

Topic 13 CAT TALK



This Topic provides readers with information about feline communication. It includes feline fun facts, cat communication basics, translations, valuable references and a portrait of *real* cat communicative behaviours as reported by two cat owners.

Feline fun facts

- Studies suggest that domesticated cats first appeared around 3600 B.C.
- Cats have the largest eyes relative to their head size of any mammal.
- In Ancient Egypt, members of a family would shave their eyebrows if their cat died.
- House cats share 95.6% of their genetic makeup with tigers.
- Research shows that cats can distinguish their own names from other words.
- Cats can hear and understand you, they just don't always respond.
- Cats can jump 5 times their own height.
- Each cat's nose print is unique, much like human fingerprints.
- A group of cats is called a *clowder*, while a group of kittens is called a *kindle*.
- Cats are believed to be the only mammals who don't eat sweets.
- Most world languages have a similar word to describe the *meow* sound.

Cat communication

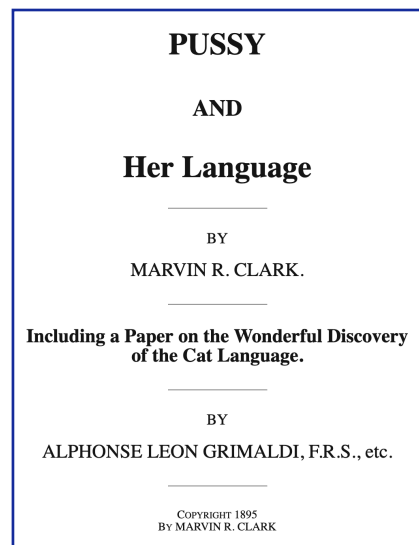
- Ailouros (αἰλουρος) is the primary ancient Greek word for cat. It translates into *thing with the waving tail* or *tail-twitcher*, is derived from *aiólos* (fast-moving) and *ourá* (tail) and was used to describe long-tailed carnivores, including wild cats and, later, domesticated ones.
- Ailurophile (αἰλουροφίλος) is the technical-academic word for cat lover. Derived from Greek, *ailurophile*, it is a combination of the noun *ailouros* (cat) and the suffix *-phile*, (lover).
- Cat communication is also referred to as cat language (CL), feline language, cat talk, cattolingo and catlish.
- Meowlogisms are cat-related words, such as *purrfect* and *pawsibilities*.
- Meow-mail is a slang term for messages cats send.
- Cat messages are tied to a stimulus situation. They have a utility function, are context-bound and are related to events such as feeding, greeting, resting, comforting, sleeping and playing.
- Cat talk is schedule-governed, has a restricted set of messages, and indicates an emotional state.
- Communication with cats reveals how two very different species, animals (cats) and humans (cat owners), using very different communicative tools, engage in two-way meaningful exchanges where both initiate and respond to turns, respect one another and meet each others needs.

The multilingual cat*

Arabic: قِط (qitt)	Malayalam: പൂച്ച (pucha)
Albanian: mace	Persian: گربه (gorbe)
Chinese (Mandarin): 猫 (māo)	Polish: kot
Dutch: kat	Portuguese: gato
Esperanto: kato	Romanian: pisică
Finnish: kissa	Spanish: gato
French: chat	Swahili: paka
German: Katze	Swedish: katt
Greek: γάτα (gata)	Thai: แมว (maeo)
Hindi: बिल्ली (billee)	Turkish: kedi
Italian: gatto	Ukrainian: kit
Japanese: 猫 (neko)	Vietnamese: mèo
Korean: 고양이 (goyangi)	Yiddish: קאטן (kats)

Pussy and her language

In this 1895 pioneering work on animal communication (image on right) an American journalist and a French scientist, provide an account of the intelligence and the unique communicative behaviours of domesticated cats. They include anecdotes about famous cat lovers, describe the role of cats in different cultures and defend cats from negative societal prejudices. They claim that cats are far more than *utility mousers* and characterize them as highly observant, courageous, emotionally aware creatures whose *words* can certainly be decoded by attentive humans. For the authors, feline communication is a *subject of vast importance* (p.123). They end their delightful book with an appeal to *the great American public and other nations* to continue the scientific investigation of cat talk.



*If you do not see the word **cat** in your language (in the above boxes), let me know and I will happily extend the list.

Response

One hundred and twenty years later, in 2015, Robert Eklund, a Swedish linguist responded to the Cark-Grimaldi appeal. In his study entitled *Grimaldi's Discovery of the Cat Language: A theory in need of revival (or perhaps not?)* Eklund provides a linguistic analysis of four aspects of CL (cat language): vowels/consonants; vocabulary size; the most important words in cat language and their English equivalents, (e.g. aeilo (food), lae (milk), aliloo (water), bl (meat); word order and prosodic inflection.

