

Canine Communication



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Objective versus Subjective Language



“My dog goes crazy when he sees another dog.”

“My dog barks and pulls on his leash toward other dogs when we’re out for a walk.”

Subjective: This dog is guilty.
Objective: This dog is signaling submission.



- ◆ Increases information & clarity
- ◆ Reduces judgement, bias & misinterpretation

Objective language still needs interpretation



“My dog barks and pulls on his leash toward other dogs when we’re out for a walk. His bark is high-pitched and he bares all of his teeth. His behavior is consistent with defensive aggression.”

Dogs communicate messages through three main channels:



- ◆ Body language
- ◆ Vocalizations
- ◆ Olfactory signals

What can you tell about this dog?



- ◆ Ears semi-erect
- ◆ Natural eye shape
- ◆ Looking at something
- ◆ Mouth open
- ◆ Natural tail
- ◆ Balanced weight distribution



This dog is alert but relaxed.



**What can you
tell about this
dog?**



- ◆ Ears forward
- ◆ Wrinkled brow
- ◆ Natural eye shape
- ◆ Looking at something
- ◆ Mouth closed
- ◆ Raised tail
- ◆ Weight balanced or slightly forward

This dog is alert and interested in something.

What can you tell about this dog?



- ◆ Crouched body
- ◆ Lowered head
- ◆ Ears lowered
- ◆ Large round eyes
- ◆ Looking upwards
- ◆ Mouth closed
- ◆ Leaning away



This dog is afraid of whatever he's looking at.

What can you tell about this dog?





- ◆ Direct gaze
- ◆ Ears back
- ◆ Mouth closed, slightly puckered
- ◆ Tail raised above natural carriage
- ◆ Weight shifted slightly forward
- ◆ Hackles up on rear

This dog is about to threaten whomever she's looking at.



Research suggests that people are less adept at recognizing subtle signs of negative emotions in dogs than positive emotions, although we improve with experience.

What's the difference between fearful and submissive?



- ◆ Non-social behavior
- ◆ Exhibited in the presence of animate or inanimate stimuli
- ◆ Motivated to avoid



- ◆ Social behavior
- ◆ Exhibited only while interacting with people or other animals
- ◆ Motivated to approach



Submissive vs Fearful:

Body language looks very similar.

Only way to distinguish is on the basis of context & other behavior.

Submissive dogs will approach with a low fast tail wag.

Fearful dogs will avoid, no tail wag.

Dog-Dog Dynamics



Dominant/Assertive



Submissive/Appeasing



Chin Over & Passive Submission



Which dog is more confident? Can you tell?





YOUTUBE VIDEO PROVIDED BY PATRICIA MCCONNELL

**Play is made up of a variety of behaviors,
including aggressive, dominant,
appeasement & sexual behaviors.**



Play is frequently interspersed with play bows, brief timeouts, and moments of stillness.



“Play Face”



Why do dogs mount?

- ◆ Sex
- ◆ Play
- ◆ Non-specific arousal
- ◆ Dominance



Dogs rely on their entire body to communicate. When learning to “read” dogs, it’s helpful to first focus on specific features:

- ◆ **Eyes**
- ◆ **Ears**
- ◆ **Tail**



- ◆ **Mouth**
- ◆ **Weight distribution**

Eyes



- ◆ Shape
- ◆ Gaze

Relaxed “Soft” Eyes



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BOBBIE BHAMBREE



Naturally round or almond shaped

Squinty Eyes



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TRISH MCMILLAN LOEHR

The eyes of relaxed, happy dogs can sometimes look “squinty.” Probably because they also have a wide, open mouth.

**PROCEED
WITH
CAUTION**

Tense “Hard” Eyes



- ◆ Focused
- ◆ Direct stare

- ◆ May be narrowed

**PROCEED
WITH
CAUTION**

“Whale Eye”



The white sclera of the eye is visible. The dog has turned his head but is still looking at the target of his concern.

**PROCEED
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“Whale Eye”



The white sclera of the eye is visible. The dog has turned his head but is still looking at the target of his concern.

**PROCEED
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Fearful Eyes



Unnaturally wide. Pupils may be dilated. Gaze is often directed upwards because body is lowered.

