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Behavior - The Dog's Language

Vetspeak - April 1998, Linda Aronson, DVM

One of the best selling books over the fall-winter season was Monty Roberts' the Man Who Listens to Horses. Monty suggests that if we all became familiar with horses' gestural, body and other signals - what he calls the language equus - then we'd all be better horse trainers. Of course, many people who spend time around other species, and have an interest in understanding them, do begin to understand some of their signals.

A lot of the behavioral problems people have with their dogs, although by no means all, come about because we are different species, and we haven't quite understood what the other is trying to tell us. It really isn't that surprising. Caninus is probably even more complex a language than equus, and a very different kettle of fish. One species was originally primarily predators and the other prey. Furthermore, in our manipulation of dog genes we have changed the appearance of the beast far more drastically than we ever did the horse (just think about the wolf ancestor and the Pekinese for a moment). The wolf and most dog breeds use their tails quite a lot, as you may have noticed, dogs with either no tail or a docked one, are at a social disadvantage. I always remember a class Xipe and I took eons ago in which the dog behind us was a bulldog with a particularly exaggerated brachycephalic (squashed nose) 'deformity'. This poor dog wheezed and groaned as he was asked to gait. Xipe in the meantime thought he was growling at her. Now if dogs can't always understand the dialect of other dogs, fluency in the language caninus is not easily come by for the human.

Different species often use the same gesture to indicate very different emotions. Think about the human smile. We pretty much know what that means, we can even distinguish a genuine smile from the pasted on variety by examining other cues (e.g., does it travel to the eyes or affect only the mouth?) The aggressive dominant facial signal of a wolf (I'll use the term wolf quite a bit, fortunately given the shape of a Beardie hasn't been distorted too badly, most of what I say about wolves applies equally well to their hirsute cousins the Beardies), what we might call a snarl, actually doesn't look that dissimilar from our smile, if you allow for the differently shaped face. If we smile at our dogs they may actually think that we are challenging them, especially if we try to look them in the eye, again a sign of dominance in this species. If you observe the chimpanzee however, the



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message coming from a very similar facial expression is actually fear.

The idea of the human fake smile also has some ramifications in the dog. Fortunately, dogs aren't as duplicitous as we are, even though we anthropomorphically accuse them of so being on occasion. What they are capable of however, is sending mixed messages. Most people who've spent any time around dogs can tell you something about submission and dominance signals (even if they don't always apply this knowledge in their dealings with their dog). We also usually have a fairly good idea of what aggression and fear look like. Please note dominance doesn't equal aggression, some dogs are aggressive primarily because they are exerting dominance, while others are aggressive because they are trying to protect themselves, i.e. from fear. The dominance and fear scales are separate, and the most emotionally labile dogs usually score high on both scales.

The neutral dog appears relaxed, ears will usually be erect or raised (depending on breed) if he's exploring the environment, but not stiff. The tail will usually be horizontal and relaxed (again depending on breed). This is a confident dog, he is quite dominant and sure of himself, but he displays neither fear, aggression, or signs of dominance and submission at this point. As the dog becomes offensively aggressive, the ears rise further and become stiffer, hair begins to rise along the spine, it stares at the potential threat or object of aggression, the lips retract vertically to display the canine teeth and the dog usually growls or barks a warning. This is in contrast to the wolf and highly dominant dogs of some breeds (e.g., the Akita) which attack silently without warning. The body and tail are stiff and erect and the whole beast seems to enlarge and be walking on its toes.

The fearful dog draws back its ears against its head, which it lowers submissively, it crouches, making itself look smaller and less threatening, and tucks its tail between its legs. If it can it will run away, otherwise it may roll on its back, lift its leg and even urinate. Lips are retracted horizontally in that rather goofy look that means 'I'm incapable of hurting you, please don't hurt me'. The gaze is averted. (Dominant dogs tend to attack from the front, while fearful ones will often sneak up and bite from behind. Beardies interestingly enough usually fall into the dominant group when aggression becomes a problem.)