A portrait of cat communicative behaviours

To better understand the communication of cats, I invited Maria and Elizabeth, two seasoned cat owners to document their cat interactions. Both reported that they view their cats as communicative partners and treat their vocalizations and behaviours as communicative contributions. Audio recordings revealed that cats and owners respect turn taking, a fundamental conversation behaviour, where participants alternate between speaking and listening. When asked about communication, Maria and Elizabeth report that they *talk* to, or *chat* with their cats. For example, Maria claims that her cat, Sir Simon hails from English nobility and is a competent communication partner, while Elizabeth reports that, *life would be so different* without her two *sweet* sister-cats, Daisy and Cleo, who bring her *great happiness*. Both Maria and Elizabeth identified two distinct cat communicative modes: communicative vocalizations (both open-and closed mouthed), and communicative actions.

Cat communicative vocalizations

- (a) The primary open-mouthed **communicative vocalization** for cats is the open-mouthed *meow*. Produced by adult cats to interact with humans, (not other cats), meows are distinct, purposeful and, according to animal behaviourists, an effective way to manipulate their owners (Robins 2014). Often accompanied by body and eye movements, meows differ in pitch, intensity, volume and length and are context dependent: loud and repetitive meows for food and low(er) pitched meows for greetings, attention, or, as Maria claims, *to tell me or to acknowledge something*.
- (b) In addition to request meows, all three cats produced a number of closed mouthed communicative vocalizations such as grunts, mumbles, murmurs, trills, sighs and purrs. These sounds, often accompanied by eye movements (e.g. blinking or closed eyes) mostly communicate affection, happiness, greetings, contentment or responses to attention or a pat.

Cat communicative actions

In addition to the communicative vocalizations described above, all three cats communicated through actions. For example Sir Simon's paw tapping communicated that he was ready for sleep, while a tap at Maria's feet, heels or ankle sent a *hurry up* (food preparation) message. In a similar manner, Daisy's three-step attention and play request, dropping a toy in front of Elizabeth, making eye contact and then tapping the toy, communicated, *C'mon let's play. Throw the toy*. Requests for affection and attention were also communicated behaviourally. Here are two examples: Sir Simon's *pick me up* request includes three behaviours: moving into a standing position, resting his forepaws on Maria's leg, and reaching upwards with one paw. In a similar way, when Cleo rubs against Elizabeth's leg, she is asking for attention and affection. Yet feline behavioural communication is more than requests for attention and affection as seen in Sir Simon's disapproval and frustration due to routine changes. When food, joint play, attention and sleep patterns were altered or delayed, he exhibited unacceptable, *bad* or *naughty* behaviours such as head butting Maria's feet and ankles, aggressively pawing and scratching furniture.

Talking to cats

While Maria mostly uses *a normal conversational tone of voice* when interacting with Sir Simon, a *sing-song tone* is used for affection, for example: *When I tell him that I love him and that he is sweet as honey*. In her interactions with Sir Simon, Maria comments on events in progress, such as going and coming: *I have to go out now, see you in a bit*. She asks questions and praises Sir Simon's behaviours. A stern *no* is used to stop inappropriate behaviour such as furniture scratching. While her conversation contributions are mostly in English, she does, on occasion, use Italian with Sir Simon.

Elizabeth uses baby talk or a *sing-songy soft voice* with Daisy and Cleo. She reports that both cats recognize and respond to their names, but less so to their nicknames (Baby Daisy, Baby Cleo, Mamba/Mambasita), which she occasionally uses. Commands often accompany behaviours, as in *Let's go! Downstairs!* or *Time to eat!* Affectionate multi-turn interactions initiated by Elizabeth and spoken in Polish include an extended hand, *Chodź tutaj* (*Come here*) and a slow blinking cat response followed by *Co to moja kochana?* (*What is it my love?*) spoken in a soft loving voice. Request interactions initiated by the cats, such as standing in front of the empty bowl, looking at Elizabeth and communicating *Fill the bowl*, are understood, responded to and accompanied by a question: *Are you hungry?* Finally, like

Maria, Elizabeth stops her cats' unacceptable behaviours (approaching cables or houseplants) with a *forceful* and *firm* voice: *Cleo! No! Stop it!*

! Final Thoughts

1. Human language is open-ended, using complex syntax and symbolic words to convey unlimited ideas, while animal communication is largely a closed system based on immediate, context-driven cues like vocalizations, scent, and body language.
2. The communicative behaviours described in this Topic are but a small representation of a larger and complex communicative repertoire of cats and cat owners. Interested readers will find additional information and examples of cat-human interaction and communication in the list that follows..

References

Amazing Cat Facts: Fun Trivia About Your Feline Friend

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Eight Sounds cats make

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XTLEnjwybA>

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