

How to Understand "Cat"

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

Marty Becker, DVM

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

With a vocabulary of meowing, trilling and caterwauling, cats certainly have their own verbal variety. As a pet parent, you should consider learning the foreign language known as "Cat." In knowing it, you're destined to understand your feline family members at a deeper level.

"I believe cats are more vocal around us because they know that's the method [of communication] with which we're most comfortable," said Pam Johnson-Bennett, the author of "Hiss and Tell."

While cats don't have specific meows for specific contexts, they certainly can deliver messages loud and clear, according to a recent Cornell University study on interspecies communication conducted by Nicholas Nicaastro and Michael Owren.

In a study of 12 cats, Nicaastro and Owren recorded meows in five different contexts: food related (prior to regular feeding), agonistic (when being petted too vigorously), affiliative (when a cat solicits affection from an owner), obstacle (when the cat wants in or out) and distress (when a cat was taken for a car ride).

Then, under a carefully controlled laboratory setting, they tested people for their ability to identify the calls correctly, without the help of visual or contextual cues. Even the most experienced owners were unable to classify the calls accurately.

Nicaastro and Owren felt this lapse in communication occurred because people often pick up on contextual cues in their analysis of a cat's sounds. So, they may think they know what a call means, while they are actually relying on contextual cues to make the determination.

Sharon L. Crowell-Davis, DVM, professor of Veterinary Behavior at the University of Georgia, concluded from this data that humans are often incompetent when it comes to interpreting cat meows. However, Crowell-Davis said that does not mean that cat sounds are indistinguishable.

Feline Adaptation

In a separate experiment, people were asked to rate meows based on how pleasant or urgent they sounded. The researchers found a clear trend: The more urgent the calls, the less pleasant they were to the listener. Also, the urgent calls were lower in pitch and longer in duration.