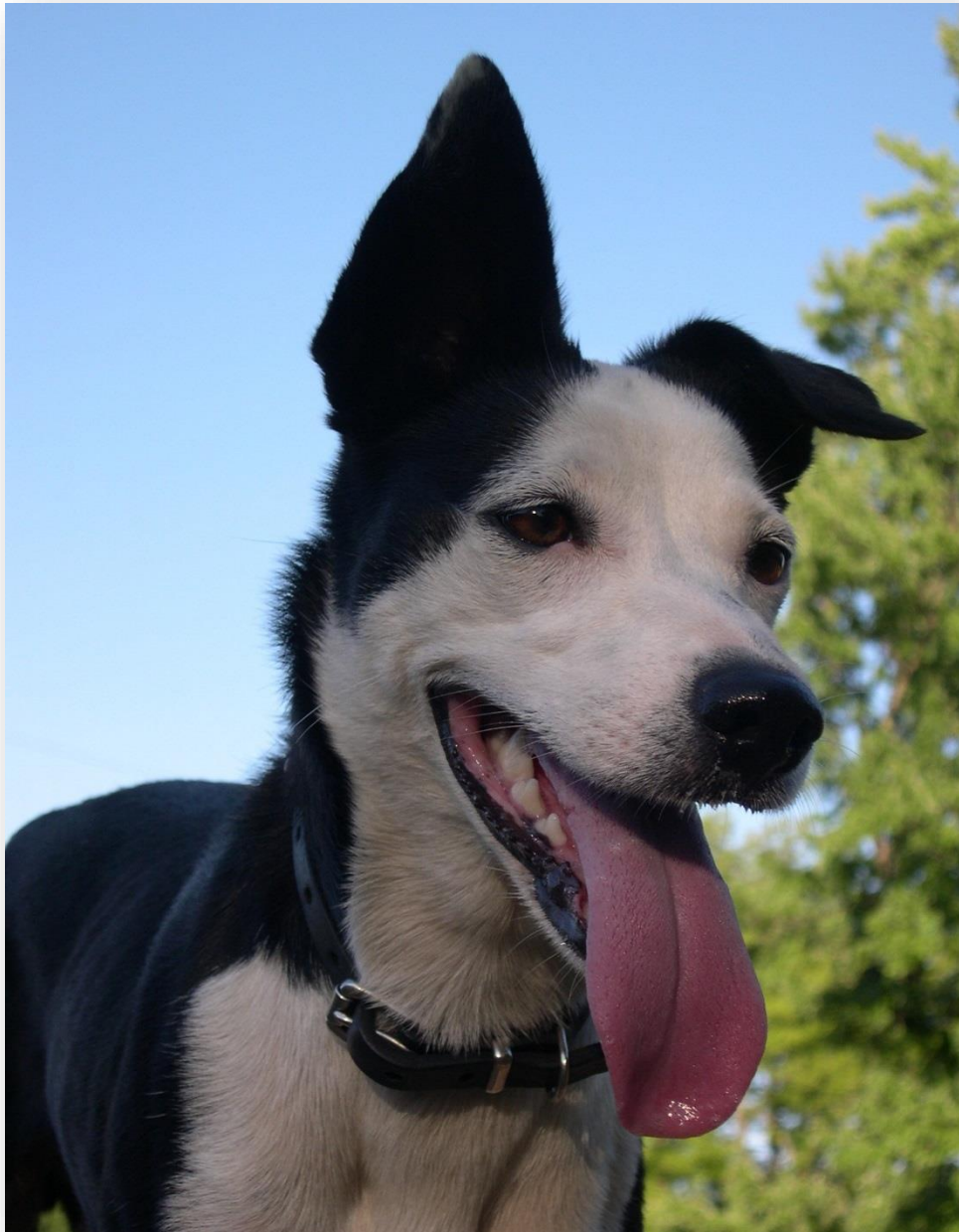


Dilated Pupils

A highly aroused, aggressive dog's pupils are often dilated.

However, pupils will also be dilated if the dog is in dim light.

Contrast the features of these two dogs.



