

Once when I was cooing at my cat and asking if she loved her “mommy,” an annoyed housemate asked me “What would you do if she actually answered you?”

“She does,” I said. “If she purrs, she’s saying ‘yes’ and if she runs away it’s a no.”

People always want to know what their pets are thinking and feeling. Most settle for a few obvious clues. Some go so far as to hire an “animal communicator” to try and read a difficult pet’s mind. Those who work with pets professionally have always used careful observation to build up a working dictionary of cat and dog body language. And biologists have created more structured interpretations of wild animals’ communications.

But in recent years, some of those threads have come together. Scientists have started applying knowledge about wild canines and felines to their domesticated cousins. Behaviorists have taken their mental dictionaries and started comparing notes and writing things down. And pet owners want in on the secrets.

The result has been a spate of books like *Pet Speak* by the editors of *Pets* magazine and *How to Speak Dog* by Stanley Coren, which tries to make sure that you and your pet are speaking the same language. Jean

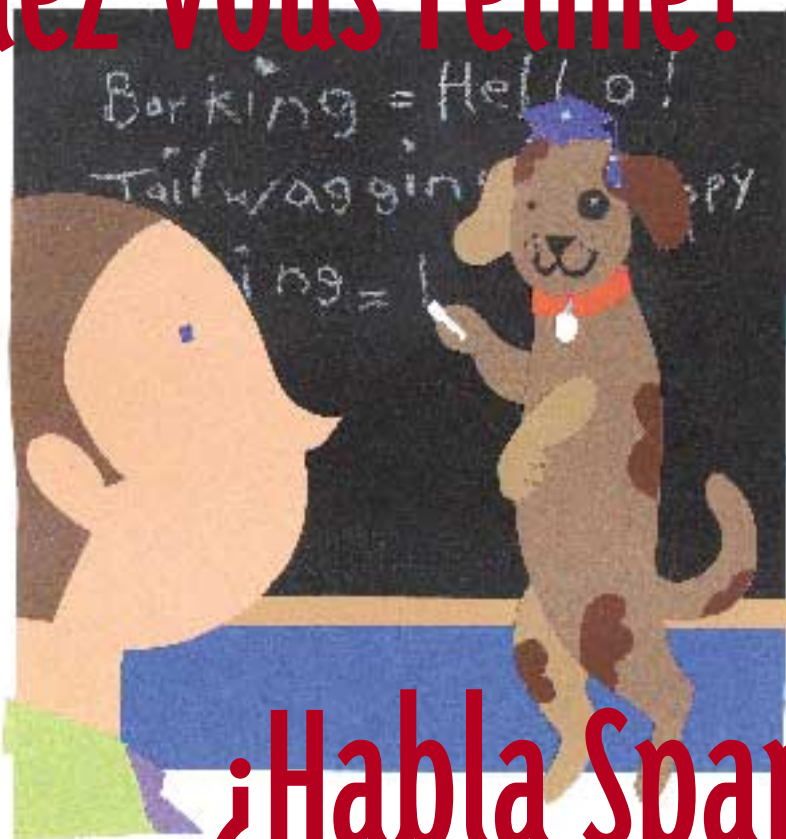
Craighead George has started the education early with illustrated children’s books like *How to Talk to Your Cat* and other titles are sure to come as our knowledge of animal communication increases. But what are the basics of understanding your pet?

things with their vocal cords, they rely more on their bodies. A cat is saying something with her posture, tail, ears, whiskers, eyes and even hair. Dogs communicate with their tails, ears, mouths and stance, plus eye contact, how they face you and who wins at tug-o-war. If you think a cat is happy with a bout of petting

because he is purring up a storm, yet you don’t notice when he starts to lash his tail and put his ears back and his whiskers forward, you are in for an unpleasant surprise. But don’t say he didn’t warn you. You just weren’t listening with your eyes.

Just as you have to pay attention to what your pet’s body is saying, you also have to look at your own body language. Miscommunication in body language can cause problems in training,

Parlez Vous Feline?



By Carla Schack
Illustrations by Rhonda Voo

¿Habla Spaniel?

