

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.

Marty Becker, DVM

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

To break the cat code, Crowell-Davis said, cat owners should match the situation with the vocalization so that they can identify what individual sounds are intended to mean.

"Since we don't have a good understanding of the subtle variations of the vocalizations, the owner certainly has to look at the context," Crowell-Davis said. "Imagine knowing only 10 words of French and trying to navigate through Paris. You would use a combination of context, physical gestures and emotional content of verbalizations to help convey and understand meaning."

Sophia Yin, DVM, an applied veterinary behaviorist who teaches at the U.C. Davis College of Veterinary Medicine, agrees. She said that owners could learn to distinguish their own cat's individual calls based on other clues. "For instance a persistent mew at 5 a.m. or 5 p.m. might clearly mean, 'feed me,'" she said.

"The best way to find out what your cat means when he calls is to sit and think, 'what response is he getting?'" Yin said. "If feeding your cat calms the calls, then that particular call in this context means 'feed me.' If he starts a rasping call while you're petting him and then turns to bite you before running off, it probably means 'enough already.' And if he mews and rubs against your leg and stops vocalizing as soon as you pet him, it's just petting that he wants."

Yin said that cats meow to us because they get a response. Based on this knowledge, people can choose how to respond. If your cat meows persistently every morning while you prefer to sleep, you can avoid responding.

Janice Willard, a veterinary ethologist from Moscow, Idaho, offers a dissenting viewpoint. "If you watch a feral queen bring killed prey, like mice, to her kittens, she will call them from the nest and they will rush out clamoring loudly and compete for it," she said. "In [our] case, we have assumed the role of the queen. In reality, they have no other way to have their needs met but to get it from us. They are adaptive enough to use communication patterns in this way."

Johnson-Bennett said that cats are a quick study and learn when a particular vocalization gets a specific result. "If your cat is standing over the empty food bowl issuing a meow and you obediently rush into the kitchen, the kitty may be thinking 'ah-ha! This will be my official feed-me meow,'" Johnson-Bennett said.