

THE **BARk** DOG IS MY CO-PILOT

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Translating Puppy Talk

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A basic truth about humans and dogs: We live in overlapping but not identical sensory worlds. To a pup, we are sort of like the Brobdingnagians of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, extra-large beings whose ways just don't all make perfect sense. That's a hard position to be in, because your dog's world is controlled by you. Making matters more difficult still, a dog can't explain to you what you're failing to understand about him. While we live in a world of language, dogs communicate via a variety of other means.

Thus, it's important that you learn to understand your puppy, and understand what he's "saying" to you, as you call the shots. The better you understand how he experiences his world, the less likely you'll be to become frustrated or angry (and perhaps treat your charge unfairly). And, ultimately, the better and stronger the bond between the two of you will be. Here are 35 actions, with explanations that will help you translate what he's "saying" to you.

1. Moves away when you pet his head. How are you doing the petting? A lot of people are taught that the way to pet a dog is to keep patting the top of his head. But a dog perceives that action as a signal of dominance, not affection. It also plain just doesn't feel good. Dogs prefer to be stroked, particularly on the side of the face, under the chin, or on the front of the chest. They also like having their rumps scratched.

2. Circles the mat before going to sleep. This is an ethologic vestige. Dogs in the wild flattened the grass by circling around it a few times before settling down. They were creating a safe and comfortable nest. Today, dogs are acting out a primordial sequence that was genetically encoded many thousands of years ago and passed down from generation to generation.

3. Barks at the mailman no matter how well acquainted the two are. Your pup probably thinks he's exerting some power by getting the mail carrier to leave. He does leave soon after the dog starts barking, doesn't he?

4. Grunts. A grunt from a puppy is a communication of pleasure. Sought-after warmth or communion has been attained.

5. Whines. A puppy whines if he is cold, hungry or separated from those he feels he needs near him. Put a warm towel over him, feed him or pay him attention, and the whining will probably stop.

6. Blinks. *That's what a dog does when he is thinking hard.* If you say "Down" to get him to lie down and he blinks before doing so, he is thinking, "Do I have to?"

7. Yawns. A dog may yawn if he's tired, but more generally, it's an indicator of stress. With yawning, the dog is trying to displace the stress, or inner conflict, with a safe, neutral behavior. Humans do the same thing when they find themselves in a situation of conflict that causes stress—not yawn necessarily, but do something to cope until the unpleasant situation passes. Let's say you're in a hurry and you reach a red light. You want to be there, but you have to be here, both because that's the safe thing to do and because someone else, the police, will enforce the behavior that causes the stress: staying still until the light turns green. So what do you do?

You groom yourself in the rearview mirror, or you look at the driver in the car next to you. Neither of these actions is directly related to what's pressing on your mind, but engaging in them is better than doing nothing while you're stuck in the state of conflict between what you want to do and what you must do despite your desires. That's pretty much akin to a dog's yawning when he's not tired.

8. Licks his lips. This is a sign of nervousness, anxiety and submission. People do it, too.

9. Licks you. This is not really a kiss. Rather, it's a deferent, attention-seeking gesture, similar to what a pup is expressing when he licks his mother's lips to get her to regurgitate food. (Young puppies will sometimes feed off their mother's regurgitations.) Why, then, do dogs often lick people in moments of affection? Most likely it's because they get good feedback for it. For instance, puppy happens to lick baby, baby squeals with delight, mom and dad are overjoyed and pet puppy while racing for the camcorder. The puppy learns, "Ah, when I lick the kid, everyone gets in a good mood and treats me well." Inadvertent conditioning has taken place.

Note: In some instances, a dog will lick to establish dominance. It has happened in our own offices. One owner brought in a Rottweiler puppy who needed to have his overly dominant and aggressive behavior curbed. The pup immediately put his two front paws on the treating veterinarian's desk and slobbered him up and down with his big, pink sandpaper-ish tongue. It was clearly not a deferent gesture but, rather, a gesture in which the dog was exercising control and showing he could get away with it. You've got to read the situation a little (which is not hard to do).

