

UNDERSTANDING GROWL SOUNDS AND OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

One of the most misunderstood aspects of our pups/dogs is their growly noises. The dogs' vocalizations consist of growls, barks, whines, whimpers, yelps, and a variety of un-doglike sounds. For example, my Treasure does a little "trill" sound reminiscent of a bird with a chest cold. These are the extent of their capability to verbalize/vocalize. The dogs' language (dog speak) is varied, extensive, highly refined, and specific within their own species. The dogs communicate with their eyes, facial expressions, body language, and a variety of vocalizations. These same "modes" of communication define human communication. The difference is we are a different species and are not capable of understanding the full scope and nuances of another species' communication system. To be very honest, we are not always adept at reading our own species' communications. We are certainly not adept at dog speak.

Let's examine some aspects of human communication that are misunderstood or missed entirely. There are books, courses, and seminars that address the full scope and nuances of human communication. When we interact with another person, we use a combination of the elements that make up our complete communication system. Some of this is conscious and some is subconscious to the communicator. But, all of the elements are part of the complete communication. Unfortunately, many of us misread, misunderstand, or miss altogether key aspects of the other person's communications. How often have you heard it is not WHAT someone said, it is HOW they said it that truly communicated. *Note: This applies to the dogs' growly noises. A growl is the "what" is being said; the type of growl is the "how" and is the barometer of their true communication.* What a person verbalizes is often converse to what their eyes, facial expressions, and/or body language is communicating. Think about how often a person is responding in an affirmative or yes mode and yet their head is moving side to side indicating a negative or no response. Being a good "listener" encompasses being able to read all elements of the communication, not just the words being spoken.

Watch a person's eyes as they speak. When their eyes move to the upward plane, this means they are thinking, remembering, and accessing information. When their eyes are in the middle plane, they are comfortable with what they are saying and relating factual information. When their eyes look downward, they are accessing feelings and emotions. If a person has their arms crossed or their body is curled into itself, this says they are guarded or closed off. A person leaning into you can mean they are confident, or they are comfortable with you, them self, and/or the situation, or they are giving emphasis to what they are saying, or they can be intimidating, challenging, or threatening you. Another nuance of human communication is when we consider not what the person "is" saying, rather what they are "not" saying. Most people understand what a tapping foot or fingers mean or someone constantly looking at their watch. If we are observant, we will pick up on a person's body language telling us they are in a hurry, busy, distracted, disinterested, or bored. Sometimes when a person is excited or disappointed, they will try NOT to communicate that to the other person. If someone is observant and adept at reading all the elements of human communications, they will be able to read the true emotions/reactions behind what is being exhibited, verbalized, and communicated by the other person. *Note:*

This correlates to the dogs' growly sounds meaning you should not just take a growl as being a bad, negative, or aggressive. Rather, assess the activity or situation the dog is involved in AND the accompanying communication nuances like body posture, ear set, and facial expression.

Unfortunately, all too many of us are not adept at reading all aspects and nuances of human communication. Consider we are talking about our own species using basically the same communication system. Within our own species, we may not understand a foreign language. But, we all understand "human" communications albeit we may not be adept at discerning some of the human language nuances. Now, think about trying to understand the language of an entirely different species with their species specific language and communication system. *Note: While humans can say one thing and mean another, the dogs are incapable of this. Whatever a dog is communicating is real and true to their emotions.*

Think about how interesting it is when we watch the documentaries on the big cats or the elephants or even the reptile, avian, insect, or aquatic world. The "experts" explain to us what we are seeing and what is being communicated within these various species. There is no way an average, everyday person would attempt to think they know or understand the communications of these species. Then, we have the canine species. The dogs live with average, every day people and these people somehow think they know and understand dog communication. I can only assume that people perceive they understand the dogs and the dogs understand humans because the dogs are "domesticated". To this day, the dogs are not arbitrarily a domesticated species. What constitutes domestication is "living with us". Consider that there are "feral" dogs. Feral means they have not been domesticated by living with humans. It can also mean they have "reverted" to an untamed state from domestication. Consequently, for a dog to be termed "domesticated", they must have lived with and interacted with humans, at least in the relatively recent past. You cannot use the term "domesticated dog" just because they are of the canine species.

My point in all of this is that it is unrealistic for the every day person to think they can know, read, and understand the language nuances of another species. This is as true of the dogs as it is any other species. Granted, we have had a broader and more prolific exposure to the dogs than most other species. But, this alone does not mean people, as a whole, truly understand dog speak. Think about cats. How long have they been a part of the human world? And yet, even devoted cat lovers will tell you their cats and their communications remain a mystery to them. For some reason, we seem to believe we know and understand dogs and their language just because they are dogs.

