



STUDIO OCHENTA ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

“THE LANGUAGE OF ANIMALS” (*Atlas Linguae* Season 2, Episode 1)

[00:00:03] Luis Lopez

The other day I was having a conversation with “folks” I talk to every single day: my cats. They were insisting that I give them wet food. I replied with a “but you had a can of tuna yesterday!” After which they ganged up on me and replied with insistent meows that I could only take to mean “Well, today’s a new day, buddy.”

[00:00:30] Luis

And to some extent, I know, of course, that my cats can’t understand the words I’m saying, the sentence structure, the grammar, etc. But it got me thinking. What do they understand when I talk to them? The tone of my voice? The gestures of my hands and face? Do they get offended by my accent when I say “meow” back to them? Because we know dogs bark, cats meow, birds chirp, and so on. But why and when do they make those sounds? How do they talk to us? And how can we talk back to them?

[00:01:10] Luis

Welcome to *Atlas Linguae*, a show where we talk about language; the joyful, the challenging, and the joyfully challeng- Oh, whoops! Sorry, that intro is so last season. From here on, we’ll be doing things a little differently.

[00:01:30] Luis

You seem this second season will be all about the ways we express ourselves beyond spoken and written language. You know, in real life. We’re gonna talk about how you communicate while flirting, playing video games, budgeting, and even watching true crime series. But no spoilers yet - we’ll get to each of those in time. I’m your host, Luis

López, and in this episode, we're going to dive into the most untranslatable languages out there: the language of animals.

[00:02:04] Pat Shipman

I discovered one time when I had to take care of a bird for someone who was known for rescuing birds and raising birds and healing birds and so on. And she had to leave town for a couple of months and asked if I would take on this hatchling. Apparently, it had fallen out of the nest. It didn't seem to be injured, but somebody was going to have to take care of it. And she thought, since I like and understand animals pretty well, I'd be an obvious person.

[00:02:33] Luis

This is Pat Shipman, a retired anthropologist from Pennsylvania State University and author of *Our Oldest Companions: The Story of the First Dogs*. So she knows a thing or two about how we've learned to communicate with domesticated animals, like dogs, for thousands of years. But when it came to birds...

[00:02:53] Pat

I never connected. I have discovered I don't speak bird. I mean, I fed it religiously every two damn hours, and I kept it happy and clean and changed its water and did all those things. And when she came home, she said, well, how is it doing? Is it flying? And I said, I don't know, I keep it in the cage. I have no idea that I could get that bird back if I ever let it out of the cage. She said "You didn't teach it what to eat in the garden?" And I said, "No, I don't know what it's safe for a bird to eat in the garden." And probably that bird was sending me all kinds of messages and I didn't get them. I didn't understand. I mean, I was kind to it. I took care of its physical needs, but the bird never loved me. And I can see that birds love this friend of mine. She's quite known as a bird lady. And wild birds come into her garden, land on her shoulders and talk to her, all kinds of things. They're never going to do that with me. I don't get it! It is a learning process on both sides.

[00:04:01] Luis

It is indeed! It's like asking someone who's an expert in Romance languages to try to translate a quote in Mandarin. Every animal, in fact, communicates in its own way and throughout history, humans tried to figure out the best way to approach their languages. It's something that we've been doing for thousands of years, in the process we call domestication. Which, as you surely know, transformed the predator wolf into the cute pug you see on postcards every now and then.

[00:04:30] Pat

I believe quite firmly that domestication was one of the most brilliant ideas ever created. What domestication does is it gives you a permanent genetic heritable change in the traits or appearance of an animal. You don't have to do it all over, every time.

[00:04:51] Luis

In fact, something fascinating about human and dog communication since they became domesticated – dogs, not humans – is that “talking” to them starts way before you grab a stick and say “Go fetch!” It begins with the way you look at each other.

[00:05:07] Pat

All doggy-type animals, wolves, foxes, the whole thing... It is clear that the ones that live in packs, that function in packs, show the whites of their eyes and may have physical markings on their fur or on their skin that particularly draw attention to the eyes and the direction of gaze. And the direction of gaze is what you're looking at. So without words or hand signals, if you and I were cooperating in some semi-dangerous activity together, I could tell you where I was going to go by altering my direction of gaze. And the many dogs that have what are called “eyebrows,” that set off their eye and their direction of gaze, or even just that part of the face seem to be very important. There are also obviously postures and bodily positions of facing straightforward, leaning forward, leaning back, looking away, getting small. All these things that tell you something about the emotional state or intentions of the other animal.