10. Keeps climbing up onto the couch even when you've told him "No." A puppy who tries to get as high as or higher up than you might be vying for dominance. But puppies also prefer soft to hard surfaces. Sometimes a cushion is just a cushion.

11. Paws and scrapes the ground after eliminating. A lot of people mistakenly think that a dog, like a cat, is scratching and scraping to cover his "deposit," or at least the scent of his deposit. Nothing could be further from the truth. A dog that scratches the ground after eliminating is actually engaging in a kind of marking behavior to advertise his presence—the opposite of trying to cover up the "evidence." By pawing the dirt, he is leaving both a visual cue—unearthed soil—and an olfactory one coming from, we surmise, sweat glands on his paws. It's for emphasis. If the urine doesn't say clearly enough that "Kilroy was here," the other scents will.

12. Eats feces. Called coprophagia, this behavior is commonly displayed by puppies. It is species-typical behavior. Bitches keep the whelping area clean after they give birth by eating their young's feces. There is nothing harmful about it to a pup, who will probably outgrow the behavior by the time he's one year old. But if you find it too objectionable, simply deny access. Always walk the pup on a leash, and pick up after dogs—and other species of animals—who have relieved themselves in your yard. (Some say that adding meat tenderizers or breath fresheners to the dog's diet helps curb the habit, but it does not work.)

13. Rolls around in disgusting stuff, including muddy messes, feces, and carcasses. Remember, dogs "see" largely through their sense of smell. When they roll around in something and stink to high heaven, they're not trying to be disgusting. They're saying, "Look what I found. What a day I had in the cow pasture," and so on. It could also be a holdover from the times when dogs ran wild. Rolling in the excrement of another animal or rotting material masks the dog's own odor, thereby making him less easily detectable by potential predators—or prey that he is staking out.

14. Eats grass. Some people believe dogs eat grass to make themselves throw up when they have stomach upset; that is, the dogs are thought to self-medicate. Some believe dogs simply like to eat grass and then throw up when they eat too much of it. Who's right? Both. Different dogs have different grass-eating patterns. None of them are harmful, so don't fret if your dog throws up after nibbling on the green stuff.

15. Sniffs around forever before urinating. To a human, urination is urination. To a dog, it's an elimination process and a way of communicating. So a dog has to take in the various olfactory notices left by other dogs before leaving a message of his own. He may even want to make sure that no other pup has previously urinated in the spot he's considering. An "all-clear" sign takes some time. Be patient. He's not trying to drive you crazy.

16. Sniffs other dogs' behinds. If smelling were seeing, humans would be considered legally blind by those in the canine world. Dogs would feel more's the pity for us for not getting anything out of sniffing the behinds of others. Pheromones generated from the glands around a dog's anus let another dog know the identity of another dog. They're as crucial to learning about another dog as the pheromones contained in vaginal secretions and urine.

17. Pants. Unlike humans, dogs don't have sweat glands on most of their skin. There are only a few on their paws and around the anus. Thus, they don't have the mechanism we do for cooling their bodies by losing body heat through the evaporation of sweat. Rather, the way they regulate body temperature when it starts to rise is by panting. The faster a dog pants, the more water-saturated air he is breathing out (evaporating) from his lungs, and that has a cooling effect. That said, dogs don't pant only when they're hot. Sometimes they pant when they're anxious. For instance, you might see a dog panting when he's suffering from separation anxiety or thunderstorm phobia. He'll pant, pace and generally look nervous.

18. Acts happier around dogs of his own breed. It is believed that dogs do not have a sense of self-image and do not even necessarily recognize themselves in a mirror, so it's not vanity that is attracting your pet to others of his kind. It may simply be that your pup had good experiences with his siblings, so he seeks out others who look like them. It can

work the other way, too. If, say, your pet is a Border Collie who has had unfortunate experiences with Cocker Spaniels, he may spend his whole life acting aggressive or fearful about that breed.

