



FELINE BODY LANGUAGE

The giving and interpreting of sign language is innate in cats. The house cat has an exceptionally vast supply of many forms of expression. Domestic cats have advanced far beyond their wild ancestors in the capacity to develop new forms of social organization and communication. It uses its body and facial expressions to communicate its intentions to all around it.

By studying the various signals that make up the cat's language, you will find that you will better understand the messages your cat is trying to convey. A basic understanding of this language will aid in deepening the bonds of friendship with your feline companion.

BODY GESTURES

Gestures are body positions and movements that convey a message. The cat's ability to erect the hairs on certain parts of its body must also be included. Aggression is expressed with erect ears, constricted pupils and tail swings in low arcs close to the body. A defensive cat crouches in a cringing position with its eyes averted and ears flat and thumps the top of its tail on the ground. A happy cat relaxes its whiskers, perks up its ears and holds its head and tail high in the air.

BODY

A stretched body can indicate that the cat is sure of itself or prepared to attack. A contracted body indicates fear. The arched back conveys the idea that the cat is in readiness for defense.

HEAD

A head stretched forward is ready for contact. Facial expressions and other gestures indicate whether the encounter is antagonistic or friendly. A cat feeling dominant raises its head and inferior feelings cause the head to lower. If the head is lowered in a jerky manner and the chin is pulled in or the head turned sideways, the cat is displaying a lack of interest. The cat uses this gesture if it desires not to provoke or be provoked when encountering another cat. When meeting another cat that is being very persistent, the cat that wants to avoid contact will raise its head high and pull it far back.

LEGS

Stretching legs to their full length is a sign of self-confidence. Depending on the facial expression, this gesture could also mean a readiness to attack. A cat bends its hind legs to convey its uncertainty or timidity. By bending the forelegs, the cat is expressing its desire to avoid conflict, while stating it will defend itself if necessary. Complete defensiveness is communicated by bending both fore and hind legs. A slightly raised paw indicates readiness to defend itself.

TAIL

The tail is one of the best barometers of feline mood. A still, raised tail means a friendly greeting. A sudden whip of the tail shows a threat of impending attack. The highly excited cat waves its tail from side to side in jerky, rapid motions. The top of a tail moving means slight dissatisfaction or impatience. A relaxed cat allows the tail to hang straight down. A tail held straight out behind indicates caution. The top ships back and forth in moments of great excitement.

HAIR

When the cat is afraid, the hair on its body stands erect, fairly evenly all over the body. A cat hat is ready to attack or trying to threaten will raise its hair in a narrow strip all along the spine and the tail. In this mood the hair will incline slightly toward the middle of both sides, forming a sharp ridge.

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

CHEEK RUFF

The cheek muscles pull the cheek ruff downward and toward the throat during excitement or expectation mixed with fear. A pulsing rhythm is sometimes present. This is easy to see in cats with prominent cheek puffs, such as those with Persian ancestry.

EARS

Ears pointed forward can convey friendly interest and different degrees of attentiveness of suspense. Ears that are pricked up and turned slightly backward indicate a warning that an attack is contemplated. Ears that are raised and twisted back combined with hissing mean that a cat is ready to attack. Ears fully erect but furred back indicate anger. A frightened cat lays the ears down flat. Ears that are bent back and drawn down sideways can signal a defensive attitude, fear or readiness to take flight. A cat playing or hunting will hold the ears open, erect and slightly forward.

LIPS

Movements of the lips are usually combined with some type of sound. The mouth is slightly open, with the nose and upper lip drawn upward expressing displeasure or disgust. The mouth is open very slightly and the nose is barely wrinkled. Another lip gesture is embarrassment. The mouth may stay open or closed, with the lips drawn back and not too far upward. The nose is not wrinkled. At the same time the head will swing slowly from side to side. This gesture expresses friendly rejection to another cat approaching with friendly intentions, and translated means "please be kind and leave me alone".

PUPILS

Narrowed pupils many indicate aggressive threat, tension or a heightened interest. Surprise, fear and a defensive attitude are expressed by dilated pupils. Mood shifts can be magnified by changes in light, since the size of the pupils depend on light.