The reality is the dogs have a very advanced, specialized, and refined communication system. Even pups have to be taught by older dogs in their pack how to behave appropriately according the more advanced levels of canine communications and pack behavior. For us to think the pups will just somehow KNOW appropriate human/dog behavior when they have to be taught and "learn" many appropriate behaviors within their own species is unrealistic and unfair to the pup. To think we know and understand the nuances of the dogs' communication system just because they are dogs, exceeds

reason. Perhaps this is because the dogs have been so much a part of our world and lives for as long as any of us can remember. Consider that dog “experts” often do not agree on some of the most basic aspects of dog communications. There are almost as many different theories and approaches for living with and training your dog, as there are breeds of dogs. In fact, there will be many people who disagree with some or all of what I am presenting in this book. What I want you to realize is if the experts often do not agree, HOW can the every day person truly understand dog communications?

EXAMINING DOGS’ GROWLY SOUNDS

While all dogs have various vocalizations, some breeds are considered more vocal than others. However, even within a specific breed some individual dogs are more vocal. I describe these dogs as “talkers”. Just as some people are more vocal and talk more than others, the same is true of individual dogs. Some people say their dog makes all sorts of sounds and even seem to really be trying “to talk”. Generally, people have a relatively narrow scope for accepting their dog’s various vocalizations in a positive perspective. This narrow scope includes two of the most common dog verbalizations, their barks and their growl sounds.

On the whole, people do not like or desire barking. They want to dictate to their dog when it is acceptable for them to bark. This can often set up an inconsistent circumstance for the dogs. People want to know how to train their dog NOT to bark in the house or in the yard EXCEPT they still want their dog to alert them to intruders by barking. These people also want the dogs to bark as a deterrent to possible intruders. As with many other natural, instinctual, and innate dog behaviors, the dogs cannot discern when the behavior is acceptable and when it is not acceptable by their owner’s determination. Remember my analogy about the pups/dogs who are expected to know they can only chew on the sock and shoe the owner provides and then somehow know NOT to chew on any other shoes or socks. This is inconsistent and unrealistic, just as many owners’ expectations are regarding barking. *Note: It is possible to modify a dog’s barking behaviors “within reason” and only when approached the correct way. I will discuss this in detail in the “barking” discussion.*

The most misunderstood dog vocalizations are their growly sounds and these are some of the dogs’ most important verbalization mechanisms. For the most part, we are not accepting of any growl verbalizations. The reason is humans perceive all growls as being a sign of aggression or unacceptable behavior. Let’s look at a prime example of how incorrect our human perceptions and understanding of growl noises can be. Many people contact me because their very young pup growls when the owners interact and play with them. If you watch a litter of pups playing together, you will witness all sorts of growls and barks. While the pups do bark during their play, their growl sounds are the overriding vocalization of choice for pups. We bring them into our home and they play and interact with us using those same growls and periodic barks. Watch two adult dogs playing together, they make all sorts of growl sounds as part of their play interaction. These growl sounds are part of their play vocalizations. However, this is not the way people perceive their pup’s/dog’s growl sounds when playing with their dogs.

Pups and adult dogs playing with a toy by themselves make these play growl sounds. Unfortunately, many people view even these play growls as an indication that their dog is displaying aggressive behavior or at least a tendency toward aggression. Sometimes pups will spontaneously take off running through the house or around their yard in bursts of energy. I call these "puppy explosions or puppy skitters", but they also occur with adult dogs. Almost all pups/dogs will make growly sounds during these energy spurts/bursts. These examples are proof positive that the dogs use growly sounds as part of their normal play and interaction. And yet, we perceive any growl sounds as an indicator of negative or aggressive behavior when they occur during play sessions and interaction with us. I think you can see the fallacy of this reasoning and perception. Additionally, consider how often an owner will actually make human growly sounds while playing with their pup/dog. Somehow, they think this is okay for them to do, but not their pups or dogs. *Note: I am adamant that humans should not attempt to emulate dog growl sounds. You may think you are making a play growl sound, but since you do not speak "dog", you could be saying anything!*

When people bring a pup into their home, often their current family dog will periodically growl and/or bare their teeth at the pup. Many owners perceive this as the adult dog being aggressive with the pup. What is actually happening in most instances is the adult dog is teaching the pup their "puppy manners". When adult dogs teach pups their puppy manners, this means teaching them acceptable behavior and exposing them to some of the advanced levels of dog communication. This is crucial part to a pup's overall behavior development and their understanding of pack hierarchies. The adult dogs teach the pups important dog speak and dog behaviors that are essential for a pup to mature into an appropriate adult dog who can properly interact with other dogs. Much of what the adult dogs teach the pups is beyond the ability of humans to teach. And yet, because of the owner's misperceptions of what is occurring, they will scold or reprimand the adult dog for doing what the adult dog instinctually knows they must do to properly raise a pup. While the dogs know their job, their role in a pup's development, most humans do not correctly understand this natural inter-dog process.

