

How to Understand "Cat"

Knowledge of the feline language can strengthen the cat/owner bond. Learn to recognize the meaning in your pet's meows and actions.

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Posted: Thu Jul 1 00:00:00 PDT 2004

Taken together, these findings suggest that, unlike words, the calls do not denote specific meanings. However, they may indicate emotional content or urgency. In fact, the amount of pitch variation in these calls seems suited more for human hearing, since humans are 10 times more sensitive to pitch modulation than cats. The finding caused researchers to suspect that cat communication has evolved and that cats can tap into the human senses.

One possible explanation is, when humans don't respond, cats vary the pitch and modulation of their calls until we finally give in and search for what they want. The implication is that domestic cats evolved to make more sounds as an adaptation to living with humans. In addition, they have learned to make a wider variety of sounds because of human reinforcement.

"Cats, like people, have a variety of calls that mean different things at different times," said Larry Lachman, PsyD, author of "Cats On The Counter." "The pitch, intensity, frequency, rapidity and volume of the meowing reflect different emotional states or physical needs. Typically, the more rapid, intense and loud the vocalization, the more panicked, scared or anxious the pet is.

"Conversely, the slower and less intense the vocalizations, the more confident or potentially assertive the cat is," Lachman said, noting that these characteristics of vocal communication are consistent across the animal spectrum. "Humans verbally express various wants, needs and emotions: hunger, thirst, happiness, fear, shelter and sex same with cats."

Cracking the CodeCarolyn Osier, a cat breeder and an all-breed judge for the Cat Fanciers' Association, said (perhaps with tongue in cheek) that cats think of people as communicatively disadvantaged. "If you will watch cats, they seldom communicate with each other with loud sounds, except [when] in dire distress," Osier said. "Two male cats about to fight over territory will scream at each other. A female calling for a suitor often has a banshee wail. At a lower level, a momma cat trying to round up her kittens for nursing has a distinctive trill that the kittens, with their eyes still shut, will understand. And, of course, a Siamese simply appears to like the sound of its own voice."

When communicating with each other vocally, feral cats often do so at a low volume and usually from close proximity, Crowell-Davis said.