DO YOU SPEAK DOG?

UNRAVELING THE SECRETS OF CANINE COMMUNICATION

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

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"I'd love to be able to have a conversation with a dog and know what it's thinking," says Bonnie Beaver, D.V.M. "But I don't know," she laughs, "if I'd *really* want to know."

As professor of veterinary medicine at Texas A&M University and past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Beaver understands more about dogs than most of us do. She knows that a tail wag isn't always friendly, and a bark isn't very communicative. But as much as she's learned, Beaver also appreciates that we face countless unanswered questions about the ways dogs operate.

"We don't know what we don't know," she says. "For example, it's hard for us to know how important pheromones are for dogs, because humans are terrible at picking them up. So we have a really poor handle on this whole area of chemical communication."

Beaver also acknowledges how little we know about the goings-on inside a dog's brain. "We're so anthropomorphic with these animals, and we try to figure out what's going on in their minds, but we can be so far off."

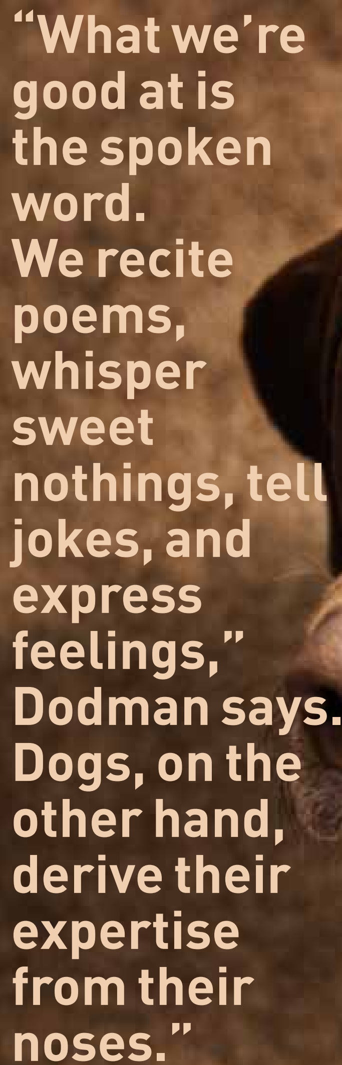
The Nose Knows

In the best circumstances, humans communicate with their dogs clearly enough that our retrievers and rottweilers know what we want from them—and we read them well enough to avoid any major faux pas. But more often than not, the language barrier between humans and dogs hinders our relationships and can cause confusion, frustration, and, in some cases, physical harm.

It's important to remember that while humans and dogs have evolved together, we are different species, says Nicholas Dodman, director of the animal behavior clinic at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. "What we're good at is the spoken word. We recite poems, whisper sweet nothings, tell jokes, and express feelings," he says. Dogs, on the other hand, derive their expertise from their noses. "They can smell people's fingerprints on a glass slide six months after they touch it, and they can smell the difference between identical twins."

Tibor Feigel, who trains dogs in New York and Florida through his business, Zen-K9, says canines have taught him the "most incredible lesson" of his life: Don't try to change what's out there. "If I try to speak Hungarian to a French person, of course they will be confused," he says. "Dogs have their own language. It's best to just watch how they communicate."

Over time, dogs have learned to read our expressions, follow our finger when we point, and recognize when we're stressed. They tolerate some things—like a human putting her face up against her dog's face—that are not necessarily polite canine language. But in general, experts say we need to do a better job at understanding the language of dog. And they agree that if there's a behavior problem, it's usually coming from the two-legged member of the pair. Feigel, who calls himself "Doctor Zen," studied human psychology in his native Hungary and says he uses those skills daily. "Dogs," he says, "are the easy part."



The first thing to remember when trying to understand doggie language is that you have to pay attention to the whole dog, from pupils to posture. "The mouth, lips, tongue, eyes, head, ears, muscles—you have to look at the whole gestalt," says Dodman. "But most people cannot put it together. They will see a play bow, with the back end up and the head down, and think that anything following that is intended as play. But that's not always the case."