[00:06:27] Luis

You know those videos where dogs make some funny faces or gestures? Like when someone off screen opens a bag of chips and their ears suddenly perk up and their eyes turn toward the sound? A reason why this is so funny is precisely because we're able to read those expressions and relate to them. But of course, we can't always relate to animals. Our anthropologist Dr. Shipman was stumped by that bird. And there's a ton of stories of people who just don't get why their pets behave the way they do.

[00:06:69] Pat

There are people who are much more sensitive to these things than others now all the time. There are people who write into websites saying, “My dog is always doing this,” or “My cat is doing this,” or “I don't know what the hell is going on, just out of nowhere, there seems to be an emotional explosion with this animal.” That's because they aren't good at picking up these signals.

[00:25:32] Pat

We've all seen or read the stories about people living with non-domesticated animals, with wild turkeys or grizzly bears or dolphins or lizards. All kinds of animals. And I think your cat loves you. I believe my cats love me, but that's their sort of accommodation to

getting used to people and being, having an inborn ability to read people as hostile, or friendly, doing nice things for me, scratching my chin, you know, that's nice. Often scratching my tummy is not nice with a lot of cats, for example.

[00:07:59] Luis

Oh yeah, my cats definitely don't like that. Look. Here, kitty, kitty! Oop. Yeah, no...

[00:08:07] Pat

And of course, in any endeavor you're carrying out with another being feeling they have the same purpose in mind, feeling that you can trust them becomes incredibly important

[00:08:19] Luis

So it takes a lot of time and dedication to be able to speak to your pets. That's something you can't easily pick up from a textbook. There always has to be some connection and sense of trust with the animal. And how do we gain that trust? Well, let's talk to someone who's an expert on helping us talk to our "best friend". *Cat meow* No, we'll get to you in a bit. I mean our *other* "best friend". *Dog barks* Yeah, that one.

[00:08:50] Ian Dunbar

Dogs have the ability to read us like a book.

[00:08:54] Luis

This is Ian Dunbar, a veterinarian behaviorist and dog trainer for ten years at the Dunbar Academy, which he founded. And in his line of work, as you may imagine, he gets tons of questions, some of which are quite nuanced and specific, and others, not so much.

[00:09:12] Ian

An owner once came to a seminar. He says, "Doctor Dunbar, I've got a question." And I said, "What is it?" And he said "Well it's my dog." I said, "What about your dog?" This is a dog behavior seminar. He said, "Well, it barks." And I took a minute, I looked at him and "Your dog barks?" He said "Yeah, it's all the time." I said, "Well, that's terrible. I mean, of all the dogs you could have picked and you chose one that barks?"

[00:09:40] Luis

No way, a dog that barks? Who'da thought? But seriously, it's fascinating how often we don't understand dogs, when they clearly understand us quite well.

[00:09:53] Ian

They don't understand our words, but our body language, our facial expressions, they have tremendous social savvy. If you stand up in the evening from your armchair, they know what you're going to do. They know whether you're going to the bathroom to take a leak, or to refill your glass with wine. Or they're going outside and will take the dog with you. They just know that because they've learned to read not just how we act, how we move, you know, body language, but facial expressions. And so they pick up on the intention signals long before you actually move. And then the intention signal could come from the TV. They hear the theme tune to a program you're watching for the second time. That means the program is ending. And that's when owners often get up. So then they open an eye and look up at you. Are you actually going to move? Is there going to be activity here?

[00:10:49] Luis

It's like that joke where someone says they're going on a "W-A-L-K", because if they say the word "walk" their dog immediately jumps in excitement.

And it's not just about not understanding what our dogs are trying to say, sometimes it's about how the ways we try to communicate with them that can actually can send the wrong message altogether.

[00:11:10] Ian

The worst communication is the owners get it back to front. When they should be praising the dog, they punish it. And when they should be correcting, the dog just Instructively with words, they reinforce it. Let's take two examples. They're in the park, they call their dog he's sniffing another dog's butt or something on the ground. "Come here, Rover. Come here, Rover. Will you come here?" So now they start shouting when the dog comes, "Come on, get over here now!" And when it gets there, they say, "You bad dog! Would you ever do that again?" The dog just came to you and then you punish it. Because rewards and punishments with no language only go back three seconds in time.