19. Lays his head and front paws splayed out close to the ground while sticking his rump in the air. That's what's known as the play bow. It's a dog's way of saying that he wants to play—or keep on playing. When a dog does that, he's in a very good mood. All dogs (and coyotes and wolves) are genetically hard-wired for this position. When another dog sees it, he knows that the lowered head is an invitation to come forward, while the rump in the air is a signal of playful, frisky readiness. Oftentimes the lips of a dog doing the play bow will be retracted in a kind of teeth-showing grin. The oncoming dog will make note of that signal of friendliness, too.

20. Chases his own tail. Is your dog a Bull Terrier or German Shepherd? Those are the breeds most likely to go after their own tails. But it is not normal doggie behavior, for them or any other breed. It is believed that tail-chasing starts in dogs with a high predatory drive with no natural outlets for their predatory instinct. One day, out of boredom, the dog spies his tail from the corner of his eye and tries to pounce on it. The result is that circular tail-chasing motion, which is perfect, in a way, because the tail moves away just as fast as the dog moves to catch it.

Unfortunately, for some dogs, the behavior becomes so ingrained that they do actually get hold of and bite their tails, causing bleeding. Other dogs spin themselves into extreme dizziness for hours on end, barely even taking time to eat or sleep. That means the anxiety arising from the inability to stake out real prey has resulted in a compulsive behavior that can only be corrected with a major lifestyle change (allowing the dog a lot more free rein in the woods, for instance) or anti-obsessional drugs.

21. Nurses on things like blankets or stuffed animals. If a puppy lives with his mother until he is at least six to eight weeks of age, he will probably not suck on various non-living items. That's because he will have had the opportunity to nurse to his heart's content as a newborn, and even to suckle from his mother once he moves onto solid food in those instances that he needs comfort after an unnerving event. It's those puppies whose biological drive to nurse from their mothers has been denied that end up nursing on things they shouldn't be nursing on. Note that some puppy breeds have a greater propensity to nurse on blankets and such (and even on themselves) than other breeds when denied access to their mothers. These include Doberman Pinschers and Dachshunds. Why is not known. It may be that these breeds have a particularly high nursing drive that is more likely to become displaced when not offered the right outlet.

22. Sticks his head out the car window during drives. It's fun! Dogs, like many humans, enjoy the feel of the wind on their faces. In addition, with those noses out the window, they can smell various neighborhoods they're passing through, which is their best way of "seeing" them. Be aware, however, that a pup or older dog can get hurt by flying pebbles thrown up by other cars, particularly if their eyes are hit. For that reason, one company makes doggie goggles, although, admittedly, not all dogs willingly become like Snoopy's Red Baron.

23. Barks at another dog with his head held high. When one dog barks at another with his head held high, his eyes directed at the other dog, his ears pricked forward (if they're not floppy), and his body tense with his tail erect, he is signaling confidence and

dominance. He is not only calling attention to his presence but announcing his control over the territory.

24. Barks at another dog with his ears pressed to his head, his tail tucked and his eyes darting from side to side. Such a dog is afraid. He might actually be barking more ferociously than a confident one, but it's all bluff. Watch how he might charge forward a couple of paces and then step backwards. He doesn't really want to get into a tussle.

25. Digs fast and furiously in the dirt, or even in the bed linens. This action is often derived from aspects of the so-called appetitive phase of predatory behavior. Consider that Terriers, for instance, were bred to chase small varmints. The varmint, after running some, would burrow into the ground, and the dog's job was to dig in the dirt and pursue it. When there aren't any true predatory outlets, he might displace these aspects of a hard-wired behavior with seemingly pointless behavior—digging in some leaves in the garden, perhaps, or in some heaped up bed clothes.

Not all dogs dig for predatory reasons. A northern breed, such as a Siberian Husky, might dig to simulate what he does in the harsh terrain of some polar region. Wandering around in ice-cold wind blowing 70 miles an hour, he'll dig a little depression into the snow to shield himself from the elements. Likewise, on a very hot day, a dog might dig in the ground and lie in the cool soil to shield himself from the sun. In other words, digging could be a vestige of thermoregulatory behavior rather than predatory.