Rather than jumping to conclusions about what a dog is saying, we can learn by watching how they approach each other: thoughtfully and slowly. "Sometimes I have to stay in front of the crate for a minute or two so the dog can learn that it doesn't have to display aggressive behavior," says Feigel, who prides himself in being able to "rescue rescues." A dog doesn't enter another dog's area by jumping and barking. "It uses body language first. Sometimes that's as simple as standing and getting closer," he says.

MIKE KEMP/GETTY IMAGES

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By acting more like a canine, Feigel says he's able to break the dog's old pattern. He remembers being asked by a shelter to help with a 140-pound pit bull-Great Dane mix that was going to be euthanized. "He was going crazy and wanted to take the crate down," he says. "I sat down on the ground and invited him to me. Five minutes later he was licking my face. I surprised him with my approach."

Bonnie Beaver says paying attention to the dog's anatomy is critical, but it's not always possible to rely on that. "How do you know if an old English sheepdog is staring when you can't see their eyes? Ears get pinned back when a dog is tense, but how do you know if a basset hound is tense? Boston terriers don't have tails, so how do I know if their tail is wagging?" she asks.

Lost in Translation

Even when we can see a dog's whole body, we often misread it. The tail is a primary communicator, but instead of interpreting a wag as a welcome, it's critical, Dodman says, to analyze the context. Look at it like a car's rev indicator, he suggests. "It shows energy, but that could be happiness, excitement, or fear. A fast tail should be a danger sign."

More language basics: Freezing is a coping mechanism that dogs use when they are scared. Dilated pupils are also a sign of fear, and a growl is a sign of discontent. A growl with the lift of a lip is a warning, but if a dog has learned that the early signs don't work, he may go right to the bite. "They can't write you a letter or deliver an oratory about how unhappy they are," Dodman says. "So if you're petting a dog and it growls, stop! Most people say, 'He doesn't really mean it.' But he does."

One of the most commonly misunderstood messages is what humans call the guilty look—offering submissive body language such as a lowered tail, crouched body, and pulled-back ears—in response to human scolding. "It's not indicative of actual guilt or innocence," says Kristen Collins, an animal behaviorist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "I can't blame people for interpreting this as guilt, because it looks like guilt. But it turns out this is not about your dog's moral code, and we have scientific research to back that up. What he's really doing is trying to turn off your anger at him for eating the couch." She says the dog looks like he's groveling, but in fact, he would present the same body language if he were trying to "turn off" aggression in another dog.

Tiana Peterson, an obedience instructor and veterinary assistant in Minnesota, says the yawn (sometimes accompanied with a little noise) is also misunderstood. "We think

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they're tired, but it has more to do with stress," she says. "At the vet clinic, we take these dogs out of the situation—get out some treats, do some 'sits' and 'downs' and play games to distract them." She warns against unintentionally reinforcing certain behaviors. If your dog is afraid of thunderstorms and starts shaking, don't coddle the canine. "Stroking it from head to tail tells them that [shaking] behavior is OK. Instead, if a storm comes, I tell my clients to make a game of it. Turn on music, get a treat, and do some training."

Peterson says when a dog is still young, it's important to expose him to as many places and people as possible. "Most dog bites," she says, "come from not enough people contact."

Larry Rodriguez, a long-time board member of the Hawaiian Humane Society, developed and funded a bite-prevention educational program (available online), intended to help people better communicate with dogs they encounter on a day-to-day basis. The Mr. Bugs Dog Bite Prevention Program, named for Rodriguez's late wire fox terrier, explains how to read a dog's body language, and which dogs are most likely to chase a bicyclist or bite a child. "Bites happen when people get involved with the animal instead of leaving the animal alone," Rodriguez says. "They may physically reach out to the dog, which further exacerbates the situation."

If you remember nothing else when approaching a dog—your own or an unfamiliar pup—recall this ancient advice. "Shakespeare said, 'Let sleeping dogs lie,'" Dodman says. "And he was right."

