

Canine Communications Norma Bennett Woolf

Introduction

When Monkey gets left in the boarding kennel, he “scolds” his owners with non-stop barking when they return. Bear howls with the fire sirens, Ruffy woo-woos when her owner comes home, Chief barks a fearsome sound when the UPS truck comes down the street, Amber whines when left alone for more than a few minutes, Ranger growls a throaty sound when another dog approaches his food bowl or toys, and Ringo barks to be let out or in and when his 5:30 p.m. dinnertime rolls around. Dogs have a wide range of vocalizations, all designed to help them get along in their human or canine pack. Although most of these sounds draw our attention, we often misread their intentions and confuse alarm barks with anxiety attacks, please-don't-do-that requests with aggressive warnings, and simple communication of needs with nuisance noises. And sometimes we even manage to develop nuisance noises out of what began as a communication of needs and escalate please-don't-do-that requests into aggressive warnings.

Barking

This is the most common of dog noises, done to signal the approach of a strange person, dog, or other animal; ask for play; show distress; say hello; get attention; or warn the approaching stranger or critter. Barking has tones; dog owners can distinguish those tones by listening and by reacting in an appropriate manner. The alarm bark that says “someone's coming; come see who it is” is different than the “come-play-with-me” woof, the deep “get-off-my-property” warning, the “I'm-glad-you're-home” greeting and the “please let me in” request. And all are different than the non-stop, inhale/exhale panic barking of a frightened pet. It appears that early breeders deliberately selected for barking in some breeds. Breed histories and modern dog lore indicate that the Norwegian Elkhound barked to lead the hunter to the cornered moose; livestock guard dogs barked to alert shepherds to intruders and to warn trespassers not to bother the flock; palace guard dogs also barked to warn of invaders and prowlers; hounds bayed their way to the rabbit, raccoon, or fox; and terriers barked to mark their progress as they chased their quarry above and below ground. But the evolution of barking is not so cut and dried. Writing in the chapter “Social and communication behaviour of companion dogs” in [The Domestic Dog : Its Evolution, Behaviour, and Interactions With People](#) edited by James Serpell, John W.S. Bradshaw and Helen M.R. Nott wrote: “It is possible that humans have selected dogs to bark more readily in order to draw attention to potential hazards or problems (‘watchdog barking’) and also during the pursuit of prey, directing the hunter towards the kill. It does, however, seem unlikely that this was due to conscious selection, since dogs that have evolved in all parts of the world generally all show the same propensity to bark . . .” Further, the authors stated: “Coppinger and Feinstein (1991) point out that young animals of many species of canid tend to bark more frequently than adults. It is therefore possible that, during selection for tameness, juvenile characteristics were also selected for, including the propensity to bark.” To bolster this perspective, Bradshaw and Nott went on: “Studies on foxes

selected over 20 generations for tameness by a group of Soviet biologists showed that over successive generations the foxes gradually began to sound more and more like dogs.” The authors concluded that while the bark may serve as an alarm or a warning, many times it seems to serve no communication purpose at all – except perhaps to direct attention to body language that solicits play, challenge, or other social activity as a sort of “yoo-hoo, I’m over here and I’m play-bowing” call. The evolution of barking may be only of academic interest to most dog owners, but the fact of barking is an irritation to many and can even land an otherwise respectable pet in the slammer. Communities pass noise ordinances against excessive barking, neighbors fume and threaten lawsuits, and landlords hand over eviction notices – all because Barkley can’t keep his mouth shut. Excessive barking These days, every dog owner is well-advised to teach an additional command beyond the sit, down, come triad for well-mannered pets. To avoid anti-dog regulations and legislation and keep peace in the neighborhood, every Barkley, Rascal, Sassy, and Fluffy should learn “Shhhhh!” or “Quit” to turn off the sound before it causes trouble.

Along with teaching some version of “knock-it-off,” dog owners should always respond to barking and praise the dog for alerting to the visitor or passer-by so the dog knows he can do his job before being told to zip his lip. Some dogs that bark excessively are victims of separation anxiety, a malady that causes various neurotic behaviors when dogs are left alone. Mild cases can be handled by training; severe cases require long-term behavior modification.

Howling

Many breeds and some individual dogs have a propensity to howl, a sound that is considered music to the ears of a houndsman or the wolf fancier but not so cool by suburbanites and city-dwellers. Some of these howlers need a trigger, a siren to accompany or another dog to start the chorus, but some need no encouragement to throw back their heads and send a mournful song to the full moon, to the strains of a violin, or to some unseen, unheard spirit. Wolves howl to bring the pack together before a hunt and to seek contact with other pack members. Even though they do not gather to hunt, some dogs may howl to connect with another being. At times, however, dogs seem to howl out of sheer joy.

Growling

Growling can be used in play, as a warning or threat, or as a defense signal. A pet might growl in mock ferocity when playing tug of war or carrying a favorite toy. He might also growl when petted where it hurts, when a child pulls his tail or ears, or when he wants his own way. All throaty vocalizations are not growls, however; some dogs have an entire repertoire of sounds to show happiness, throaty growls or roars among them. More than any other dog sound, however, growling should be heeded with special attention, for it is also the rhetoric of dominance and aggression. Bentley’s almost sub-sonic rumble when Katy toddles near his food dish or grabs his tail; Spot’s grumble when told to sit or when corrected for knocking over the garbage can; Misty’s mutters when she’s put in her crate at night – all are warning signs that the pooch is trying to

play the system to get his own way. It does not matter if the growls are submissive or dominant, if the pet is fearful or bold when uttering the protests; the result – an out-of-control pet – is the same if they are ignored. Submissive pets that growl when approached need training to instill confidence; dominant pets that do the same need training to instill deference to authority. Both may need the attention of a professional trainer or behaviorist.

Other Sounds

Along with barking, howling, and growling, dogs whine and whimper to get attention or to indicate pain. Whining – a leftover from the days when the puppy needed his mother's milk and comfort – can be another propaganda ploy to gain the upper paw, for its annoying tones often cause the owner to give in. "If Barkley wants out of the crate, fine, as long as he stops that incessant noise!" Sidney Jones may grumble under his breath, but if he actually lets Barkley out of the crate, his problems will multiply. Some dogs whine out of panic, escalating their upset until they salivate heavily and dribble and spray spit on themselves and their surroundings. These dogs need confidence, not punishment. In the short run, giving in may be the best answer as long as it is followed up with a program, guided by a behaviorist or knowledgeable dog trainer, for building self-reliance.

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