

# SIT, STAY, SPEAK

A dog gets a rare chance to talk about what's on, and in, his mind

BY BRUCE BOWER



Look at that silver Frisbee hanging up there in the black sky. I can see it through the big square in the wall. I need to grab that thing and bury it in the backyard right now. Then, I'll dig it up tomorrow and chew it into tiny, slobbery pieces. Oh geez, I'm starting to quiver with excitement. What's the best way to snatch that delectable disk? Let's see, I'll walk to the end of the hall, right about here, run hard at the big square, take a flying leap, and . . . Oof! That hurt almost as much as the time I mistook the neighbor's cat for a chew toy. It was just after he'd gotten his hair shaved off to treat a skin infection. Curled up asleep on our front porch, Mr. Bojangles was as smooth as a gob of vanilla pudding hanging off a baby's bib. That cat wakes up nasty, though. They should have clipped his claws, not his fur.

While I regain my bearings, let me introduce myself. I'm Larry the Labrador. I'm talking, that's right. No thought balloons for me; those are for Snoopy and those other comic strip posers. No demeaning speech impediments, either—I don't blurt out "ruh roh!" like Scooby Doo. I'm the real deal, a linguistically gifted Labradorator. I thought that one up myself—sweet, huh? This gift for gab appeared last summer while I and a few other dogs participated in a genetic engineering experiment. Knock out a piece of DNA here, cure a disease there, it was that kind of a gig.



An unexpected genetic tweak rendered me as talkative as Oprah Winfrey with a double-mocha-esspresso buzz.

In that same fateful experiment, I met my friend Brutus, the English bulldog sitting over there and drooling on himself. Brutus can talk, too, but there seems to be a reserve clause in bulldog DNA. He limits his conversation to catchphrases he's heard as his owners constantly watch reruns of the television series *Seinfeld*.



*I'm out there, Larry, and I'm loving it!*



You and me both, buddy. At any rate, I have something to get off my chest. I've noticed lately that scientists are showing a lot of interest in deciphering the inner workings of dogs' minds. It's about time one of us gave you the straight poop on this issue. It may come as a surprise to many dog owners that we can think at all. Hey, we think so hard that our heads hurt—like what just happened in my ingenious Frisbee-grabbing plan. OK, I got bopped in the noggin and didn't catch the Frisbee. Big deal. I'll get it tomorrow.

Even in this wobbly state, it's easy to keep up with the latest research findings. An old *New Yorker* cartoon put it best. A dog sits in front of a computer and says to another dog: "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." I stay away from chat rooms, though. I'm strictly a Google retriever.

The search engines revved up earlier this year, when scientists reported that a photogenic border collie named Rico had learned the meanings of 200 words. Over about 9 years, Rico's owners taught him names for a slew of small toys and other items by rewarding him with food or play when he fetched what they asked for. Rico picks the correct object out of arrays of 10 different items. If asked to fetch something that he's never heard of, Rico picks the one object he's never seen out of a group of familiar objects.

OK, first of all, I don't trust this canine con artist. Those unblinkingly eyes, the upturned mouth on the verge of smiling, the high forehead—he looks like a Botox collie to me. A nip here, a tuck there—our boy Rico is just a little too eager to please. Has he been tested for stimulants?

Second, the big scientific argument revolves around whether Rico is the mental equal of a 1-to-2-year-old child. At that age, kids learn

words for specific objects and people as well as for categories of things and creatures.

I have a different take on dog mental maturity. Look, when one of my owners tells me to fetch the newspaper and my response is to roll over for a belly scratch, or when he scolds me for begging for food and I crawl under the table to shove my muzzle into his crumb-covered lap, I'm clueless on the outside and cunning on the inside. I know what he wants. I know what I want. They're rarely the same thing, so I have to take matters into my own paws. If feigned ignorance gets me the goods, I'm willing to go there. As far as I can tell, that makes me the mental equivalent of the average teenager.



*You are still master of your domain.*



You have to master your own domain before you can master your master's domain. There's no substitute for paying attention to what people do, not what they say.

Maybe we've been bred for it. The curiously named scientist Brian Hare recently reported that domesticated dogs read people's glances and gestures far more skillfully than chimpanzees, wolves, or wild dogs do. In one of his studies, animals watched an experimenter look or point at a sealed bowl containing food. Only domesticated dogs were more likely to approach the food container than a sealed but empty one next to it. Even puppies that hadn't been around people much gravitated to the grub by watching the experimenter.

Hanging around people for tens of thousands of years caused dogs to evolve internal radar for human body language, according to Hare.