Ears

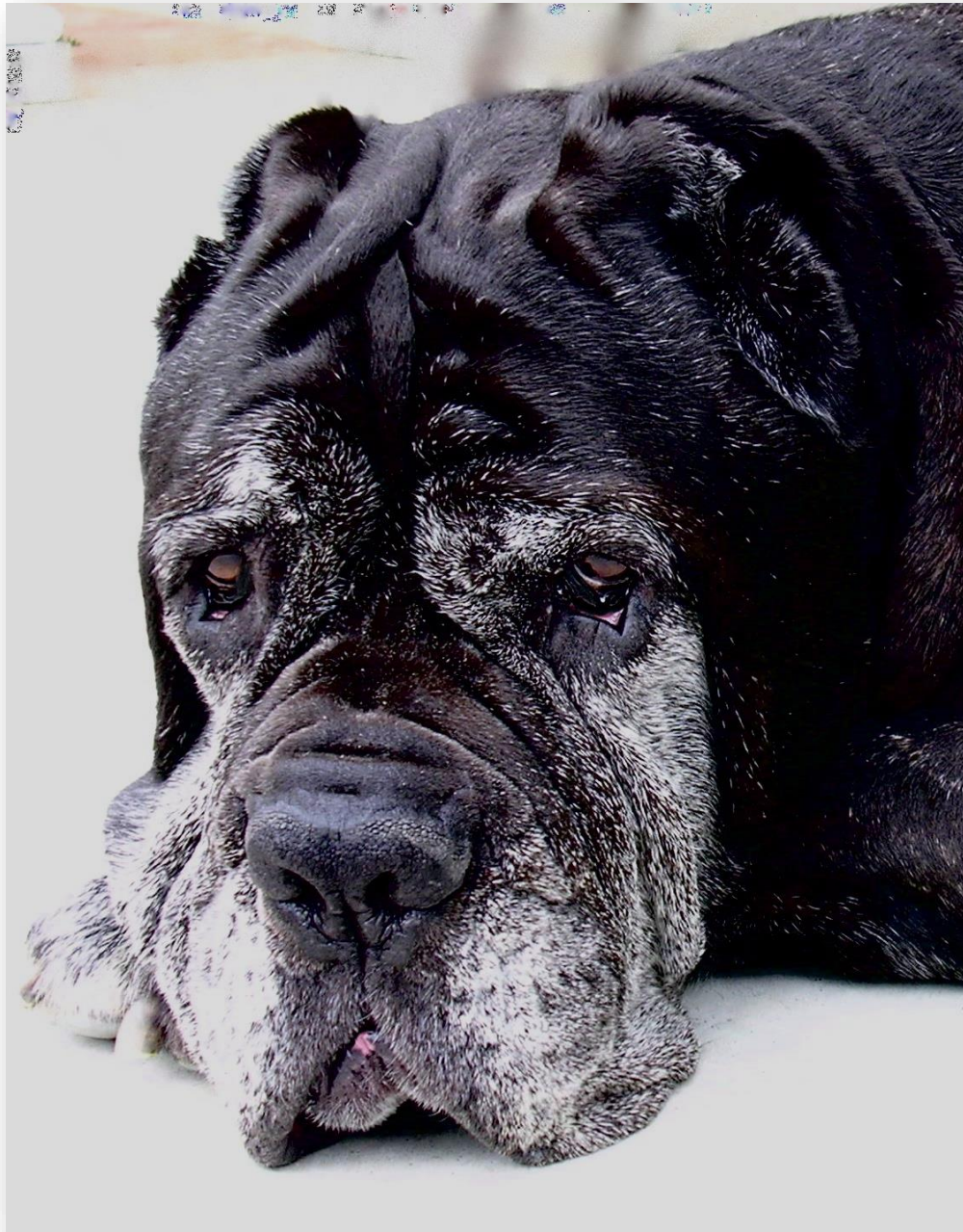
- ◆ Position
- ◆ Movement

Dogs' natural ear positions vary from prick to semi-prick to drop. Some dogs have such heavy drop ears that they don't allow for much movement.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF
SUSAN MANN





Dogs with extreme crops (bun crop) will still move the base of their ears. You just have to watch more closely.

Dogs can move their ears independently. This dog is looking at something but she's also listening to a sound behind her.

It's important to take note as this may indicate a heightened level of vigilance.



Relaxed Ears



Natural position

Alert Ears



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ANNETTE ALFONSO

Erect & Forward



Sexy Ears

Back but very erect, accompanied by courtship behavior, including a high, fast-wagging tail.



- ◆ **Aggressive:** ears usually pulled back or flattened. Occasionally forward. Can be anything but natural.



- ◆ **Fearful:** ears tend to be pulled back from their natural position, even flattened against the head.



- ◆ Some dogs indicate submission with “airplane” ears



Tails

- ◆ Position
- ◆ Movement



Natural





Submissive or Afraid?