[00:11:56] Luis

Exactly! So, for example, if you come back home and you see that your dog has made a mess in the kitchen (yep, that wonderful moment), it makes no sense to start shouting at him at that moment. They just won't get it.

[0:12:10] - Ian

The other side of the coin is clear instructions. Instructions should be short, a single word until we know the dog understands it, and we test that. And I test that scientifically. So for each word, "Sit", I work out the response reliability percentage in the kitchen, let's

say at 70%. Move the living room that drops to 60, the bedroom, 50, in your yard, 25, in the dog park, zero.

[00:12:40] Luis

Huh! This actually makes a lot of sense. Think about when you walk your male dog and he starts sniffing a female dog in heat. Good luck getting his attention back! So how should we talk to our dogs?

[00:12:54] Ian

When I talk to my dog, I talk to it the same as I talk to my son. I talk in a calm voice. I reserve shouting at the top of my lungs to communicate urgency. Let's say someone's left front door open and the dog is running towards a crowded street. He is half a second away from death. I would scream at the top of my voice. So we practice teaching the dog that volume, higher volume and that loud, excruciating, scared tone because you're worried in danger. It just means urgency.

[00:13:34] Luis

It's amazing to see how much the tone of our voice is crucial when communicating. Maybe if we constantly talk to our dog with a "Who's a good boy, who's a good boy" tone, he'll get so used to it that when we do need to raise our voice, he won't understand us as easily. But now I'm wondering; can we teach our dogs to understand our languages?

[00:13:58] Ian

We teach dogs our language, ESL. English as a second language or French as a second language, Japanese or Spanish as a second language. We teach them the meaning of words we use. So I start with the dog's name or in my case, names. I give every dog actually more than two different names. A nickname, an informal name. I actually give loads. So Hugo. I often call him Hugy, Hugy baby, Hugovsky...

[00:14:29] Luis

Hey, every one of us who has or had a pet is guilty of giving more than a few nicknames.

[00:14:37] Ian

Gestures are very easy for a dog to learn, to understand. Language is very, very difficult. I always look at things from the dog's point of view. And so I'm interested, what is their point of view? So let's say we want to work out who the dog likes and the family first. But I told you that. You get the four family members to space out and sit down on chairs and we time how long the dog sits against each person without them doing

anything. And you quickly learn they prefer women, they prefer children to adults. They're really scared of men, especially tall men with beards, wearing dark glasses and hats and carrying a cane. We know all this and we can ask these questions of a dog so we can ask them what food they like by giving them a choice.

[00:15:29] Luis

So yeah, we can't teach our dogs to read or write, but the ways in which we can communicate with them are so rich that we're still learning how to do it. And this brings us back to the very beginning, to the very heated discussion I was having...with my cats. *Cat meow* Yes, now it's your time to shine.

[00:15:50] Lauren Pears

I think cats have always come and gone as they pleased.

[00:15:53] Luis

This is Lauren Pears. She's a lifelong cat lover and owner of Lady Dinah's Cat Emporium in London.

[00:16:00] Lauren

The idea of animals communicating with you is a big part of why I started doing what I do. I think that animals give a certain kind of relationship and peace that humans can't always give. I set up Lady Dinah's, thinking "People must miss having pets," but the people who visit us, they're not looking for replacement pets or temporary pets. That's actually a lot of people who visit us have cats. But I think what Lady Dinah's real thing is that we give people a delightful time. They just come to be delighted. And I think that's just a nice thing to want. It's not loud, it's not showy. It's just a place where you can come and feel happy for a little bit.

[00:16:43] Lauren

There were a lot of questions from people about whether or not cats could be housed together and be happy. And so I kind of did a little bit of digging around, looking into the different kinds of lives that cats have. Because there are a number of cats that, for example, will create a colony on their own and live quite happily and that sort of thing. So in doing that, I did come across things like the process of domestication and that they predominantly just kind of, in Western culture anyway, were like pest control. So that was the main thing. But people I think it's generally known that the relationship with cats extends far beyond that. There's carvings on walls and pyramids, and they've been revered at some times and not at others. So I think our relationship with them has probably been quite long, but I don't think it's been quite as mutual as the relationship we have with dogs, for example. I think cats have always come and gone as they pleased.

[00:17:42] Luis

They sure do! And as Lauren says, all cats have different personalities - something that she's seen in her own café.