Fair enough. But my view is that hanging around dogs for tens of thousands of years has caused even bigger evolutionary changes in people. Because we're fuzzy friends who—until now—have never had a negative word to say about them, people have evolved to shower us with their goopiest emotions. Consider my neighbor Mrs. Kandinsky. She's a charming old woman who thrusts her face against my nose as she grabs my ears and exclaims, "How's poopsie's little sweetheart? How's little Larry, Larry, quite contrary?" Yech. Then, she blasts me with mouth fumes—people-breath is so vile. I don't know why people haven't evolved sweeter breath to avoid offending dogs' highly evolved sense of smell.

On the other hand, through the millennia people have learned that dogs are convenient receptacles for their passions, rage, and other loopy emotions. Consider my two owners. Every few days, one of them pours out his or her forbidden desires and simmering resentments to me in private. I look on in shock while actually working out cat-revenge strategies. The pope should hear so many confessionals. Now that I can talk, what am I supposed to do, assign them a penance for each sin? Or perhaps I should go therapeutic and chime in every so often with "Uh huh, go on, what do you think it means?" Then, I could send them a bill.

Speaking of therapy, I think that pet psychology is a laugh. It's the owners that need the treatment. Dogs that bark and charge with teeth bared are just emotional bullhorns announcing that life at home is not a bowl of bacon-flavored kibble. That's where dogs are like little kids.

Maybe I'll organize the neighborhood dogs into a vigilante-justice mob. We'll get together every week and put a scare into owners that neglect and abuse their dogs. No one has to get hurt, but it will be interesting to see how high two-legged critters can climb up trees. I think I'll call our group Bite Club.



*Serenity now. Serenity now.*



Perhaps you're right, Brutus. People and dogs just have to live with their differences. I believe it was Sigmund Freud who said, "Dogs love their friends and bite their enemies, quite unlike people, who are incapable of pure love and always have to mix love and hate in their object relations."

Freud was a dog lover, of course. He owned a series of chows and gave them free run of his office. One time, Freud's chow jumped on top of a reclining patient as he was recounting an intensely disturbing memory. Freud exclaimed, "You see! Jofi is so excited that you've been able to discover the source of your anxiety!"

How's that for object relations?

Little did Freud know, as researchers have now found, that all it takes to become a "therapy" dog is for one of us to walk into a hospital, nursing home, mental-health center, or homeless shelter. People who have never had to trail behind us on frosty nights with a pooper-scooper or scrape chewed-up wads of leaves off the living room rug treat us like four-legged gods.

For individuals stranded in lonely or physically dire situations or fighting traumatic memories, hugging a dog is a lot like popping a Prozac. Your inner chemistry bubbles with good cheer, at least for a while. And you don't have to worry about side effects or whether health insurance will cover the cost.



*It's gold, Larry.*



Hey, if you happen to be a person who wants to communicate with a dog or another creature, it's not so hard to do. Forget about Dr. Doolittle and all that "talk with the animals" jive. Shut your yap and open your mind to nonverbal communication.

What University of Michigan psychologist Barbara Smuts learned while working with wild baboons in Africa gave her special rapport with her own dog back home.

Smuts had trouble studying a wild baboon troop until she learned its social conventions and started to behave accordingly. For instance, Smuts came to realize that she should acknowledge approaching baboons with a brief glance or a grunt, rather than ignoring them. This subtle expression of respect allowed everyone to relax.

Eventually, Smuts not only became highly sensitive to the mood and intentions of the troop as a whole but also appreciated that each baboon had a distinctive personality and presence.

A similar meeting of the minds, Smuts says, ties her to Safi, her German shepherd-Belgian sheepdog. Like any other pet owner, Smuts talks to her dog a lot, and I'm sure that Safi usually gets the gist of what the words mean. But the real fun comes when they do stuff together, such as Safi leading Smuts on wilderness jaunts or the two of them locking eyes and moving in unison as person and dog stretch together in the morning. Smuts regards these rituals as a type of language that, as she puts it, "tends to speak the truth, where words might lie."

Toto, we're not in Rico's rubber bone-fetching realm anymore. Talk may be cheap and deceptive, but I still enjoy shooting off my mouth. It's as addictive as my continuing quest to nab the big silver Frisbee in the night sky. My owners chuckle about that little quirk. They tell me I should take a pill for my Projectile Dysfunction. It would cut down on vet expenses and window replacement. People don't understand. It's a dog thing. Right, Brutus?



*Yada, yada, yada. ■*