Many dogs who are "talkers" have a whole repertoire of various growly sounds. My little female Westie, Treasure, is a talker and she uses growly sounds as a major part of her vocalizations in various situations. When Treasure is inviting me to play or asking me to train her, she will dart around me making growly sounds. Sometimes she uses the play invitation body posture along with her growly sound by having her front end on the ground and her rump in the air and tail wagging. When playing, Treasure will often use her growly sounds. In the mornings when we first wake up, I give all my dogs what I call "good morning smoodges". This is part of our morning ritual and the dogs love it. During her morning smoodges, Treasure is on her side and basically immobile because she is truly in a state of sheer nirvana. However, during this ritual she makes the most fierce growl sounds you can imagine. I remember the first time my mother visited and witnessed this. Mom was in the guest bedroom. I was giving Treasure her good morning smoodges and she was making her normal fierce growly sounds. My mother came running to my room thinking the dogs were having a fight. When she got to the door of

my bedroom and saw what was happening, she burst out laughing. Mom could not believe the fierce sounds coming from Treasure while she was so obviously in a state of ecstasy.

The point I am making is the dogs' growly sounds are diverse and there are various communication elements and nuances to their growl sounds. Someone who is not attuned to or open to understanding the growl sound communications will perceive ALL growls as negative or aggressive. This is incorrect and is why we must view and assess our dog's growly sounds with a broader and more receptive perspective and perception. Remember it is not as important "what" (growly noises) is said, as "how" (type of growly sounds) it is said. Granted, there are times when a growl IS a growl that is negative or rather is unacceptable in the human/dog world. But, the key is to become more understanding of the scope of our dog's growl sounds.

I cannot tell you how many people have contacted me about their pup's growling which was being seen as negative and/or aggressive, and with my explanations the owners were able to see the growls with an entirely different perspective. You should strive to be a better "listener" in assessing your pup's/dog's growl sounds. Listen with an open mind, ears, and eyes. Work to become attuned to the various growl sounds your pup/dog makes and what those particular growls are communicating. *Note: In the play section of the book, I discuss the pups'/dogs' getting overly stimulated and adrenalized during play. This can take their normal play behavior out of play mode. You have to be attuned to picking up on this shift in their behavior and the accompanying sounds. This is the same as a mother who recognizes the sounds of their children's play that indicates they are on the verge of moving out of play mode. Pup/dog owners need to become equally adept at assessing their pup's/dog's play growl sounds.*

Let me take a moment to address a common occurrence with terrier pups/dogs. It is exceedingly common for terrier owners and people who interact with terriers to view almost all of their vocalizations as aggressive. I believe this occurs because the incongruity of the terriers' physical size as it correlates to the size of their voice. The terriers are small dogs with big dog personas and personalities. They are naturally imbued with big dog "voices". I believe this is Nature's way of protecting the terriers by giving them big voices more commonly associated with and expected of a much larger dog. This provides them with a naturally occurring self-protection element. This is similar to animals with natural "body camouflage" that acts as a self-protection element. The large dog/animal sounds convince other dogs, animals, and predators that the terriers are "bigger and more formidable" than they actually are. This is part of what has allowed the small, game terriers to survive throughout time.

The problem occurs when we hear these large dog sounds coming from such a small dog. What we "hear" is inconsistent with what we see. This skews our perception of the terriers and their vocalizations. If we were hearing these big dog sounds coming from a larger pup/dog, we would be better able to correlate what we hear with what we see. One of my dog favorite stories exemplifies what I am describing. A friend of mine who has been in dogs for over 20 years went to see a litter of five week old Parson Terrier (Jack

Russell) pups. Keep in mind that I consider my friend a very knowledgeable dog person, but she has owned only large breeds. She called me very distressed and concerned as soon as she arrived home. Before she provided any details, I started laughing. Then, I asked her if this was the first time she had ever seen a litter of “terrier” pups. It was. I told her I already knew what had disturbed her. I knew she had never seen a litter of pups, much less a litter so young that sounded so fierce and ferocious. This was indeed what she had found so disturbing. Then, I explained the incongruity of the big dog sounds she heard as related to her “expectations” based on size.

My friend thought back on what she had seen and heard and did acknowledge that the pups were, in fact, playing like all pups play. The sounds just did not compute with her previous dog experiences. As a side note, all of those pups turned out to be wonderful dogs with solid and sound temperaments.

