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Shared language

Humans are from Earth, dogs are from Pluto!

We've all been there in our human relationships — when we're talking at each other but for the life of us we can't understand the other person's perspective at all. That can happen between two human beings who share the same language, culture and upbringings. So imagine what can go astray when we are talking about cross-species communications.

Dogs have a different culture, language and perspective of the world than we do, so we need to assist them to successfully live their lives as dogs in our human world. In order to do this, we need to create a way of communicating with our dogs that makes sense to them. We need to create a shared language, which we can use whenever we want to 'speak' to our dogs or understand why they are doing what they are doing or acting the way they are acting. Dogs can't change the way they

are, so it is up to us to understand them and take the lead in creating our shared language.

In this chapter we will learn:
- how dogs communicate
- how dogs read us
- how to build a shared language together.

Why is creating a shared language important?

It isn't obvious to dogs why we do the things we do in our human world. Our requirements for a safe and happy life are often different from dogs' natural inclinations, which they get from their wolfish roots. There are many risks in the human world that dogs don't understand: cars are dangerous, aggression is largely inappropriate, killing stock and cats is unacceptable, and so on. These situations often come with death penalties to the dog and legal repercussions for owners. Having a shared language is critical to enable us to articulate to our dogs what it is we want from them, and how we will keep them safe. Through this they learn the family rules of conduct.

A quick note on dominance

As noted earlier, when I talk about dominance it's not in the old discredited 'Lupomorph model' of aggressive, dominant leaders of the pack. When I refer to dominance, I mean the sort of relationship that's based more on guidance, one a dog would have with a father, mother or older sibling — the mentor.

Dominance can be a gesture, signalling disapproval or 'don't do that', which prevents or averts actual aggression. This is the value of social dominance and subordinance signals: they remove the need for aggressive, violent action, by informing others rather than escalating to action.

4.1 UNDERSTANDING THE DOG'S SOCIAL SIGNALLING

Language is a two-way process, so the first step in developing a shared language is to understand the dog's language. Dogs understand our

behaviour in dog terms, so we need to understand the way they perceive things so that we can adjust the way we communicate.

Dogs are communicating with you all the time: either intentionally seeking to communicate, or unintentionally signalling their internal state. This peer-to-peer social communication signalling is a slightly modified form of the system inherited from the wolves. Dogs show a less exaggerated form of these signals, and have more sociable gestures that are more friendly and affiliative.

Dog postural communication, like any language, is highly subtle and complex. Each component can have many nuances; for example, the stare can have many variations, from direct and active, to looking away, as well as a 'targeting' stare that is lining up the other dog or prey (which might include something as subtle as having one foot up, pointing). However, the basic postural components or shapes and their behavioural and emotional meanings are explained here to give you the important basics.

It is important to realise that the *time* between your dog alerting his behaviour and 'targeting' or fixing on the 'target' is critical for you to recognise, so you can intervene before the behaviour is initiated. Before your dog's adrenalin rises and the primitive brain kicks in, you have a window to make contact with your dog and get him focused on you, his mentor, so you can guide him in the right decision. Looking to you is the key: in most instances, as soon as he looks to you, you can intervene effectively.

Different breeds have differing drivers or motivations that are important to them. Understanding these drivers will help you anticipate and interpret your dog's behaviours. For example, Terriers are self-driven hunters, so can be more aggressive and protective of objects. If they are staring, pay attention: they are more likely to chase! Herding dogs are driven by things moving and will want to herd them. Sled dogs run together and want to pull. Sight hounds see things and chase after them, scent hounds smell and follow their nose, Retrievers will retrieve and mouth. Guard breeds will be more territorial, Labradors and group hunters more accepting of a group and less competitive, and so on. We need to take these differences into account when reading dogs and understanding their predispositions and potential problems.

The basis of a dog's language is different from ours. Humans are highly verbal communicators, while dogs rely on a number of different attributes, primarily: posture; space; proximity; vocalisations including intonation which often indicates emotional content; and scent marks and pheromones.

Dogs are approximately 90 per cent postural communicators, so we need to learn how to read their postures to understand what they are saying or meaning. The main body parts you should look at to read a dog are the eyes, ears, lips, body, hackles and tail.

There are the six main behavioural states (and shapes) you need to be able to read. Remember that these are intrinsic (innate) so will be honest (true).

1. **Aggression/Dominance** — demonstrated through big postures which dogs use to make themselves look bigger and more dominant. Dogs almost always signal threat before an attack. This is the fight part of the fight–flight state.
- **Eyes —** staring directly and held longer than normal (a fixed stare), pupils dilated (enlarged).
- **Ears —** forward so able to pick up auditory information well.
- **Lips —** fully puckered forward into a full offensive snarl, or as fear increases retracted back (ventrally) into a smile-like gesture. A growl will often be paired with this gesture if it is dominance or offensive aggression: this is a signal that an attack is more likely. (Dogs add extra gestures as the threat escalates — giving you lots of warning.)
- **Body —** strutting and standing over the neck and shoulders of another dog. A dog on the verge of aggression may also stiffen up (standing-over tactics) or be directly in front.
- **Hackles** (the hair along the back of the dog's neck and back, even to the tail in some cases) raised (piloerection), which can indicate dominance or fear. (The difference is differentiated by back shape: see the fear section below). This really signals arousal, the adrenalin-induced fight–flight state.
- **Tail —** held up high or at least level (12 to 3 o'clock position). Most dogs don't wag the tail when they are aggressive, but some do, so don't rely on a wagging tail to identify a dog as friendly: look for other signals to confirm.
- **Tone —** deep growling, especially if the aggression is intensifying. Barking is a lower tone and occurs more behind barriers or on

Aggression/
Dominance.

Confident.

the chain, as it indicates a level of conflict between approach and retreat, when dogs can't get fully away as they are contained.

- **Body orientation** — the more direct, the more threatening.
- **Approach** — the more direct, the more threatening. Circling behind shows an element of fear.

2. Confidence — demonstrated through upright and relaxed postures. This is the behaviour and posture we expect from calm, stable dogs, and is the state you would aim for your dog to be in most of the time.

- Eyes — looking at the other individual but not staring (the more sustained and direct the staring, the more threatening).
- Ears — upright, pointing forward and relaxed, not alerted.
- Lips — normal and relaxed.
- Body — upright, but not puffed-up or out, strutting or lowered.
- Hackles — not up, or if they are this can be just arousal level but with no other aggressive signals.
- Tail — normal, relaxed height (4 to 6 o'clock position), could be wagging slightly.
- Tone — normal to higher-pitched.
- Walk — calm, no strutting or no lowering of the body.

3. Playfulness — demonstrated by moving into play bows and play-soliciting behaviour. Dogs often use play to mediate and reduce conflict. Play behaviours are more often subordinate to the dominant dog, although dominants will initiate play to create safe interactions with subordinates and relieve the tension of a social interaction.

- Eyes — happy. Sometimes they will be staring in play threat when combined with a play bow. Note that the eyes convey many subtleties: open, wide open, squinted, pupils dilated, etc.
- Ears — relaxed, but can vary as dogs mimic other behaviours in play at times.
- Lips — the playful dog will approach, lick the jowls of the other dog (or human), then run away, approach and lick the jowls again, then run away.
- Body — play bows, soliciting play.
- Hackles — not raised unless a dog gets a fright, which could turn into a dominance interaction or an apology.
- Tail — wagging or relaxed.