WHISKERS

The position of the whiskers says a great deal. When a cat is excited, tense and ready to act, the whiskers will be pointed forward and fanned out. On a calm or comfortable cat, the whiskers point outward and are less spread apart. This position can also mean a friendly disposition or indifference. A cat that is hunting prey will thrust its whiskers forward. The shy, timid or reserved cat will bunch the whiskers together and flatten them out to the side of the face. Whiskers flat against the face signify the cat is scared.

VOCALIZATIONS

Cats have a different vocal apparatus from humans. They can vocalize when exhaling as well as inhaling. The variations in the phonetic quality of sounds are achieved mainly by changing the tension of the throat and oral muscles and by changes in the speed of air moving over the vocal cords. The position of the tongue is not as important as it is in human speech.

There are three general sound categories in cat vocalization. Murmuring comprises the soft sounds used for acknowledgment, approval, attention, calling and greeting; purring is included in this group. The majority of these sounds are formed with the mouth closed.

The vowel sounds are another category of sound. Cats use these particular sounds, which consist of the meows, in very specific context. Most cats have an impressive vocabulary of these sounds to express needs such as hunger, gratitude, in or out, "no", "come here", "move over", to name a few. Cats seem to train their humans more readily to this part of their language than any other.

The last group is made up of high-intensity, strained sounds. These are usually reserved for cat-to-cat communications and consist of the hiss, spit, growl, wail and snarl. Such sounds generally indicate anger, pain or frustration. When directed at humans these sounds mean, "leave me alone, NOW".

PURRING

It is thought that this sound originated as a vocalization of kittens to tell a mother they are content. When they produce this sound while nursing, it doesn't interfere with suckling, and sound contact can be maintained with the mother cat. A mother cat purrs when approaching her kittens in order to reassure them of her presence. Older kittens purr when they are trying to get an older cat to play with them.

Adult cats purr when all is well with their world. A dominant cat will purr when approaching another cat with playful or peaceful intentions. A sick will purr in order to try to soothe a potential aggressor.

It is not known how cats purr. One theory maintains that it is the vibration of the false vocal cords. Another theory suggests that it is the result of turbulence in the bloodstream of the vena cava (the main vein returning to the heart).

GURGLING

A high-pitched gurgle means a friendly greeting. This sound is sometimes combined with gentle meows to become a chatting sound that will vary in quality in cats. It is a social contact sound. The cat has a tremendous capacity for variation on this sound. It seems to play an important role in vocal exchanges, but it has not yet been studied in depth.

MEOWING

The vowel sounds a cat makes are the meowing sounds and are used in specific context. These sounds form distinct words in that the cat closes its mouth after making each sound. These sounds are used in communicating with humans, and the manner in which a cat pronounces them gives the individual a specific voice. Cats have a broad range of several types of meows. The best known of the meow sounds is that of an unhappy kitten. A short, high meow in adults expresses discontent, or unhappiness. A hungry cat shows displeasure with loud, almost screaming meows. A cat seeking attention or wanting to be petted will meow softly.

Caterwauling

This is a song of threat and war, sometimes called wailing. It is the sound that rival tomcats emit as they approach each other. It is often mistaken by humans to be a love song between a tom and a queen.

GROWLING

This sound is usually accompanied by a facial expression. Growling indicates offense rather than defense. When growling, the corners of the mouth are drawn up more than the upper lip. Repeated growling will eventually turn into snarling.

HISSING

This is a common sound. When hissing, the cat will open its mouth about halfway, drawing back the upper lips and arching the tongue. The breath is expelled with force. This is why a cat will shy away if you blow in its face. The expression of hissing without sound will succeed in repulsing a cat.

SCREECHING

This sound seems to have evolved from a meowing sound and is usually used to mean distress.

SPITTING

This is a warning or threatening sound. It is a sudden and violent non-vocal sound, accompanied by a forepaw hitting the ground. Cats use this sound as a bluff when approached by an attacker.