Canine Communication

Understanding canine body language

Agenda

• Observe behavior objectively
• Identify components of canine body language
• Putting it all together
Subjective vs. Objective

• Language we use is crucial
• Often riddled with assumptions and our own perceptions.
• Lead to misunderstandings
  • When describing the dog
  • When interacting with them

Subjective: arising out of or identified by means of one's perception of one's own states and processes (labels the animal)

Example:
“This dog is happy”
Subjective vs. Objective

Objective: expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations (describes behavior).

Example: “This dog has an mouth open and his eyes are squinty”

Subjective vs. Objective

Try making the following subjective statement into an objective one.

When the doorbell rings:

\[ \text{my dog goes crazy (subjective)} \]

\[ \text{____________________ (objective)} \]
Canine Body Language

• Avoid labeling; instead describe behavior.
• Think of behavior on a spectrum rather than absolutes

Photo credit: Home Depot
Behavior is on spectrum

Canine Body Language

- Dogs use whole body
- Helpful to narrow focus on specific parts when first learning.

Photo credit www.softsia.com
Canine Body Language

• Behavior is not a trait or exist in a vacuum (environment sets the stage)
• It is not: “This dog is aggressive”; rather context of this situation

Eyes

Consider:
• Eye Shape
• White part (sclera) showing
• Pupil dilation
• Movement
Eyes: Shape
Round or almond-shape, little to no tension around the eyes (“soft eye”).

Eyes: Shape
Tension pulls eyes open into a round shape (“hard eye”).

May show white of eye (“whale eye”).
Eyes: White sclera visible

- Looking forward; soft eye
- Looking forward, facial tension widening eye to reveal sclera (fear response)
- Looking to the right; soft eye, with white showing due to our angle

Eyes: Pupil Size

As arousal increases, the eyes dilate.

Photo credit: Natalie Zielinski
Eyes: Dilation

Reminder to keep in context in “real world”.

These are the dogs from previous slide. Dog on left is playing while dog on right is guarding.

Photo credit: Trish Loehr
Eyes: Movement

How a dog uses their eyes can relay information

- May dart back and forth (ex: seeking, play, fear)
- May be fixed on another animal, object, or you (ex: play, prey, fear)
- Eye contact with you may be direct and sustained or complete avoidance

Eyes: Movement

Fixed eye contact with pupil dilation
Ears: Forward

The position of the ear can be forward, back or somewhere in-between. Also may be held in position or moving back and forth.
Ears: Droopy shape

“Forward” and “back” ear posture can occur in all ear shapes and sizes

Mouth

Consider:
- Shape of lips
- Lip licking/stress yawning (“Calming signals”)
- Openness of mouth
- Vocalizations
**Mouth: Shape**

Side of lip can be pulled back ("long lip")

![Dog with long lip](image1.png)

**Mouth: Shape**

Side of lip can move forward ("Short lip") or even pucker

![Dog with short lip](image2.png)
Mouth: Calming Signals

Lip licking and stress yawning

Mouth: Close or Open?

Generally open mouth is more relaxed body language.
Mouth: Teeth?

When dogs feel no choice or lack of escape, aggressive behavior is more likely.

Mouth: Vocal behavior

- Is intended for communication!
- Used in variety of contexts: food sources, guarding behavior, breeding, play, arousal, fearful situations, used to gain social distance and maintain social contact.
- Vocal behavior common except stalking during hunting.
Tail

Consider:
- Position (base of tail)
- Movement

Tail: Positions

Tucked (fear)       Low
Tail: Positions

Neutral

High

Tail: Positions

Neutral

High
Tail: Movement

- May sweep side to side in wide arch (ex: greetings)
- May rotate in circular pattern (ex: play)
- The tip may be the only thing moving side to side in rapid short movement when held high (ex: greeting)
- Many options! Keep in context.

Hackles

Hair stands up on shoulders, near tail or along whole spine (arousal)
Hackles
Observe dog on left (changes in mouth & tail)

Body Posture
Consider how a dog carries their body weight and changes positions in order to communicate.
Body Posture: Weight

May shift weight forward

Photo credit: Khris Erickson

Body Posture: Weight

May be somewhere in the middle (square)
Body Posture: Weight

May shift weight backward

Body Posture: Play!

- Play bow is the “invitation”
- Wide range of behaviors exhibited after invite accepted
Body Position: Roll/Lie down

- Used as cut-off cue and “no-fight”

Body Posture: Play vs. cut-off cue
Practice observation skills!

- Benefits of video - use as learning tool when played back slowly
Practice observation skills!

- Observe behavior of dog greeting a stuffed dog *(video is slowed)*

![Image of two dogs greeting](image_url)

Practice observation skills!

- Observe behavior of a dog approaching another dog *(video is slowed)*

![Image of a dog on a leash](image_url)
Future practice!

• Start with a narrow focus and build (video!)
• Pick one part of your dog (ex: eye) and just observe for a few moments the movement, eye tension, shape, any eye contact that occurs. Notice the changes
• Watch dogs play together and choose one aspect to focus on (ex: shifting weight movement in one dog)

Summary

• Practice using objective language!
  Use glossary: http://www.aspcapro.org/aspga-safer.php
• Note how the behavior changes.
• All behavior occurs on a spectrum; no absolutes!
• Consider behavior & the environment together
A FEW COMING ATTRACTIONS FROM ASPCA PRO

www.aspcapro.org/webinars

• Human Body Language and Its Effects on Dog Behavior (April 26)

• Defensive Dog Handling: Leash Skills and Body Language (May 10)

• Reuniting Lost Dogs with Their Families (June 13)