

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-your-dog-telling-you-1431098919>

LIFE | IDEAS | ESSAY

What Is Your Dog Telling You?

They may not use words, but dogs say a lot more than we realize with their body language.



Though dogs have been our best friends for tens of thousands of years, they still read us far more skillfully than we read them. *PHOTO: EVAN KAFKA/GETTY IMAGES*

By **MELISSA HOLBROOK PIERSON**

Updated May 11, 2015 10:10 a.m. ET

My first dog, Mercy, was a border collie mix whose body could convey an epic narrative—especially when she was in the dog park communicating at once with dozens of her kind. I soon began to wonder just what they were all saying. Their gestures were obviously dense with meaning. At times, a nearly invisible movement by another dog would change Mercy's course dramatically: She would bend into a play bow, or stiffen in alarm, or look away as if hoping that the dog enthusiastically eyeing her would suddenly

forget she existed. Often he would.

Watching those intricately choreographed ballets of intention in the park, I realized that to each other, dogs speak loud and clear. Humans, by contrast, have real trouble deciphering their language. Though dogs have been our best friends for tens of thousands of years, they still read us far more skillfully than we read them.

RELATED READING

- How to Photograph Black Dogs and Cats With an iPhone (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-photograph-black-dogs-and-cats-with-an-iphone-1430492001>)
- Dog Gone? Pooch Pooped Out? Fitness Trackers Keep Pet Owners in the Loop (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/dog-gone-pooch-pooped-out-fitness-trackers-keep-pet-owners-in-the-loop-1416002309>)
- Five Signs Your Dog Loves You ([http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeeasy/2013/12/04/five-signs-your-dog-loves-you/](http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/12/04/five-signs-your-dog-loves-you/))

We
tend
to
think
that
dogs
have

relatively little to say because they don't speak our language, but we are too focused on speech: Witness the tourist hoping to be understood by repeating a request ever more slowly and loudly, or the dog being scolded "Come here!" as he runs merrily away. Dogs are constantly asking us to listen, just not with our ears.

The language of dogs is primarily visual, enacted with their bodies. They speak with the direction of their gaze, the tilt of their tails, the distance they keep and the arc of their movement. Canine language is rich for the same reason ours is: We are both social, cooperative species.

Remaining ignorant of our companions' modes of expression is not only a frustrating limit on our mutual sympathy. It is also dangerous for us and for them. Some 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs in the U.S. each year, many of them children (for those 4 and under, most of the bites are to the face and neck).

Dogs are generally quite adept at telegraphing warnings, so it's our job to learn to read them better. This is also in their interest, since "behavior problems"—often the result of misunderstood canine expressions—are a leading reason that owners have to surrender or euthanize their dogs.

So what are dogs trying to tell us?

It's all in the ears, tail and body.

The baseline posture of a relaxed dog includes having ears up and tail down. In an alert, often transitional, posture, the tail is held straight behind, the ears go forward, and the entire carriage raises. A fearful or anxious dog tucks his tail, lowers his body and pulls back the corners of his mouth. If his hackles (the hairs along the back of his neck) are raised and his nose wrinkled, he is saying he just might bite if pressed further.

Similarly, the dog whose tail is stiff and wagging slowly (not all wagging denotes pleasure), with ears forward and carriage following suit, may be announcing imminent attack. If he freezes, pupils dilated and staring hard, he is to be taken at his word: Watch out.

Some dogs growl before biting and some don't; the canine body speaks louder than the voice. That is why dogs whose tails are docked or ears cropped lose some of their linguistic fluency. And it's why some of our grooming choices, such as the poodle's topknot, cause trouble when they are misread by other dogs as heightened carriage.

They're sorry, in many different ways.

For the same reason that Eskimos purportedly have 50 different words for snow, dogs have a vast repertoire of gestures for appeasement and propitiation. The Norwegian dog trainer Turid Rugaas has identified some 30 "calming signals"—movements offered to deflect trouble (which may also relieve stress in both giver and receiver). Supremely subtle, sometimes so quick we don't notice them, these appeasing signals include a flick of the tongue; turning the head or gaze away; suddenly sniffing the ground or sitting; yawning; shaking off; or approaching on a curve.

Please skip the hugs.

For a dog, what comes naturally to us primates when we overflow with affection feels like a threat. The desire to hug is one of the hardest reflexes for us to overcome, but reaching across a dog's neck is an act of intimidation. He may tolerate it, but he doesn't like it.

Like many dog owners, I do it anyway, but I'm always watchful: My current dog, Nelly, flashes her tongue to her nose or looks away during a hug, subtle but unequivocal responses to what she views as aggression. When strangers bend over dogs or reach out to pat their heads, or when children latch on to their necks—or stare into their eyes, another threatening gesture—many dogs will react with a volley of appeasements. If these go unheeded, they may feel forced to defend themselves. This is often why small children get bites to their faces, conveniently presented at muzzle level. Viral Internet

photos to the contrary, it is not cute when toddlers lie on top on dogs or pull their ears; it is a lit fuse.

That's not a guilty look.

The jury is still out on whether dogs experience guilt or shame, but chances are that “the look” popularly ascribed to a dog who has done something wrong is actually fear or anxiety prompted by the expectation of anger from the owner. Things commonly punished by us—“stealing” food, urinating on the rug—are hardly immoral to a creature whose values are so different from ours. The furrowed brow, half-moon eyes, slinky posture and lowered head of the canine “wrongdoer” are not an apology; they are signs of stress or requests to desist.

They love you too. My dog, and probably yours, has a special way of greeting those she loves: I call it helicopter-tail. (Nelly’s earsplitting screams of joy are peculiar to her.) Other signs of happiness are unmistakable and easier to read by humans than many of dogs’ other communications: a “rocking-horse” run, as vertical as it is forward; the greeting stretch (followed by “pretty please” front paws on your leg); the C-shaped body bend—the better to maneuver a butt for that all-pleasing scratch—and the smile.

Yes, dogs do smile. No translation needed.

—Ms. Pierson is the author, most recently, of “The Secret History of Kindness: Learning from How Dogs Learn” (W.W. Norton).

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.