

## Canine Communication

Understanding canine body language



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## Agenda

- Observe behavior objectively
- Identify components of canine body language
- Putting it all together



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## 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 vs. Objective

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"



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## Subjective vs. Objective

Try making the following subjective statement into an objective one.

When the doorbell rings:

~~my dog goes crazy~~ (subjective)

\_\_\_\_\_ (objective)

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## Canine Body Language

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



Photo credit: Home Depot

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## Behavior is on spectrum



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## Behavior is on spectrum



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## Canine Body Language

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



Photo credit [www.softsia.com](http://www.softsia.com)

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## 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



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## Eyes

Consider:

- Eye Shape
- White part (sclera) showing
- Pupil dilation
- Movement



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## Eyes: Shape

Round or almond-shape, little to no tension around the eyes (“soft eye”)



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## Eyes: Shape

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

May show white of eye (“whale eye”).



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## 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”.



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## Eyes: Dilation

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



Photo credit: Trish Loehr

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## 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



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## Ears: Back



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## Ears: Droopy shape

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



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## Mouth

Consider:

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



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## Mouth: Shape

Side of lip can be pulled back (“long lip”)



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## Mouth: Shape

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



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## Mouth: Calming Signals

Lip licking and stress yawning



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## Mouth: Close or Open?

Generally open mouth is more relaxed body language.



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## Mouth: Teeth?

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



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## 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

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## Tail

Consider:

- Position (base of tail)
- Movement



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## Tail: Positions

Tucked (fear)

Low



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## Tail: Positions

Neutral



High



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## Tail: Positions



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## 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)



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## Body Posture

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



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## Body Posture: Weight

May shift weight forward

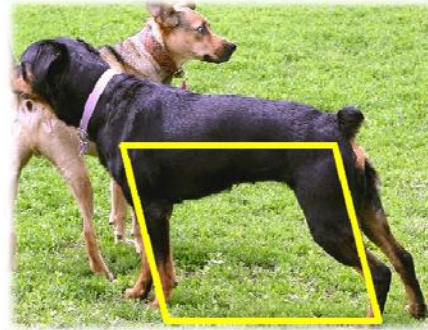
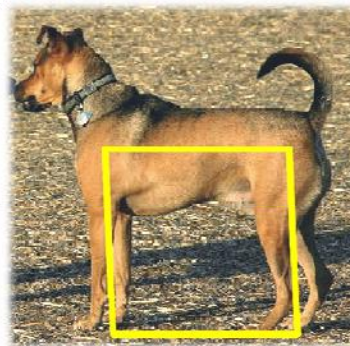
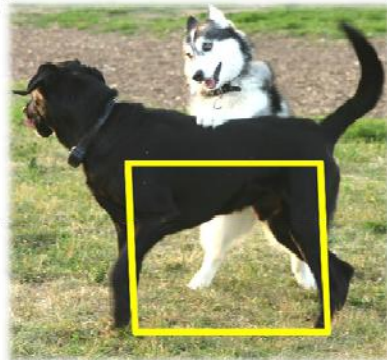


Photo credit: Khris Erickson

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## Body Posture: Weight

May be somewhere in the middle (square)



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## Body Posture: Weight

May shift weight backward

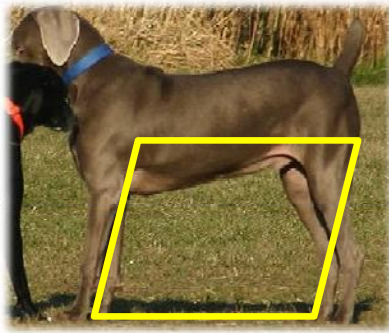


Photo credit: Cristina McCarty

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## Body Posture: Play!

- Play bow is the “invitation”
- Wide range of behaviors exhibited after invite accepted



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## Body Position: Roll/Lie down

- Used as cut-off cue and “no-fight”



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## Body Posture: Play vs. cut-off cue



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## Practice observation skills!



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## Practice observation skills!

- Benefits of video - use as learning tool when played back slowly



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## Practice observation skills!

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



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## Practice observation skills!

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



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## 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/aspca-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<sup>PRO</sup>

[www.aspcapro.org/webinars](http://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)