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The dog in conflict between dominance and fear will show a conflict of signals which is less easy for us to interpret. Lips may retract horizontally and vertically. The dog may growl and avert its gaze at the same time, approach with ears back and tail wagging, or bark aggressively with the tail tucked. Such dogs should be handled with caution. Awareness of what our dogs are trying to tell us about their comfort level in any given situation should never be ignored. An uncomfortable dog is unpredictable. Don't try and jolly him out of it, as he may decide to up the ante too, and the results can be unpleasant and painful. I find Beardies tend to have very expressive faces. Many of them smile, and this should not be confused with the snarl or fear expression. It does mean, 'I'm having a good time, hope you are too.' Eyes and eyebrows convey volumes, and so does the set of the ears. Think of the 'expressiveness' judges want in the ring, a look of curiosity and interest.

How can we use our knowledge of caninus? When we become fluent, the possibilities are boundless, and we really can talk to the animals. Let's look at a particular set of signals which we can send our dog from which he will gain comfort and a sense of calm. Unfortunately when our dogs are stressed to the max (or even before that) we are inclined to reinforce their fear rather than put them at their ease. Let's suppose we have taken the dog to the vet. He will remember his last visit, perhaps his anal sacs were expressed or some other indignity befell him and he is justly apprehensive. He sits in the waiting room with all the other nervous patients. They are pacing and panting, some will be shaking like leaves, others will be trying to leave, while others try and bury themselves or head for the safety of the master's lap. Our reactions to this tend to go one of two ways. The first, and I hope more usual, leads us to say, "there, there, Fred." We pat him on the head (praising his fear), some of his apprehension transfers to us (remember the fight we had with him last time we tried to clip his nails?). Unfortunately, our dog's interpretation of our response is "Oh my gosh, this is worse than I thought, if the master's scared I want out." We are reinforcing fear. The second response, which may occur independently or follow the first is that we punish the dog for his fear. We toss him from our lap, jerk on his collar, yell at him to take it like a man and just get generally exasperated with his lack of backbone. I hope that you realize punishing an animal for what to him seems a perfectly logical fear will not make him snap out of it, and may make not only his fear but his reactivity worse. A fearful animal is very unpredictable in his responses.



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How then does one dog tell another that whatever is happening is no big deal. First he's relaxed, so loosen up on that leash. Slow down. When dogs approach a strange dog they do so slowly, and they do it from the side not head on. (Cars, bikes and joggers which approach fast are therefore likely to be seen as a threat.) A good thing to look for when selecting animal care personnel is how they approach the dog. If they do so slowly and from the side, they understand how to put the dog at his ease. (Think of some of those judges again, amazing how little they've learned over the years, isn't it?) Incidentally, there is some evidence that dogs prefer it if you offer the palm of the hand rather than the back for their initial inspection. There are attempts to explain why, but whatever the reason it's worth a try. Avoid direct eye contact, even turn away your head when greeting a fearful dog, or a dominant one. Yawning and sitting calmly, ignoring the dog's fear is probably the best way you can diffuse it. Yawning is very calming to dogs. That's what another dog would do.

Dogs may sniff for a lot of reasons, but one is to calm down potential enemies. "Look at me, I'm sniffing the ground, I'm not a threat." If Geronimo's comes are fine up to a certain point, and then his head drops and he starts sniffing the ground. Try and imagine why he's saying this. Could it be that your body posture, tone of voice or past experience, calling him to come for a bath or worse to be yelled at, has caused this ambivalence in your pal? Dogs that suddenly lie down in the middle of an active play session may not be tired, they may be saying, "Hey, I think things are getting out of control, let's all relax guys." One of the most subtle calming signs dogs make is flicking the tongue out across his lips. Take a look at your dog's portfolio, chances are in many of the face on shots his tongue will be out. That staring eye of the camera is intruding into his comfort zone.

Finally there are the dogs that have either never learned or have mislearned their own language. The company they keep is important. Dogs learn from other dogs both the good and the bad. An isolated pup is like an isolated child, and the sad thing is he's not fluent in caninus. The puppy that gives all the calming signs in his repertoire and still has the stuffing knocked out of him by an unruly larger playmate may eventually resort to meeting newcomers with signs of aggression rather than calming ones. Another canine thug has been born.

Further reading: Roger Abrantes books *The Evolution of Canine Social Behaviors* & *Dog Language: An Encyclopedia of Canine Behavior*



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Turid Rugaas - On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals

Charles Darwin - The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals

Konrad Lorenz - King Solomon's Ring

The first three are more user friendly, the latter just go to show that there's nothing much new under the sun!