

SCENTVENTURE

Speaking Your Dog's Language

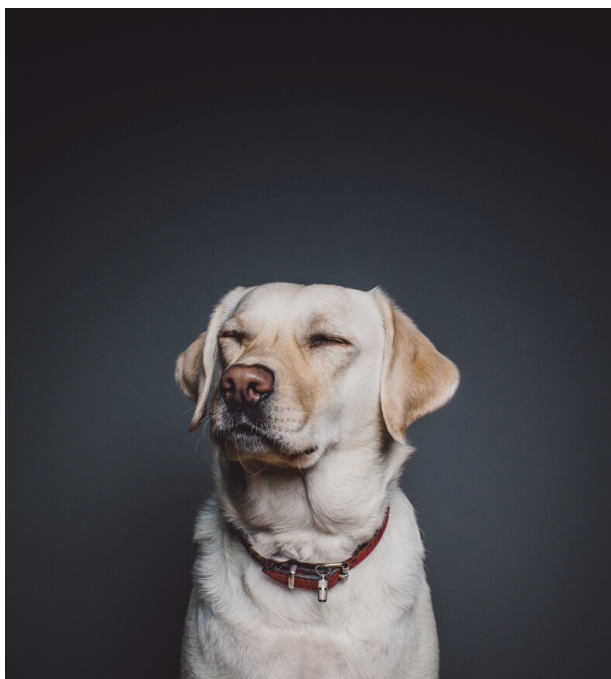


It seemed like the perfect time to move to Italy. I was just finishing my Masters and ready to begin a new chapter in my life. The only problem being that I had a 20,000-word thesis to complete and a life to pack up, which didn't leave much time for learning a new language. Don't worry, everyone told me – 'The best way to learn a new language is to live in that country.'

Well, what a wonderful theory that was. The reality of course was completely different.

I didn't have a clue what was going on around me. No idea what people were saying to me or to each other. While this had never seemed a problem when I had visited in the past, I was in holiday mode then. Living in another country and having to carry out everyday life whilst being unable to communicate was a whole different story. It was a nightmare.

I've never felt more lonely and frustrated. Ruben did his best but couldn't always be there. Normally sociable with a smile for everyone, I dreaded anyone speaking to me. I walked through the village with my head down in case anyone tried to strike up a conversation.



Frustration

From my experience in Italy you can see how speaking a completely different language to another being in your household can lead to feelings of frustration.

Without a doubt one of the most important aspects of living with your dog is understanding how they communicate through their body language.

Body language is a mammoth topic and one that we will be unable to exhaust in this challenge, but even learning some of their language will improve your life together.

I can't really emphasise enough how important understanding body language is, whether you have a dog who is reactive, anxious or over excitable.

For anxious and/or reactive dogs it's essential to know how they're feeling so you don't push them outside of their comfort zone.

Prevention where possible

Even if your dog isn't anxious or reactive, understanding body language is essential to ensuring that they're feeling comfortable and relaxed, to prevent any issues developing.

Over exuberant greeters can make other dogs uncomfortable. A sweeping statement, but I would say that most people you meet on a walk couldn't read their dog's body language. If you meet another dog and their owner tells you their dog would like to play with you dog, understanding the other dogs' body language becomes very important. It could be the difference between your dog having a good or bad experience.

Often we don't pay enough attention to subtle expressions of body language before it escalates. By learning your dog's communication signals you can identify potential problems before they begin.

Dogs don't want to resort to aggression; from an evolutionary point of view it could be very costly. They are by nature peaceful animals and so they use calming signals to maintain healthy relationships and avoid or resolve conflict.

Dogs have an innate ability to calm themselves and others around them. Turid Rugaas describes signals as 'calming down nervousness, fear, noise and unpleasant things. The signals are used for calming themselves when they feel stressed or uneasy. They are used to make the others involved feel safer and understand the goodwill the signals indicate.'

Look at the dog in the photo top left. What do you notice? List the things you see, even if you're not sure what it means.

Did you see the dog is blinking and turning their head away? It could be a random moment caught in time that isn't really indicative of the dog's real state of mind, or this dog may be feeling uncomfortable about the proximity of the camera or the proximity of the photographer. We will never know for sure! All we can do is observe and read the context and if we think a dog may be uncomfortable, stop what you are doing.



If you were the owner of one of these two dogs in the picture above, why may you need to keep a very close eye on this play session?

If you noticed that the dog on the right has a bandaged paw - well done!

You can see by both of their tense bodies and tail that their play style may be quite intense and exciting. If the dog on the right feels pain in their paw during play, they may come to associate that pain with the other dog. Pain is very closely linked to aggression in dogs.

This is why it pays to not only become familiar with your own dog's body language but to be able to read the whole situation. It really can save a lot of unnecessary unpleasantness.

Public service announcement!

Once you learn body language you're can't 'unsee' it and you may start seeing a lot more uncomfortable or stressed dogs than you did before. However, the advantages far outweigh that, as you will become the very best partner to your dog.

What can we do about it?

So, you've identified that your dog isn't feeling comfortable, what should you do?

It's easy to miss the more subtle communication signals our dogs give, for example, a nose lick, turning away, averting the gaze, yawning, moving slowly, and so on.

