

WHISKER WHISPERS

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As I type on my computer, Jackson, my 17-year-old reclusive cat, strolls out from behind the desk, stretches up to put his paws on my leg and, purring, bumps his head against my arm. I reach down to pet him, and he rubs the side of his cheek on my hand, then returns his paws to the floor where he sits, still purring, for several minutes. Each time I pet him he sniffs my hand, then offers another cheek rub. Eventually he retires to his den behind his desk, and I return to my typing. I'm grateful for his rare display of attention and affection, but I don't spend too much time wondering about what he's trying to say. I doubt, however, that he's trying to tell me that Timmy has fallen in the well!

Cats have been studied by behavioral scientists far less than have their canine counterparts, so it should come as no surprise that we as cat owners are far less confident than dog owners at reading and understanding the language of our furry companions. We have a rough idea of what some of our feline friends' various communications mean, but much is still open to interpretation.

Cats use three primary channels of communication: vocal and auditory; visual; and olfactory. Feline communications are generally more subtle than those of our canine companions. That doesn't mean they're not talking to us – more likely we're not listening closely enough and, as a result, we tend to misinterpret or overlook a lot of what they are saying.

The Cat's Meow

Feline vocal communications have been classified by some behavioral scientists into five categories:

1. The Purr. Everyone knows that a purring cat is a happy cat. Kittens can purr as early as two days of age. Nursing kittens purr as they suckle and knead contentedly at the milk bar, and adult cats purr and knead on our laps when they are relaxed and happy. But did you know that an anxious cat may also purr? Some scientists theorize that the purr of an anxious cat has different sound qualities than the purr of a contented one, but this has yet to be confirmed by sonographic testing. Maybe, like the person who smiles bravely to overcome feelings of fear or depression, the anxious cat purrs to convince herself that everything really *is* okay.
2. The Chirr. The chirr sounds like a meow that has been rolled on the tongue. (Perhaps it was originally spoken by French felines – les chats.) Most commonly used by mother cats calling their kittens from the nest, it might also be uttered by a friendly cat who is eliciting the approach of another cat or a human. Humans can also mimic the sound to reassure and greet their feline friends.
3. The Call. A loud, rhythmic sound made with the mouth closed, the call is primarily associated with a female cat who is soliciting a male, and sometimes occurs in males who are fighting with each other. Our inscrutable Jackson, neutered from an early age and an indoor-only cat for the past 15 years, makes this sound at various times, most frequently in the dead of night. We have yet to discern the cause or meaning of his mournful post-midnight calls. It may be an invitation for our other cat, 15-year-

old Gewürztraminer, to come play with him, but if so, the invitation is invariably ignored.

4. The Meow. This is by far the most common and varied cat sound. It can be assertive, plaintive, friendly, bold, welcoming, attention soliciting, demanding, or complaining. It can even be silent, where the mouth opens but no sound emerges. Human tend to find this silent meow particularly plaintive and appealing.
5. The Growl/Snarl/Hiss. These are all sounds that are associated with either offensive or defensive aggression. They are usually accompanied by a body language display intended to have a visual effect on the perceived threat. The communication may be directed at cats as well as other species – the puffed-up hissing and spitting display of a cat toward an approaching dog is a well-known phenomenon, and kittens as young as two to three weeks will hiss and spit when first picked up by a human.

The Nose Knows

Olfactory communication is useful for cats who are separated by time and space. Cats have scent glands on their tails, paws, foreheads, chins, lips, and whisker areas. The endearing head bumping, cheek rubbing behavior that feels like affection to us is actually our cat's way of depositing her scent. Well, perhaps there is some affection there, if she thinks enough of us to want to mark and claim us as her own! Head bunting may be a display of social dominance, and cheek rubbing is often exhibited by a dominant animal towards a subordinate.

The other primary method of feline olfactory communication is one that gets our feline friends in big trouble – marking with urine and feces. Although cats may mark with both sprayed and non-sprayed urine, the spray is usually more thick and oily than normally deposited urine, and may contain additional secretions from anal sacs that help the sprayer to make a stronger statement. While cats mark their territory both by rubbing of the scent glands and by urine and fecal deposits, spraying, most frequently engaged in by unneutered male cats in competition with others of their same sex and species, seems to be the loudest feline olfactory statement. Even our pitifully ineffective human noses have no trouble determining when a cat has sprayed! While neutering doesn't render a cat incapable of spraying, and female cats sometimes spray as well, sterilization of a male cat at an early age (8 to 16 weeks) is highly recommended to reduce the likelihood that he will feel compelled to *begin* making a strong territorial statement. Once begun, spraying is a challenging behavior to stop.

