

Both Ends of the Leash

Beautiful Noises

Patricia B. McConnell

It's an amazing thing to study an animal when you don't know the purpose of the noises that they make. Scientists with IQs higher than their own weight spend years trying to translate the sounds that emanate from other animals. It turns out to be exceedingly difficult to know what an individual of another species actually means when she says, "Meow," or "Caw caw" or, of course, "Woof." But if it is that hard for us humans, what of our poor dogs? Whatever is your dog to make of the noises that she or he hears coming out of your mouth?

For a while, when I was doing my Ph.D. Research, I was in a situation similar to that of your dog. I needed to analyze the words and whistles that professional animal handlers give to working domestic animals. You'd think my analysis would have been easy. I was analyzing sounds from my own species for heaven's sake. I could ask the handlers what they meant. I could play the tapes over and over again. I had all the high-tech physics of acoustic analysis at my fingertips. But being clear about what the relevant part of the signal was, when the signal stopped and started and what the signal really meant was not easy at all. As a matter of fact, it was downright difficult. I've sympathized with dogs ever since.

After all, your dog isn't listening to the same species. He's listening to an alien, who makes noises like "come" and "down" that might as well be "blech" and "pffft" for all they inherently mean to him. No wonder so many dogs would rather play with the Cocker Spaniel next door. It's hard work to be on translation duty all the time.

But you can help. Look at the signals that you and others give to your dog from the perspective of a scientist in the field. Be Jane Goodall in your own living room for a week. You don't need any high-tech equipment at this point, just an entirely new perspective on how to listen to yourself. You be the



researcher, listening to an interesting animal whose vocalizations are foreign to you. You can start anywhere – how about with the sound "down"? Whatever must our dogs think the word "down" means? We say it to our dogs to ask them to lie down, and 10 minutes later we say "down" to get them to stop jumping up on Aunt Polly. Next, it means "get off the couch." So, what would your report say? What is the definition of "down" What exactly is it that someone wants his dog to do when he says, "Lie down"? Lie down on her belly? Stop jumping up and stand there with all four paws on the ground? Get off the couch? Of course YOU know that the same word can have different meanings in different contexts, but wouldn't this make translations tough if you were starting from scratch?

Perhaps this interesting species that you're studying also mixes "down" with "lie down." Hmmmmm. If you heard "glet" and "goo glet," would you know if they meant the same thing? How about the words "pleat" and "complete"? Each contains a note that sounds the same, but aren't the meanings different?

And what about the popular use of another set of words: "good sit"? It's very popular now for trainers to teach dog owners to ask their dogs to sit, and then praise them by saying "Good sit." But look at those words from a non-human perspective. If "sit" means "put your butt down on the ground," and you want your dog to do that every time you say it, what could your dog make of hearing "sit," after he's already done so? I know your dog is smart, but expecting him to read your mind about when "sit" means "do something" versus when it means "don't do anything,

I'm referring to something that you've already done" is a bit much, even for your smart dog!

Here's a similar question for any intrepid animal behaviorist out in the field: A lot of people say "no bark" to their dogs to ask them to stop barking (or "no bite" to stop mouthing by puppies). "No bark" certainly sounds simple, because it is just two, short words. But look at it from your dog's perspective. First of all, have you taught your dog what "bark" means? After all, it's just a noise you're making, and that noise has no meaning at all until you've taught your dog what it is. Unless your dog knows what "bark" means, how could he know what you mean by "no bark"? Secondly, look at the order of the words: If you first say "no," and then "bark," wouldn't your dog start to bark again if he knew what "bark" meant?

Doesn't your dog "come" when she hears you say "come"? (OK, maybe not, but that's another column. The point is you want her to, right?) Although I'm sure that dogs can pick words out of a sentence, I'm not sure that they can think in reverse, the way that "no bark" demands. My crackerjack Border Collies could never learn that "Luke, OK" meant that Luke, and only Luke, was released from his stay. They would all move as soon as they heard "OK." Asking a dog to understand the grammar of "no bark" is asking a lot. Why not just say "no"?

