

Translating ‘Dog’

By Mary Mazzeri © 2007

Back in the fifties, my first dog-owning experience was a dismal failure. The dog didn't fail me, I failed her. 'Cinderella' was a medium-sized, black spaniel mix. She was a nice enough dog, but my family was not experienced as dog owners and, in the end, she was paper-trained so well to one place in the house, we couldn't get her to go outside. In addition to that, my parents didn't know about spaying or seasons, so there was an unwanted litter of puppies. Then one day I came home from school to find out my 'Cinder' gone. She had been returned to the shelter. I was devastated. (It took me a long time to forgive my mom) I vowed that I would never fail a dog again. I'd learn how to help my next dog to 'do everything right'. It was a vow made by a ten year old that was kept.

In 1966, while working on my BA degree in Education, I researched breeds, read every dog training book I could find, went to dog shows, talked to responsible breeders, and eventually brought home a Rough-coated Collie. He was confident and intelligent -a very willing student. I trained him with some common sense and the Koehler book. I discovered a local dog training club in 1970 and put an AKC Utility degree on him within two years.

I was fascinated with the learning process and, as an educator, found myself evaluating the instructors' rationales and teaching techniques. Some of my early instructors were not very inspiring. Their explanations and demonstrations were often ineffective. Some seemed 'bothered' to have to teach beginners. They were 'competition' handlers and tended to talk down impatiently to us 'peons'. I knew I could teach more effectively. I *wanted* to do it because I enjoyed the teaching/learning processes, loved dogs AND people and felt I could communicate with more enthusiasm, and in an understandable way. I realized that I needed to learn more about how the dogs were 'speaking' to their owners.

When I came to class with my first Irish Wolfhound, "Monday". The instructor shook his head from side to side with the condescending remark, "You can't expect much from a Wolfhound." HE challenged me to prove him wrong. Monday earned High hound in Trial at his very first AKC Obedience Trial and ultimately finished as the first UDT in the history of the breed. In the process that hound taught me more about dog training than my more accommodating Collie ever had. Monday began to evolve my training style. Since the collie and the first wolfhound, each dog I've trained has taught me something more about translating between 'human speak' and 'dog'.

Dog Speak: Body Language

While dogs do yip, yike, howl, growl, bark, and whine, all good dog trainers know that the primary canine mode of communication is actually expressed through their body language. This language is a collection of eye contact (or not), ear, muzzle, and tail position, body posture and their general state of relaxation or tension. There are few good books written on the subject. Following the traditions of **ethology** (founded by Konrad Lorenz), Dr. Roger Abrantes researched and authored a well illustrated volume called: *Dog Language: An Encyclopedia of Canine Behavior*. It is filled with excellent and concise illustrations. A couple of other resources

are: Aloff, Brenda. 2005. Canine Body Language, A Photographic Guide.
Rugaas, Turid. (1990s?) Calming Signals: What Your Dog Tells You. (video)

Even amongst these learned scholars you will note differences of opinion on the meanings of different signals. It is always interesting to interpret what a canid is 'thinking' by how it's acting. There are schools and organizations that offer courses in behavior studies. I assume that there are seminars offered on the topic by Dr Pat McConnell; Dr Wayne Hunthausen; Trish King; and others. Ask fellow professionals for suggestions.

I recommend that you observe group and private classes where you are neither teaching nor handling, so you can uninterruptedly watch how various dogs interact with their humans and how they react to each others' body language. Dog language is subtle and precise, watch carefully. The other end of the leash is connected to a human. We are less subtle and concise and often you will see an inexperienced handler giving a dog inconsistent information between his/her voice and their body language. It really is pretty amazing that dogs learn anything at all from their humans—on the one hand, on the other hand, they don't usually have much to do in a given day, so they do have a lot of time on their paws to study and try to figure their 'humans' out, if it is worth it to them.

Verbal Commands: Human Speak

Various statisticians estimate that the human species is capable of speaking 2,000 words a day with gusts up to 4,000. —hermits and cloistered excluded. In any case we are undeniably conscious verbal communicators. People also use body language but are not as consciously aware of it. Our dogs pick up a great deal of information from this. It may conflict with what they 'hear' us saying in our body language. This spills over into our relationship with our dogs. We talk to them, we chide them, we praise them, in some cases we beg them, maybe even sing to them. It has been my observation that dogs pick up primarily on 'TONE of Voice'. Our tone, inflections —and that unconscious body language —gives them more information than our actual words in many cases. It tells them where we are emotionally, e.g. if we are stable, calm, excited, upset, angry or exasperated; if we are in control or out of control, if they are even someone that they want to listen to.

Dogs that live with the average owner eventually learn to identify human voice patterns (words or phrases) and back chain them to human behavior patterns. i.e. "Marvin, do you want some Ice Cream?" followed by the trip to the refrigerator, and the presentation of the tasty treat. Eventually, the mere mention of "Ice Cream" evokes a hopeful trip to the refrigerator. They learn to associate "Ball" with the fun-to-fetch 'spherical fuzzy object' and a host of others. But what is it that actually *helps* the dog learn *Human Language*?

How do we improve the learning curve when we are actually *trying* to help them understand verbal commands? How do we help them understand that we want a response of some kind *from them* when we utter certain voice inflection and sound patterns? If we are trying to communicate to a dog, we must first translate into dog. We need to become aware of our own body language and what it is saying to the dog we are trying to communicate with.