The Eyes Have It

Domestic cats depend on visual communication to a high degree, using their eyes, ears, mouths, tails, coats and body postures to convey complex meanings. A cat's facial features change the most, and are probably the best key to the feline language.

A cat's ears change position quickly, in a continuum from sharply erect when the cat is alert and focused, and slightly relaxed when a cat is calm, to flattened against the head in an extremely defensive or aggressive posture. A cat's eyes, particularly the pupils, are their most eloquent body part, but the changes can happen so quickly that it is hard for humans to discern them in time to avoid the cat's follow-up communication of a bite or a scratch. Cats, on the other hand, are masters at reading and reacting to each other's pupillary changes. The kindergarten version of a cat's eye-speak is that round pupils are associated with fear, oblong pupils with aggression, and slightly off-round with a state of relaxation. A larger pupil generally denotes more intensity of emotion,

although, like ours, their pupils do dilate in darkness, so a relaxed cat in a dark room may also have large pupils. A direct stare by a cat is a challenge or threat, more likely to be seen in high-ranking, confident cats. Lower-ranking cats usually withdraw in response, and it's a good time for humans to back off as well!

A cat's body posture is usually the easiest for us to see and read. The calm cat stands relaxed, tail at ease, regarding the environment without any overt body language display. As he becomes more assertive, confident and offensively aggressive, his hind legs stiffen, his rump elevates but his back stays flat, his tail puffs up, his nose pushes forward and his ears pull back slightly. His intent is not so much to attack as it is to elicit deference from a less confident or lower status cat. He will back down challengers, and will pursue them if they do not defer to him.

In contrast, the fearful, defensive cat makes himself smaller, lowers himself toward the ground, rounds his back and leans his body posture *away* from the threat, rather than forward. This cat's goal is to avoid combat. He will fight only when he cannot escape.

The cat who is most likely to react is the one who gives mixed signals. Her tail is straight up and the fur on her tail and back is fully erect, indicating a willingness to interact – but her mouth is open and her back is arched in a classic “Halloween cat” display of fearfulness and avoidance. This cat is likely to stand her ground, and may fight if pushed. Because she is in a heightened state, she tends to react quickly. Her facial signals are usually less ambivalent than her body posture, and will give the best clues to her final response. Her ultimate decision to fight or flee will be based on her opponent's response to her display.

The Tale of the Tail

A cat's tail is also an excellent communication tool, which leaves short-tailed breeds – such as the Manx – at a serious language disadvantage. It is important to remember that tail position itself does not tell the whole tale, but must be read in context with the rest of the cat's body posture. Tail positions have been grouped into six classifications:

1. Vertical Tail: The straight-up tail position has been related to feline play; greeting – often in motion; sexual approaches by females; and frustration, if the tail is whipped back and forth.
2. Half-raised Tail: Sexual approaches by females
3. Horizontal Tail: A friendly approach; also a sexual approach by females.
4. Curved: Usually defensive. Over the back – a desire to increase distance by chasing away an intruder; Away from the back – a willingness to interact, but lack of confidence in taking the lead.
5. Lowered Tail: Offensive aggression if the tail is rigid and flicking; defensive aggression if the tail is flaccid; relaxed if the tail is still or moving slowly.
6. Tail Between the Legs: Submission and/or fear.

Revisiting Jackson

Now that we have a little more information, let's take another look at what Jackson was telling me earlier. As he approached, his ears were forward, his mouth was closed, his back was flat, his tail was vertical and his pupils were off-round. This tells me that he was relaxed, and offering me a friendly greeting. The head bunting and cheek rubbing may be his way of communicating his dominance over me (also perhaps

significant in his insistence on repeatedly parking himself in front of my computer screen no matter how many times I remove him and deposit him gently on the floor). And stretching up to put his paws on my knee? Gee, I don't know... maybe Timmy really *is* in the well!