A Hound-Human Match

Carlo Siracusa, an expert in small animal behavior at the University of Pennsylvania, says even if you've learned to read a dog, that's only part of the equation. "It also has to be a good match and a good environment," he says. A household with a high arousal level, in which teenagers argue with their parents, wouldn't be a good match for an aggressive dog. More and more, Siracusa says, shel-

ESTATE PLANNING FOR FOUR-LEGGED HEIRS

Nobody likes to think about the death of a pet. But increasingly, owners are starting to consider what will happen if Fido and Fluffy outlive their humans.

"The worst thing that would happen is that I would die and my husband would meet someone who didn't want to live in the country. Then what would happen to all my horses?" wonders Peggy Hoyt, who has an estate planning practice in Florida. "Someone else may not have the same commitment to the animals as you do."

Hoyt, the daughter of former Humane Society of the United States president and CEO John Hoyt, is author of *All My Children Wear Fur Coats: How to Leave a Legacy for Your Pet* (Legacy Planning Partners, 2009). The how-to guide for pet owners provides instructions to ensure that a pet is cared for if the owner dies or becomes disabled.

Hoyt has three horses, six dogs, and four cats, and she advises her clients not to leave the welfare of their pets to chance. "You can always say someone will take care of them, but you can't count on that," she says. Now, 100% of her clients do some form of pet planning. At the minimum, they indicate who will get the pets. Ideally, they also create a trust and set aside money for the lifetime care of the animal.

Hoyt says there's no right or wrong plan. Some clients—in a Leona Helmsleyesque way—leave their entire estate (house, mutual funds, retirement accounts) to their pet. "It's their decision," Hoyt says. "If I want to leave $100 million to my dogs, my personal opinion is that I should be able to."

SQUARE DOG PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES

Getting one active hound from point A to point B can be tricky enough. But what if you had a dozen of them? Ron Ainley discovered an interesting pet industry niche in the 1970s, when he began building stainless steel and aluminum kennels for travel to his retriever field trials. A former teacher, Ainley and his wife, Jane, began selling the kennels, and soon their garage-based business became Ainley Kennels & Fabrication.

The transport systems, made in Dubuque, Iowa, range in size from one to 24 kennels. "They're safe, they're comfortable, and they save time," Jane Ainley says. "They have storage units, water tanks, air conditioning, and everything a dog trainer would need to train and compete."

Customers include those who have multiple house dogs and those who want to transport dogs for hunting or field trials. More recently, the Ainleys have seen an uptick in customers participating in canine agility events or dock diving competitions, in which dogs jump as far as possible from a dock into a body of water.

Ainley Kennels has built systems for the New York Police Department and K2 Solutions Inc., which trains canines for bomb detection work in war zones and airports. The Ainleys say the military and municipal dog sector is growing by "leaps and bounds."

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ters are trying to match pets with people. But the fact remains, we still don't know whether some breeds are more communicative, whether there's a difference between purebred and rescue communication, and what it all means for training and bonding.

What we do know is that even as we struggle with dog speak, canines are helping humans communicate, even to each other. At Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, members of the military who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI) volunteer to train service dogs who will eventually get paired up with physically disabled veterans.

"Many of the service members are emotionally numb," says Patty Kennedy, director of communications and government relations for Warrior Canine Connection. "As part of the training, they have to learn to praise the dog, using a lot of emotion in their voice." She says there is anecdotal evidence that training the dogs reduces service members' PTSD symptoms and improves their communication skills. "Training the dog and bonding with the dog—eye contact, using inflection in their voice, being assertive—is such a positive thing for the service members," she says. "It's wonderful to watch them. Initially they are very flat in terms of communication; then a dog they're training does something right. And you hear, 'Yesssss!' "

Melanie D.G. Kaplan, a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C., is in the process of training a puppy for life as a guide dog.

Northwestern Mutual Connection

Several of the dog lovers interviewed for this story are Northwestern Mutual clients. They are: Ron and Jane Ainley, Tibor Feigel, Peggy Hoyt, Patty Kennedy, Tiana Peterson, and Larry Rodriguez. We are grateful for their participation–and to their Northwestern Mutual Financial Representatives, who brought them to our attention.

—*Catherine O'Neill Grace, editor,* Creative Living

TOP LEFT: MELINDA BLACK/GETTY IMAGES; TOP RIGHT: VICTORIA J. BAXTER/GETTY IMAGES