[00:17:51] Lauren

Not all cats are the same. We've had cats in the past that we've had them in the cafe just for a couple of months and thought, "No, they don't like it. This cat doesn't want to be here," and that's fine. We're not going to make him stay. It's not good for them, it's not good for us, it's not good for anybody. So we help them find a home. We don't really have a hard and fast rule. A lot of cafes are either like, "we are a rehoming facility" or "we never rehome our cats," but we're sort of a bit more like "whatever's right for the cat at the time."

[00:18:16] Luis

As a cat lover, this place sounds amazing! And it must be fascinating to see how all these cats behave with each other, the ways they interact and communicate. In fact, I was surprised to learn that the sound we associate with cats the most, the meow, is not really for communicating with each other at all.

[00:18:36] Lauren

So when they meow conversationally, that's purely for humans. The sounds that cats make for cats are fighting sounds or warning sounds, growling, and they don't do that very frequently. But that sort of conversational meow that people refer to, that's like the trademark of the cat, is actually something they only do to attract the attention for humans. And studies have shown that they meow at the same pitch as crying infants. So cats alter their voices to ensure maximum attention will be given to them by us by making sounds in the same wavelength and same pitch as a crying child.

[00:19:14] Luis

Oh, so with your meows you're manipulating me! *Cat meow*

[00:19:19] Lauren

So there's this whole thing. I remember looking into it back in the day about how cats are a great example of neoteny. So they have these neotenic features, really big eyes, little faces, and those are things that human children have. And we're sort of, like, subconsciously driven to feel protective towards things with neotenic features like them. So I think the relationship has kind of evolved out of, kind of us being a bit manipulated, I guess. They know how to speak to us better than we know how to speak to them.

[00:19:50] Luis

Huh. Well, now that I think about it, it's a very cat thing to do. It's like that famous scene from *Shrek* with Puss in Boots, where he does the comically cute kitten face. It turns out that's actually true! Well, to some extent.

[00:20:06] Lauren

Also, I read a study literally about an hour ago, that a Japanese cat cafe did a study and they found that cats recognize each other's names. So cats understand human language well enough to be able to know which cat you're talking about. When you mention a cat's name, they could recognize cats that were and weren't familiar to their family group. by name. Definitely, I know my cats when I ask who's hungry, they know exactly what that means. They come running. But for the rest of their communication, you did ask about non-verbal stuff. They give us a lot of cues. But cats non-verbal communication is actually pretty subtle. And I think it's also very inconsistent from cat to cat. So we've had 40, 50 cats pass our doors of the cat emporium, and each cat still has their own distinct method of communicating things. And often they can be contradictory. So one cat might switch its tail because it's feeling aggressive. Another cat might swish its tail because it's excited.

[00:21:02] Luis

As you can tell, Lauren has been able to learn a lot about cats, not just in general, but specifically about the cats who spend their days at the café. Especially one that's very dear to her.

[00:21:16] Lauren

Well, I think the one that I can tell the story of the best is about me and Donnie. So Donnie was a little ginger kitten that we adopted right when we opened. When we first opened, we had a mother cat and a whole bunch of kittens and they needed a new home. So we adopted them. And Donnie was about four weeks old and he decided that he and I were great friends.

[00:21:37] Luis

Sidenote: funny how it's always the cat, not you, who decides if you are friends or not.

[00:21:43] Lauren

Donnie is a very vocal cat. He talks to you quite a lot. But I used to be able to just walk into a cafe and just say, "I wonder where Donnie is?" And then no matter where he was in the building, as soon as he heard my voice or even he would hear my footsteps, he would come running because he knew it was me, jump on my head and give me a cuddle. And that was a particularly strong bond.

[00:22:05] - Lauren

We had another great one. There was a lady Jaron who used to work at Lady Dinah's and she used to wear quite heavy boots. And there was one cat that really loved Jaron. And whenever that cat had those boots on the floor upstairs, she would come up because she knew that was her person had shown up. They can recognize gait, they can recognize shoes. They're also very good at telling the time. They have an internal body clock that's quite accurate. So we feed our cats to a fixed schedule and lunchtime is 1. And I can guarantee you two minutes to one, every cat's at that door. They know it's 1 o'clock.

[00:22:36] Luis

Ah yes, a cat will use the full muscle of its manipulative meows...to let you know it's time to eat.