Afraid



**Somewhat
aroused**



**PROCEED
WITH
CAUTION**

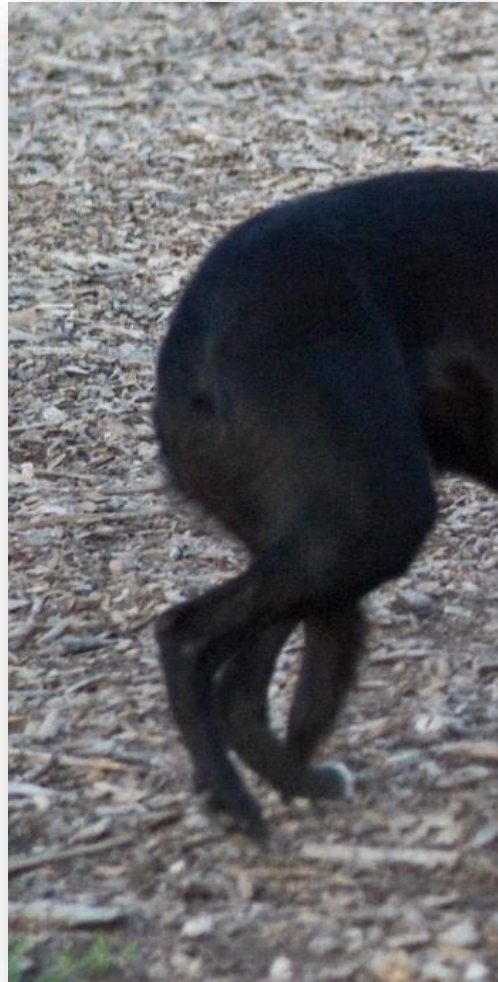
**Highly
aroused**



Natural



Fearful



Aggressive



**PROCEED
WITH
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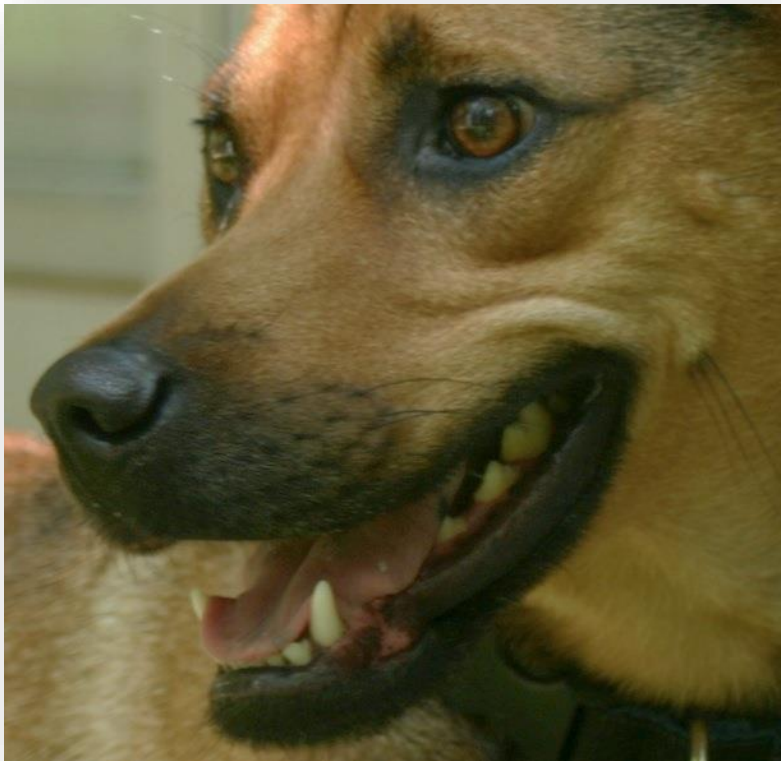
Mouth



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TRISH MCMILLAN LOEHR

- ◆ Open/Closed
- ◆ Positioning of lips
- ◆ Lip licking
- ◆ Yawning

In general, an open mouth indicates a relaxed dog. If the dog focuses on something, he tends to close his mouth.



**Commissure: the corner of the mouth
where the upper and lower lips meet**





- ◆ Fearful: commissure is tight and pulled back into a “fear grimace”





- ◆ **Aggressive: commissure is tight and pulled forward into a pursed or “puckered” position**



What is this dog communicating?





- ◆ Direct gaze
- ◆ Flattened ears
- ◆ Lowered head
- ◆ Tense face
- ◆ Forward commissure

Back off!!!

What has changed?





- ◆ Direct gaze
- ◆ Flattened ears
- ◆ Head lowered even more
- ◆ Tense face
- ◆ Pursued commissure

Back off!!!

What has changed?





- ◆ Direct gaze
- ◆ Flattened ears
- ◆ Tense face
- ◆ Weight shifted forward
- ◆ Wrinkled lips, tooth display

What has changed?





