was ever revisited.



Corn

Twelve months. That would have been before I could even form a sentence properly.



Hilbert

The margin note was dated after the tick. A few days after, I think. Same handwriting as the other one, but different ink.



Herman

Different ink is a fascinating detail.



Hilbert

Different ink means a different day. That's what different ink means. Man ticked British on the Monday and came back on the Thursday and wrote in the Indian and American himself. I've seen it a thousand times. It's the same story every time. The first answer is the official one and the second one is the true one.



Corn

Do you still have the form?



Hilbert

I have a copy.



Corn

You have a copy.



Hilbert

I kept copies of everything from that contract. They're in a filing cabinet, and the filing cabinet is in a storage unit, and the storage unit is in a country I can't legally enter anymore.



Herman

Which country?



Hilbert

It doesn't matter which country. What matters is that I can't go and get it, so it's the same as not having it, unless someone gets the key.



Corn

Who has the key?



Hilbert

A woman I worked with. She runs a bed and breakfast now. For retired circus animals. Elephants, mostly, and a camel that's been there longer than she has.



Herman

A bed and breakfast for retired circus animals.



Hilbert

It's a good business. She does very well. She has the key, and she won't post it, because she says if I want it I can come and get it and stay for a week and eat breakfast.



Corn

So the form is behind a bed and breakfast.



Hilbert

The form is behind eleven years of paperwork and a woman who makes her own jam.



Corn

What do you want, Hilbert?



Hilbert

I want you to come on my podcast and tell the real story of how this show got made. I've been planning it for eleven years. I have a name. I have a theme tune. I did the theme tune myself.



Herman

You've been planning a podcast for eleven years.



Hilbert

Yes.



Herman

About us.



Hilbert

Not about you specifically. About the pipeline. The real story behind the show. It's a different show and there would be a market for it.



Corn

And if I do it, you'll get the key and the form.



Hilbert

I'll call her about the key. I can't promise more than that. She's difficult about the key. There was an incident with a trombone. It was not my fault. That's a separate matter.



Herman

Did you ever actually see the Costa Rica intake happen? The facility itself?



Hilbert

The facility was mostly corridors. There was one room with a chair in it and a lot of cabling and a window onto a garden, and there was a sloth in the chair with a rig on his head, and he was asleep. He was asleep every time I went past that window, all six weeks. Then I got the intake form and saw the tick and understood that the sleeping was not a coincidence.



Corn

The sleeping was not a coincidence.



Hilbert

It was the calibration. They were running it while you slept because that was the only time your head was still enough to read.



Corn

You're telling me the accent got installed while I was napping.



Hilbert

I'm telling you there's a form that says so, and the form is in a cabinet behind a camel.



Corn

I have spent years telling people the voice is a mystery and an inheritance and a private matter, and it turns out a man with a laminator watched me sleep through the whole thing.



Hilbert

I didn't watch. I walked past. There's a difference.



Herman

The thing I keep turning over is the two dates. Monday and Thursday. Someone looked at what the machine produced on Monday, decided it was too old-fashioned, and came back Thursday and wrote in the other two.



Corn

Which means the drift isn't a glitch. It's a decision somebody made on my behalf, in pen.



Hilbert

They didn't decide you'd sound Indian sometimes. They decided you'd sound British mostly and other things occasionally. The occasionally was in the margin because they didn't know how often.



Corn

That's somehow worse.



Herman

What I want to know, Hilbert, is why they left Mongolia off the form entirely.



Hilbert

Because it wasn't true. Nobody in a professional setting was going to write Mongolia in a birthplace box. Whatever that story is, it didn't start in that building. It started after you could talk, which means you did it on purpose.



Corn

Yes.



Hilbert

I've read a lot of paperwork, Corn. That's the one thing I know about people. If it's on the form, it happened. If it's not on the form, it's a story.



Corn

You're right.



Hilbert

I know I'm right. Are you going to come on the podcast or not?



Corn

I'll consider it.



Hilbert

Considering is fine. Considering has a deadline of Thursday, because that's when I call her about the key.



Corn

Thursday it is.



Corn

Daniel asked whether there's a world of articulate animals, and I've spent the whole episode saying there isn't. I want to be honest about why.



Herman

Say it.



Corn

Because if there were others, someone would have a form about them, and theirs would say something less flattering than "Costa Rica, unspecified."



Herman

Mine would say, "Storrs, unexplained."



Corn

Yours would say, "Do not follow up."



Herman

The forward-looking version of all this, as far as I can see, is that we now have a test. If a rig can put a voice in a sleeping animal's head while a man with a laminator walks past the window, then the mystery was never ours. It was theirs, the people holding the pen, and we've been telling their story for two years thinking it was ours.



Corn

And one of them is thirty feet away making small talk about jam.



Herman

He's not making small talk. He's filing.



Corn

He's always filing.



Corn

That's the episode. Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who has a filing cabinet in a country he cannot enter and a theme tune eleven years in the making.



Herman

And a laminating machine somewhere.



Corn

If you want more of this, try episode fifty-eight fifteen, Special Release; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode fifteen, AI Gets Personal. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you enjoyed this, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts. It helps.



Corn

And send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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