



Excerpts from “The ABC’s of Dog Language” by Anders Hallgren
Learn How Dogs Communicate

A Dog Says a Lot

Dogs have a well-developed, rich language. They receive extensive information from other dogs’ messages. They tell each other much more than previously was believed. A dog can easily provoke another dog to fight or make sure a fight is avoided. A dog can tell another dog that it is interested in contact or wants to keep its distance. It can also show another dog that it has found something especially interesting.

The language dogs use when they talk to humans is the same as when they talk to each other. It consists of wagging tails, barking, grumbling, and a lot more. While dogs instinctively understand and speak their common language, we humans have to learn it piece by piece.

We communicate with words...

Our language is built primarily upon words. It is a collection of symbols. Language is complicated to use because the symbols (words), may have different meanings to different people. Consider for example, the word “nervous”. To many people, it means “scared”, yet to others, it may mean “restless”. Some translate it as “easy to frighten”, And yet others see it as “a sign of mental weakness”.

Furthermore, words have to be learned. We humans learn the meaning of numerous words. On the other hand, a dog is only capable of learning the meaning of a few words. Sometimes, serious misunderstandings arise because we think the dog understands the meaning of more words than it actually does. The dog listens more to the sound of our voice than to the words themselves. However, the dog is capable of distinguishing between words which sound almost alike, provided they are used with different modulation.

We can cheat each other with our spoken words. We can tell lies. You cannot hear from the words whether they represent the truth or a lie. If you watch the speaking person’s body language, you will normally be able to tell if he/she is telling the truth or not.

Our language is also lacking symbols for feelings. Words to express what we feel are inadequate and few. What do words like “happy”, “annoying”, “angry” and “scare” tell you, compared to all the grimaces and gestures we use in our different moods?

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...and dogs with body signals

Dogs use a direct language without abstract symbols. They show exactly what they feel and what they want, instead of explaining something in the roundabout way people often do. They use their voices, body postures, facial expressions, movements, smells, and touching. No signal has more than one meaning. Dogs don't lie. They are simply unable to, so they are always honest.

Dog language is a “language of feelings”. With body signals, sound, and other means of expression, a dog passes on its immediate feelings. Our language, with all its many words and few feelings, is completely different. This is why we have problems when we try to determine what a dog means. It corresponds to attempting to understand a language from a totally different world. Therefore, we need to study this “foreign language” in order to teach ourselves its grammar and meaning. If we don't, we will inevitably be misunderstood and run into difficulties.



A friendly greeting situation where the two dogs communicate their feelings with different body postures.

For the benefit of the species

Wild canines, such as wolves, are able to live in families and packs where the individual members can be useful to each other because of their language. A pack is not a group of animals without mutual contact. On the contrary, their survival depends on their ability to communicate with each other, such as when they hunt. They are able to convey important information about the prey and each others' positions, and in that way increase their chances for success through cooperation. One wolf's glance can show the pack that there is prey close by. An individual's stiff body posture, with their entire attention turned towards a certain spot, can indicate exactly where the prey is. A tail signal can hint that attack is imminent. A look can tell that the attack has to stop because the prey is providing too much resistance.

When they are together, they can show each other their affection or clearly demonstrate hostility. With their signals, they can attract each other or repel each other.