There are some instances when the pups/dogs will make growly noises to communicate that something is upsetting, unpleasant, disturbing, or threatening to them. The key here is to discern what the dog is communicating and why. Again, their growly sounds are a major part of their verbal communications. The problem is we do not hear the growls as a communication tool. Rather, we just view all growls as being aggressive dog behavior. The reality is that many times the dogs’ growls are indicative of a well-temperamented dog. Meaning, the dogs are using “dog speak” properly and appropriately. How else can the dogs communicate when something hurts, upsets, or threatens them? They could just flare at us and bite with literally no previous communication. This would signal a behavior issue. However, when they follow proper and appropriate dog communication protocol, we should react and respond accordingly.

When a person is upset, disturbed, or feels threatened, they can verbalize this. We can also react in more physical manners and all of this is acceptable or at least understood by other people. For the dogs, they have only their communication system that we misread, misunderstand, or do not recognize at all. When a dog is confronted with an untenable situation, how are they supposed to communicate this to us in a manner we will consider to be acceptable by human terms? If you think about it, we are asking, requiring, demanding the dogs find a way to communicate their feelings and emotions in a completely unrealistic manner. We demand they step outside their basic nature to communicate with us in a way that we do not even expect of another human being. How can this be possible? How can this be reasonable or rational? And yet, it IS what we ask, require, and demand of the dogs.

When a dog is in an untenable or stressful situation, often they seek refuge under a bed or behind the couch. We should NOT go after them and certainly not attempt to pull them out. If we do, even a well-temperamented dog WILL growl and possibly bare their teeth. If we do not understand what they are telling us, we will continue to encroach on them possibly with more intensity or force because now, we are upset that they dared to growl and/or bared their teeth at US! If their initial warning growls go unheeded, the next level is for them to give a “warning snap” in our direction. If this does not succeed, they are left with NO other option but to bite. When a dog exhibits these levels of communication

with us or another dog, they are being very proper and appropriate as relates to dog/dog world communications. An ill-temperamented dog in the same cornered or threatened scenario would not do any of the initial communications/warning behaviors. Rather, they would immediately attack.

Note: Some dogs who have been conditioned to very bad things happening to them when they are cornered may be patterned to respond in the extreme for basic survival. If a dog exhibits this behavior and there is a history of abuse or inflicted pain, their reactions do not necessarily signal an ill-temperamented or aggressive dog. Their behavior and reactions have been “triggered” because of some traumatic experience(s). When this is the case, often times, these dogs can be “re-conditioned/desensitized” so the trigger and accompanying patterned reflexes are extinguished and replaced by more acceptable and appropriate human/dog world behaviors.

There are other situations when dogs’ growls can be misunderstood. As I have said, some dogs are “talkers” and I often encounter a dog who makes growly sounds whenever they are picked up. If there is no physical discomfort or pain associated with being picked up and they growl when being picked up, chances are they are just talking. A friend’s dog was a prime example of this behavior. Jessica would want to be picked and would even ask to be picked up, but she would always emit her little growls when you picked her up. Most people thought she was being a nasty dog. She was not; Jessica was just talking!

Another example of something that can cause people to misinterpret a dog’s growly sounds is the way their mouth works when they make their growl sounds. I have observed Treasure closely and determined that when she is making some of her play growly sounds, this often means her teeth will show as she emits the growly sounds or the play barks. She is absolutely playing and completely respects me. Consequently, this tells me she has to “manipulate” her mouth in a particular manner to make certain sounds. Once I realized this, I began watching other dogs for this behavior and found the same to be true. For example, watch two dogs playing together. They are making all sorts of growly noises and their mouths are open and showing teeth. How often have you seen two dogs do what I call mouth or face sparring? This is when both mouths are open, teeth bared, and each is moving all around each other’s open mouth and emitting constant growly sounds. Watch a dog bark at another dog to get them to play. It is common to see the teeth and lips pulled back with each bark. This is really no different than when people manipulate their mouths to alter and change the sounds we emit. Obviously, the dogs do the same thing but it is understandable that people would misinterpret this situation. Hopefully, you will now be able to view some of your dog’s growly sounds in a completely different light and with a better understanding.

Sometimes when I am at a dog show and someone’s dog begins to play or interact with me, the owner will try to restrain their dog or become concerned at their dog’s vocalizations. This always tells me these owners are completely misreading their dog’s vocalizations. They seem astonished when I explain their dog is only playing or their dog is only talking. I hope this section of the book helps many owners to reassess their dogs’ vocalizations. Once owners realize a growl is not always a growl as normally perceived

by humans, they will be able to see, experience, and enjoy a whole other world of communication with their dogs. *Note: I am not trying to excuse or explain away ALL growls as being just talking. What I am trying to do is get owners to become more adept at understanding the nuances of their dog's communications.*

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