26. Takes food out of his bowl and then goes into another room to eat it. A lot of dogs engage in bizarre behaviors around the food bowl. Some will lift one or more pieces of kibble out of it and position them "strategically" before going back to eat them. Others snatch the food and go to a different area before eating it. It is thought that a dog that sees himself as relatively low in the pack order might be more inclined to move his food around out of fear that some alpha dog might come and take away his meal. Perhaps in the wild, he would have waited his turn in line to grab his share of the kill, then run away to protect his allotment from any potential usurpers. Call it a little paranoia, if you will.

27. Hides treats rather than eat or chew on them. A typical instance of this behavior is a dog burying bones. Going back to nature, if you're a dog and you're currently replete but you don't know where your next meal is coming from, you might stash some food as rations to be consumed at a later time. You'll always be able to locate it with your keen sense of smell.

28. "Runs" in his sleep. With that slight paddling of limbs some dogs experience while sleeping, it is believed they are dreaming about precisely what you might think they're dreaming about—chasing a squirrel or some other creature. Your pup could even be revisiting some great memory of the previous day, during which he ran a rodent up a tree.

29. Wags his tail. A lot of people think a wagging tail is a friendly sign, and it can be—but not always. The best way to think of a dog's tail and its side-to-side motion is as an energy indicator. When a dog's energy level is up or when he's excited, his tail will wag fast. When he's interested but not fully engaged, it might wag slowly. Then, as he becomes progressively more riveted or excited, his tail will wag progressively faster. Think of the tail as you would a car's tachometer. It indicates how fast the animal is revving internally. Now, that can be happy revving or frightened revving or conflict revving. In other words,

fast and furious tail wagging could mean the dog is “locked and loaded” and ready to charge. The wagging has to be interpreted circumstantially.

30. Puts his tail between his legs. This means submission and is an effort at appeasement. The dog is not at all sure of himself in a particular situation.

31. Sets his tail bolt upright. A dog that stiffens his tail into an upright position is showing confidence, even dominance. It's a very forward, confident position. Some dogs, such as Chows, were bred to always have their tails up in order to always look masterful and in charge.

32. Chews socks or slippers. A dog's gotta chew what a dog's gotta chew. If you haven't supplied him with appropriate chew toys, he will turn something else into his chewing gum. (Don't run around all agitated, trying to get the item of clothing back. The dog will think the two of you are having a game of “Keep Away.”)

Note: Some dogs don't just chew. They swallow—dirty socks, wash rags, pantyhose, and other smallish personal effects. That could cause intestinal obstructions, symptoms of which include vomiting, loss of electrolytes, shock, even death. If you see that your dog might be a swallower of such items, eliminate access to them. Otherwise, you'll end up with expensive surgery bills to remove the swallowed fare. And we mean bills, not bill. Dogs that swallow small articles of clothing do not learn from experience that their actions lead to unpleasant and sometimes dangerous ends.

33. Sniffs people in the groin area. A dog can tell an awful lot about a person from one hit of the odor of pheromones coming from that part of the body. Even if you've just bathed, a dog can “read” you, even to the point of being able to detect differences between identical twins. He might even be able to tell whether you're afraid or whether you're a super-alpha with a lot of testosterone—a force to be reckoned with.

34. Shakes toys back and forth in his mouth. Like digging, this harks back to the appetitive phase of predatory behavior. A dog will shake the neck of his prey in order to kill it.

35. Keeps the hair on his back standing on end. Called piloerection, this is sort of like goose bumps. It's not something a dog can control. Consider that a dog's hairs have little muscles attached to them called the piloerectile muscles. When his sympathetic nervous system, involved in fight or flight reactions, releases epinephrine, those muscles contract, in turn raising the hairs. It is assumed that nature programmed dogs to raise their hackles when faced with danger in order to make them look bigger and fiercer. A dog's hair will also stand on end when he is very, very cold. Again, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in, this time to help the dog burn fuel faster, but the muscle-contracting action in the hair takes place, too. If the hair stands up, an insulating layer of air gets trapped between hair shafts, so the cold air cannot get so close to the skin. It works like a down jacket.

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