Even if you are clear and consistent with your signals, are you sure that your dog defines them the same way that you do? For example, I suspect that most dogs and owners define the simple word "sit" differently. If you're like most pet dog owners, then you taught your dog to sit by calling her to come, telling her to sit and then reinforcing her after she did. To us, "sit" is a posture. We define "sit" as a position in which the dog's hindquarters are flexed, her butt is on the ground and her forelegs are straight, front paws flat on the ground. "Sit." Simple. And it looks like your dog defines it the same way, too, because most of the time when you tell your dog to sit, I'll bet she does just that. But what does she do if she's lying down and you say, "Sit"? Unless you've specifically taught her to sit UP (which of course you can do) she probably will stay lying down. What if she's already sitting? Many dogs actually lie down if you repeat "sit" when they already are. What if you ask your dog to "sit" when she's 15 feet away from

you? Most dogs will happily trot to you and sit facing you, just as she was when you first taught her to sit. My guess is that most dogs define "sit" as an action that means: Find your owner's knees (or ankles, or belly button) stand in front of him or her and go down toward the ground.

Of course you can teach your dog to "sit" without coming to you, or to sit UP rather than sit DOWN. But the point is that you have to teach it. Unless you go beyond where most dog owners go, your dog probably defines "sit" differently than you do. What other words might your dog have his or her own definition for? I'm reminded of my favorite T-shirt, complete with goofy, grinning dog on the front. "Hi! My name is NO NO Bad Dog, what's yours?"

Please don't imagine that I think that dogs can't understand many nuances of our language. Once learned, a dog can pick "walk" out of a paragraph-long sentence. We all have dogs who eventually learned the spelling of the word "ball," much less the meaning of the word "ball" itself. Dogs constantly amaze me with their ability to act as ethologists, bent on translating the vocalizations of a confusing, yet lovable species such as ourselves. But surely we owe them as much clarity as we can muster. And when they're learning, surely we can help them along by being clear, consistent and helpful in our use of words, rather than being our usual flexible and erratic selves.

All this thoughtful consideration about analyzing sounds reminds me of some of my first Ph.D. Research as a budding ethologist. I wanted to see if the sounds that we make to get our animals to speed up and slow down are the same no matter what language we speak. I had already gathered lots of recordings of English-speaking dog and horse handlers. I traveled from Wisconsin to the racetracks of Texas in my first attempt to record professional animal handlers who spoke a language other than English. I was looking for a cross-linguistic sample of animal handlers, and wanted to see how Spanish-speaking jockeys sped up and slowed their horses. Later I would compare them with horse and dog handlers who spoke English, Basque, Chinese, Peruvian Quechua and 15 other languages.

But right then, I needed Spanish speakers who had never learned English, and all the jockeys hanging around the old, rundown racetrack I'd found spoke

both languages. “Wait for José,” I was told, “he’ll be here any day. He knows lots of trainers and jockeys who speak no English, he’ll take you to them.” They were right. José knew everyone, and everyone knew José, and although José was as perplexed as the rest of the stable about what I was there for, he agreed to take me around to trainers and jockeys who spoke only Spanish, so that I could record them working with their horses. We set out early one morning, stopping at a convenience store on his request. He returned with a six-pack. Popping a Bud, he lit a joint the size of a cigar, and said, “OK, Treesha, we take you to lots of guys who talk to animals, OK? Want a hit?” I declined, and felt for my Swiss Army Knife.

José kept his word: I must have gotten five good recordings of non-English-speaking trainers and jockeys. God only knows what José said to them; my halting Spanish couldn't begin to follow their conversations. They all clearly thought I was crazy, but still, they accommodated me as you would some endearing, harmless alien.

José and I drove back late in the afternoon. I was exhausted and relieved and happy to have gotten so many good recordings of Spanish-speaking horse handlers. Budweisers and joints aside, José had been a brick. All day long he had patiently sought out handlers, translated between us, helped to lug around equipment and handle fractious horses. The sun was beginning to set when José suggested we finish up and drive to a little lake where we could park and watch the sunset. I firmly explained how I needed to get back to catalogue and organize the recordings. The predictable and universal conversation between a young, healthy male mammal and an uninterested female mammal ensued. José was doing his best, but he could see he was getting nowhere. Finally, in desperation he said, to the woman who had been obsessed with recording sounds all day long: “Treasha, please come to the lake with me. I will make you such beautiful noises.”

Here's hoping that the noises you make to your dog are beautiful too, because they are easy to identify, easy to understand and fun to respond to. Bless their furry little hearts for putting up with us.

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