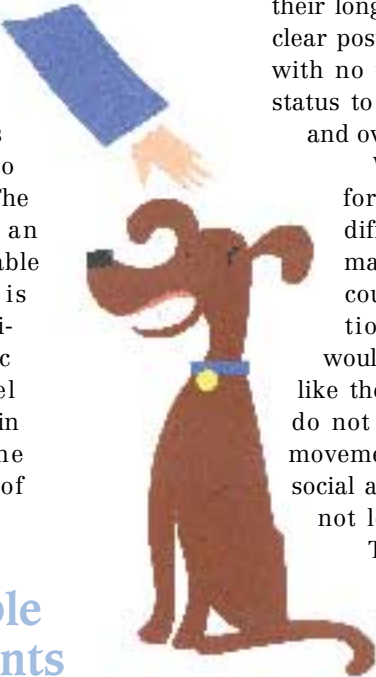
Learning to Hear What Animals Tell You

Basic grammar

The first step to knowing what your pet is saying is to stop listening – listening with your ears, that is. Humans communicate mostly with words, so we give a lot of weight to the noises our animals are making. But while pets do communicate some

such as when you are attempting to be the boss but sending signals which your dog interprets as meaning that he is the one in charge. Giving ground to a pushy or leaning dog, feeding treats and meals on her command, or allowing her to take dominant postures can lead to an “untrainable” dog who tragically may

end up in a shelter. Even more tragic results are possible when children send the wrong messages. A child who looks intently at a dog, smiles and leans forward to pet its head may think he is saying “You’re interesting, I like you, I want to pet you.” But to the dog, especially if it has a dominant personality, a stare, showing the teeth and trying to touch the head says “I’m threatening, I’m dangerous and I want to dominate you.” The result can be an entirely preventable dog bite. This is why humane societies and public safety personnel work hard to train children in the basic language of dog aggression.



The trouble with accents

You might think that even though humans can’t always tell what pets are saying and vice versa, at least communication would be clear within a species.

This isn’t always true, and ironically, humans are to blame. As dogs have been bred for specialized tasks, their bodies have been shaped to fit. Since their instincts haven’t had time to catch up, some dogs literally may not know what they are saying.

Imagine a person whose eyes were built to always look downcast, or whose hands were always clenched in fists. They would be projecting an emotional message to the people around them, but it would have nothing to do with their actual feelings. This is essentially the situation of a dog like the whippet, whose tail is always tucked under in what other dogs may perceive as a fearful

gesture, or the sheepdog whose long bangs give the impression of never making any eye contact. It may also explain why small dogs are often aggressive towards other dogs. Breeds like Lhasa Apsos or Pekinese have different ears, tails and facial shapes than the “mental dog” that their instincts still carry around, and their long hair and short legs inhibit clear posture language. They are left with no way to communicate their status to other dogs except barking and overt attack behavior.

While cats have been bred for specialized looks as well, different cat breeds have few major physical differences that could affect their communication. The only exceptions would be tailless cats and a few like the Scottish Fold whose ears do not have the normal range of movement. But since cats are less social animals than dogs, this does not lead to as many problems.

The important thing to a cat is that her human understands her, and if you use individual observation you can generally work around breed differences.

Pidgins and Creoles

Books on pet communication depend on the fact that most of the “language” of pets is based deeply in their natural instincts and is consistent across many individual animals. However, when one set of body language is in constant interaction with another, some special signals are going to develop. So while baring the teeth is not generally a good thing in wild canines, many dogs will

learn to “smile” just for their owners, to show how happy they are in language we will understand. Some owners do their best to imitate the “bows” that dogs give each other to show a willingness to play; and though our attempts may be horrible, friendly dogs generally respond.

But the value of learning animal body language isn’t all about fun and games. Behaviorists and trainers also benefit from the emphasis on pet communication, and are spending more time teaching owners how to read their pets and establish proper relationships. It may seem a trivial detail that canines in the wild show submission by conspicuously urinating. But when a pet professional hears about a dog who is “spitefully peeing right in front of me no matter how much I discipline her” this piece of trivia could mean the difference between a submissive dog who can still eventually get trained, and a potentially wonderful dog being needlessly euthanized. While animal language may seem to be just a fun fad, as people become more fluent the result could be a better life for animals and people.

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