- ◆ Eyes wider
- ◆ Ears raised slightly
- ◆ Tense face
- ◆ Head raised slightly
- ◆ Commissure more forward
- ◆ Front teeth exposed more



Submissive Grin

Some dogs display a grin, retracting their lips and showing their teeth, when they are conveying submission.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SARAH MAIRS

Some dogs display a grin, retracting their lips and showing their teeth, when they are panting heavily.

Take the whole context into consideration when interpreting body language.



Relaxed sleepy yawn



**Contrast with
this Yawn**



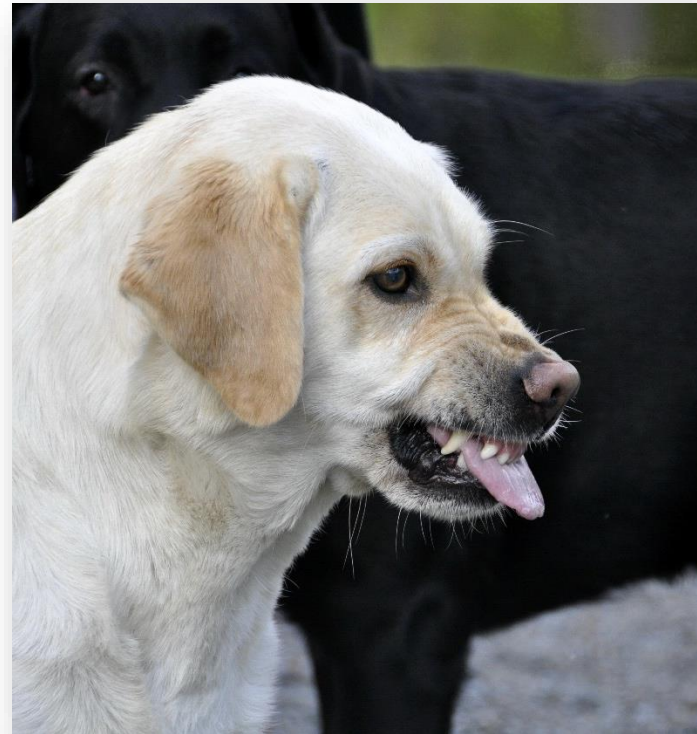
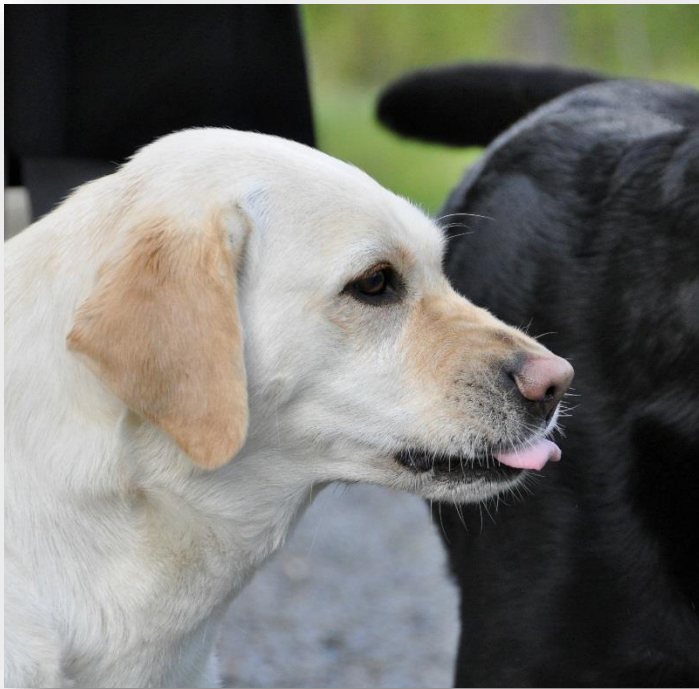
Stress yawn:
Exaggerated. Dog is
anxious, agitated.
This dog is releasing
nervous energy while
waiting for his dinner.

Nervous Panting



Lip Licking

When stressed, dogs often lip lick. Dogs engaged in aggressive displays sometimes extend their tongue out past their teeth.



Weight Distribution



- ◆ **Balanced**
- ◆ **Toward**
- ◆ **Away**



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Piloerection (Hackles Raised)

- ◆ Raised hackles does not mean the dog is aggressive. It is an indication of arousal, much like goosebumps in people. You need to pay attention though!



Conflicted or Ambivalent Behavior

**PROCEED
WITH
CAUTION**