[00:22:44] Lauren

Cat's favorite kind of people are the people who sit still, come and play with them, but who take it slow, take it easy. Cats aren't big on high energy interactions. But cats are very good at regulating what kind of thing they'll be exposed to. So if there's somebody in the room they don't like, they will get out of their way. If they don't want to be pet, they will let you know when they will leave. They don't tend to stay around and get really stressed out. They just go.

[00:23:10] Luis

You know, that's one thing that I love about cats. Because they often make it very clear when they don't want to be somewhere, that means that if they do sit next to you, or hang out with you, whether at home or at a cat café, they really want to. And this conversation made me wonder, what would a dog café be like? *Dog bark*

[00:23:33] Lauren

Dogs just need so much more space to exercise physically. I think cats can use vertical space in the way dogs can't, so they can use 360 degrees of a room. So if they're living in a cafe that's been well thought out for them, they can climb scratches, they can still get quite a big range of movement. But a dog cafe, I think you have to have a really big yard attached to it. You have to have space, they can go out. On balance, I feel like that sort of cozy homely cafe environment, it works, to me for cats, but I think for dogs long term, I'm not sure that it would work for them in the same way.

[00:24:09] Luis

Yeah, no, I mean, I love dogs, but clearly it would make more sense to have an open space to share with them instead of a cafe. Maybe a dog barbecue? I'm sure the dogs would like that. In any case, it's worth remembering that the way we speak to both dogs and cats has a lot to do with how we interact with them. Dogs are kind of like your

sports bros - they often want you to play all around and catch stuff. Cats, on the other hand, are more like our ideal gossip buddies - we can just sit next to each other and chat for a bit. And speaking of gossip, Lauren says cats have a particular way of settling conflicts.

[00:24:53] Lauren

And also cats, like in households and in towns. They tend to develop a rotor system. So if they don't get on, one cat will have a morning patrol and then another cat will have an afternoon patrol if their territories overlap and they try to avoid having contact if they don't like each other. They've done lots of studies with GPS attached to cat's collars to see where they go and that's one of the things that they found was there's, like a schedule.

[00:25:18] Luis

I think we can learn a thing or two about conflict resolution from cats. In fact, it's odd that we use the word "catty" as "hurtful" or "deliberately mean", when in fact cats can be quite diplomatic in their relationships. And in fact, one of the best known stereotypes about cats is that they don't show love for their humans. But that's just because they usually don't show it the way dogs do, and also because sometimes we're not the best at picking up these signals. One of them, for example, is a slow blink.

[00:25:52] Lauren

80% of the cats that I've worked with or that I've met respond to a slow blink, but they'll respond mostly to someone they know. When they're content, and if they're in the right mood, if you give them a slow blink, they'll slow blink you back. And it is kind of a sign of trust for an animal that's like simultaneously predator prey size to close their eyes for an extended period of time is a thing to do when you're safe. And in terms of this sort of rubbing up against you, cats have scent markers in their chin, cheeks, head, and the base of their tail. So when they rub against you, they are sharing their scent with you and trying... It's like a family scent thing. They're rubbing pheromones on you.

[00:26:34] Luis

Awwww, see? They do love you! And just because they don't communicate it the way we might expect them to, doesn't mean they don't. At the end of the day, speaking to animals is about being able to pick up signals and ask ourselves questions about them. Like, why does my dog always bark at the same time every day? *Dog barks* Why do they sniff other dogs' butts so much? *Dog sniffing* And perhaps one of the most popular animal-related Google autocomplete searches out there: Does my cat really love me? *Cat meow* Aww...wait, do you really love me or are you just manipulating me into giving you a tuna can? *Cat meow*

[00:27:29] Luis (Credits)

Thank you for listening to *Atlas Linguae*. If you're new to the series, we invite you to listen to our previous episodes where we dive deep into translation and communication. I am Luis Lopez, and it has been a pleasure to accompany you on this journey. Special thanks to Pat Shipman, Ian Dunbar, Lauren Pears and of course, my cats. *Atlas Linguae* is an original production by Studio Ochenta. Our executive producer is Lory Martinez. Sound design and production by Chiara Santella and me, Luis Lopez, with additional production assistance by Linnea Wingerup. Our production coordinator is Catalina Hoyos. For more information on *Atlas Linguae*, a Studio Ochenta original series and podcast, go to ochentastudio.com. Follow us on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Our podcast is available on Castbox, Spotify, Apple, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Until next time!

END OF EPISODE