Body Language: Visual Human to Dog Speak

The dog is less likely to engage with a human that seems unstable, inconsistent, irrational, impatient, solicitous, threatening, and the list goes on. The dog prefers the 'leader' that seems to

have a plan that is somewhat predictable, a composed, self-confident director that is safe and fulfilling to follow. The very first element of communication is attention. The human has to create a desire in the dog to be an attentive follower. A dog will follow the person it considers to be its pack leader. A dog is all about space and movement.

Bill Koehler had it right when he started his basic training without human conversation –on a fifteen foot long training line. His training model was to get a dog’s attention by replicating canine leadership, the kind of ‘body language conversation’ that amounted to walking in a straight line without asking the dog for permission to do so. The dog was attached to the line so at some point he found out that the most advantageous course to follow was the one set by the person on the other end of the line. Generally, within 3-5 minutes the dog will be walking with the handler and ‘checking in’ visually to see where the leader is. It’s what dogs do. Even with an inept ‘leader’ the dog that is connected to one by a long line learns to follow. Moving away from a dog is more likely to ‘draw it’ toward the moving person.

While moving away *draws* a dog, moving into a dog’s space is more likely to ‘drive it’ out of a person’s ‘space’. Dick Russell has it right. He teaches what he wisely terms ‘Yielding’ or teaching a dog to move out of the way as you move about the house and yard. This is a simple, clear communication to a dog that you are claiming ownership of that space. Moving into a dog’s space is also good ‘Dog speak’. Taught properly the ‘Heel’ exercise is a exquisite language between dog and handler. Properly taught the “Heel” command has the language elements of drawing and driving a dog relationally as well as creating the elements of attention, position, a loose leash, –through to, eventually, attentive off leash heeling.

The Leash: Tactile, *Directional* ‘Human to Dog’ Speak

And the leash, often a handle by which the dog owner is dragged down the road by an exuberant dog, is a wonderful tool by which to communicate *directional information* to a dog. Information can be conveyed more clearly to a dog with appropriate directional guidance. Exquisitely so with experienced handlers who combine it with complementary body language, but even with inexperienced handlers, the leash becomes a tool to convey which direction the handler wants his dog to move through space. Staying with the heel model, a dog can learn ‘where’ heel is by trial and error, through discovering that there is a given space alongside a moving handler that is comfortable. This is achieved by having that be the place where the leash is relaxed and the handler says nice things to them.

The Voice: Auditory Human-to-Dog Speak

A typical goal in pet dog training is to have a dog understand and respond to spoken commands. Jill wants “Fluffy” to come when she’s called. John wants “Buddy” to stay when he’s told. Human words, ‘instructions’, mean little to a dog unless they are connected to some body language that the dog understands. Often the desired response is initially elicited from the dog with a spoken word used in conjunction with food/hand movement e.g. Luring a dog into a sitting position by moving the food into a location just above the dog’s nose, or with a directional upward pull on the dog’s collar or a combination of the two. Eventually the spoken word and/or the signal is recognized understood by the dog as a conditioned response and the food and leash are phased out.

The human voice can become a positive verbal ‘marker,’ a bridging sound, such as “Yes!” that tells the dog it is on the right track. This is especially important when a dog first attempts to decipher a new learning step in a behavior. The confirming sound means to the dog to ‘keep on trying,’ that they are getting warmer, or “THAT’s IT!” depending on the tone of the voice. Like a clicker, the verbal marker captures a specific behavioral moment. Unlike a clicker, the marker encourages continuance in a behavior rather than ending it. The modulation in the voice pattern can give the dog additional information.

Praise is the other side of the command coin, the rewarding delightful sound made by a grateful pack leader when the behavior is delivered. Vocal nuance can be used to calmly sustain and steady a stay, or given more enthusiastically to encourage a fast recall. The leader’s approval is a reward to the dog.

Release command: It is important for a dog to learn when a behavior ENDS. A release command/signal teaches a dog that it has completed a task. The choice of word is not as important as the manner in which it is delivered. Where praise implies ‘Keep it up,’ a release command tells them ‘You’re done.’ Rightly, the timing and the tone of the release should not ‘run together’ with the praise. A good timing pattern is praise (–silent pause.....) release.

Remote Collar: Tactile Human to Dog Distance Language

I really appreciate the highly sophisticated, subtle remote training collars that have been developed in the last decade or so. Introduced and used gently and sensibly, they engaged a dog through its sense of touch. In addition to visual body language, auditory human speak, and directional leash guidance we add the tactile sensation of delicate electronic ‘taps’ on the neck. Tapping a dog with the collar when it is distracted is not unlike tapping someone’s shoulder – when they are engrossed in watching the Super Bowl game, 4th quarter, 4th down, 10 yard line – to get their attention.

This multifaceted approach allows a dog to take in coordinated information that brings into play 3 of the 5 senses. Throw in a little strategic, random food reinforcement and you’ve captured them all. The more of the ‘senses’ that are involved in training, the quicker the training happens and the more internalized it becomes. The more information we can consistently plug into the dog’s personal learning grid, the faster and easier they come to understand what it is we are trying to say to them, what we are asking of them or what we are trying to listen to them ‘saying’ to us.

I may have failed Cinderella, but I often thank her for giving me the determination to help the thousands of other dogs and their owners that have learned each other’s language. They have learned how to translate between the species and communicate successfully.

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