We tend to only begin to notice body language when it becomes a problem for us – hackles, growling, lunging or biting.

It's important that we recognise and reinforce subtle body language so that it doesn't escalate.

How do we reinforce the body language?

**By walking away from the trigger!
If the trigger is removed, dogs feel
relieved and relief is reinforcing!**

Putting distance between you and the trigger means your dog won't need to escalate their communication to growling, snapping or biting. And their trust in you will deepen as they realise you will always be there to help them out.

Invisible beginnings

Distances are crucial when we're helping our dogs feel calmer around their triggers.

If we see communication signals at 20 metres (hackles, lunging, etc), then the physiology (release of stress chemicals in the brain and body) is happening *before* that. For this reason, we need to work much more than 20 metres away. That way the fear response isn't triggered.

Once hormones are released through the blood brain barrier we start to see the body language. Before that it's invisible. It all happens so quickly!

Breed differences

Some breeds' natural body language can be misinterpreted by other dogs, for example -

- Sighthounds – tension stored in haunches to run fast.
- Bullies – natural posture is naturally 'big' and forward leaning.
- Herders – stalking can be misinterpreted as a predatory approach.
- Doodles – lots of hair covering their facial features may make them harder to read.

The Ladder of Aggression

The ladder of aggression describes the ascending severity of body language and behaviour when a dog feels threatened. It starts on the bottom rung of the ladder with calming signals and subtle signs of unease like the ones on the next page and works up to growling, snapping and biting.



The black and tan dog in the middle is 'splitting'. They are standing in between the other 2 dogs, using their body to split them. The dog in the middle is possibly perceiving tension between the dog who has the food and the one who does not. The dog in the middle may be trying to keep the peace.

When do dogs not use calming signals?

When they have tried them in the past and they haven't worked - i.e. their signals were not 'listened to'. Instead of trying calming signals again, these dogs are more likely to start higher up the ladder of aggression in order to make their point.

No body language at all?

If a dog has learned that when they display body language it isn't respected, they may stop trying. We call this 'learned helplessness.' They don't have a flight option but they either don't want to fight or they have been punished for aggression in the past. Whatever they have done in the past hasn't stopped the bad stuff from happening so they give up. Think of the now 'well behaved' dog in 'quick fix' TV shows. Owners think the dog is 'fixed' as they're no longer performing the unwanted behaviour.

Of course we don't want things to get to that level, which is why we reinforce the early subtle signals. Have a look at some of these subtle signs on the next page.



We say a dog has 'whale eyes' when the whites of the eyes are showing. The pupils are dilated so they can take in as much information as possible. The head will often face a different way to the eyes. If a dog has whale eye they could be feeling worried and may be either in or about to enter fight or flight' mode. Dogs that display resource guarding often use this type of eyes.



When a dog lifts their paw it could be for several reasons, from anticipation to fear and even play! In order to gather more information, check if your dog is offering any more body language.



The nose lick is a calming signal that dogs may use when feeling uneasy. Or perhaps they simply have food on the end of their nose! Context is ever-important when reading body language.



Head turning is a calming signal that is used when the dog feels uncomfortable.

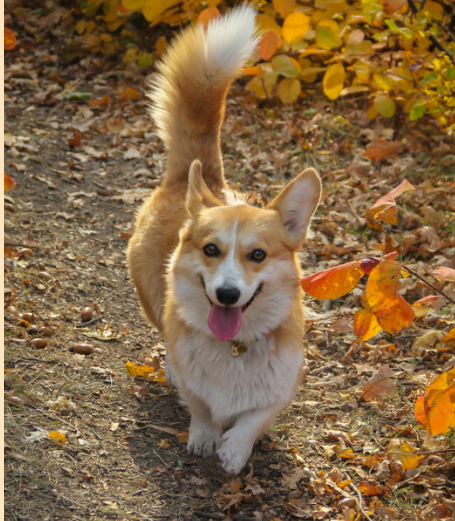
It helps them avoid direct eye contact with the perceived threat. It's a useful tool for reducing tension.



When a dog is feeling unsure they often lean forward whilst lowering the head and ears, however the weight is still in the rear end. It could signify caution or uncertainty about approach.



The yawn is another calming signal. Dogs may yawn if they're feeling uncomfortable, perhaps if something is stressful. However, as always, we need to put the yawn into context. Like us, dogs also yawn when tired! So how do we know? Gather the context. What's happening? Is your dog is likely to be tired? Is there something that could be stressful? Are there any additional signals?



COMMUNICATION SIGNAL OBSERVATIONS

ACTIVITIES & OBSERVATIONS

Observe your dog in the following 3 scenarios and observe their body language. What do you notice?

On a walk

When meeting a person or dog

When doing Exploration Zone

GUIDELINES

- Keep an eye on the whole environment. Watch for what could have changed your dog's body language.
- Don't over interpret one single piece of body language – try to look at your dog as a whole
- Try to be objective. Say what you see, rather than how you think your dog is feeling.
- Take the time of day into consideration – do you see different body language if your dog is hungry or tired?
- Try to get a couple of different camera angles if possible so you can see different body parts

Being mindful of the link between communication and behaviour enables you to adjust your interactions with your dog (or your dog's interactions with other dogs, people or stimuli) if you notice their body language starting to change. Even if you don't know the reason for that shift.