



## CALMING SIGNALS One part of the Dogs' Language

according to Turid Rugaas

by Gabriele Schröter

Chief Dan George  
If you talk to the animals,  
they will talk to you,  
and you will know each other.

If you do not talk to them,  
you will not know them.  
And what you do not know,  
you will fear.  
What one fears,  
one destroys.  
(from Calming Signals by Turid Rugaas)

### I. A FEW FUNDAMENTAL WORDS

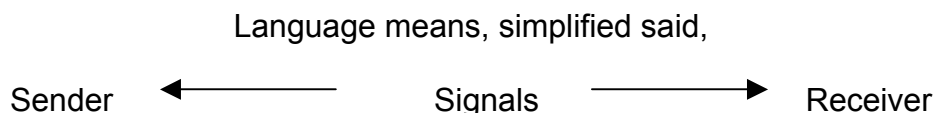
Today it is much spoken and written about the relation Man-Dog, a relation that was rather unreflected about 30 years ago: the dog was with the man and was -somehow- useful, either as a lapdog or a "fleapelt". In the more and more narrow growing, urbanised world, in which excesses, and all kinds of exaggerations happen, the dog has more or less remained a creature and then increasingly becomes a problem, either it **becomes a weapon or it isn't kept** in the true to type way, that its pack-attitude forms it to be a leader and as such then uses its power also against people.

At the moment, it is, once again, "five minutes to twelve", the man begins to think about this thousands of years old relation. There were early fundamental studies about the behaviour of dogs by Richard Schenkel (1946) and Konrad Lorenz (1950), but only with "Wölfen und Königspudeln" by Erik Zimen (1971) -behaviour-science on dogs- was pursued. Observations by Eberhard Trumler, Zimen's book about the wolf (1978) followed as well as the precise studies by Dorit Feddersen-Petersen. She goes, of late (2002), even that far to see the social conduct and with it the communication of canine-herds as possible models of man. After that came and still comes a torrent of offered books scientific and pseudo-scientific, more adjusted to the use of the forming Schools for Dogs or totally new directions of "faith", that lead to Clickertraining or Dance with Dogs. So the science has certified that dogs have certain conduct-patterns (e.g. Wolf Ethogram by Patricia A. Goodmann and Erich Klinghammer, 1985/1990, and the man has known instinctively" how to use them for a long time. Now the time has come to have a closer look at what research

has found and then make use of it. For - like in intervening human relations, too - living together functions only if communication takes place.

## UNDERSTANDING LEADS TO COMPREHENSION

And how could it proceed better than by means of the "language"? Language of course is not only our Sound-and-Sentence-system put together from abstract words.



To make understanding possible it is necessary, that the Sender as well as the Receiver know what the Signals mean. As the dog can learn our Signals, the spoken words, in a limited number only, we will have to learn the dogs' language, their Signals, if we take the understanding with our dogs seriously. And these Signals mainly come from the "body-language", which we ourselves have rudimentary, too, (like wrinkle one's brow means: danger!). As a rule: observe, watch, observe! And also: again and again learning, be up to date. Time and again new realisations come, which help avoiding misunderstanding. The best example for this is the traditional "shaking of the neck", which the wolf supposed does with his whelps - by no means! "Neck-shaking belongs to the killing-procedure, at least to the killing-intention! No wolf uses it as educational means!

Fortunately, interested and well-informed people have already been occupied with the "body-language-signals" of dogs. Among others or still better: the Norwegian Turid Rugaas has discovered this language before all of them.

She is a Norwegian Dog-Trainer, who is well-known world-wide (really from Japan to Canada) and invited to Seminars - but not with us, for Lady Clarissa von Reinhardt has a contract with Turid Rugaas. So she cannot come or with other words she would be permitted but only under very expensive conditions.

(At the same time as this meeting proceeds there is the "International Dog-Symposium" at Bernau am Chiemsee, among others also with Turid Rugaas) Fortunately, there is a booklet by TR, "On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals", in English and lately also in a German translation (Calming Signals. Die Beschwichtigungssignale der Hunde, obtainable under [www.animal-learn.de](http://www.animal-learn.de)). I think, in Germany the English edition is the fastest and easiest way to get it via [www.clicker.de](http://www.clicker.de): € 12,20 postage. In addition there is a Video by TR "in Action" ( € 43,45 together with the book € 53,70).

TR as a little girl already wished to be able to do something for dogs and for all her life remained firm, so she had discovered the signals by exact observation at her Training-School-for Dogs, by means of which she is now, after 39 years, able to communicate very well with dogs and do good things for them.

So it is known for a long time and scientifically described that wolves as social animals, living in herds, have developed good possibilities of communication. They don't only need understanding when hunting but also to avoid aggression within their own breed. Therefore they have found possibilities of understanding in their behaviour in situations of stress and to calm down their opponent, thus avoiding conflicts and to survive.

These body-language-signals also belong fundamentally to the conduct-repertoire of dogs as TR has found out. They use them as they don't "stand in the seriousness of life", only "in small letters" - which are rather difficult to make out, the way as TR puts it into words. Though they can, in particular cases, get rubbed by bad experience in the decisive phases of development of whelps: the most peaceable whelp, too, grasps after several times, threatening gestures do work better than calming signals! This is the beginning of the development becoming a problem-dog, as well as regarding to other dogs as also to man. But they can learn this language again by a positive strengthening .

After an exact observation of this signals TR has been able to identify 28-29 "indications". By her fundamental views to dogs she has soon found out, that learning without oppression functions better than under oppression - the same as also with people. So she has regularly not only tried to see and understand the signals of the dogs which she knew, but she has also used them to weaken oppression. Knowing at least a few of the fundamental connotations of this "language" could put back the man again partly into that heavenly situation, where he could communicate with his fellow-creatures, as St. Francis from Assisi had tried. For this we would have to get away from our mental image always keeping up our dominance by power and oppression: the good Alpha-wolf keeps its dominance without aggression. With the canine-varieties the Alpha-animal, the "strong", is always inspiring confidence - never threatening. Its natural authority is based in the family-herd on controlling of resources and not on threatening or imposing conduct.

## II. THE MOST IMPORTANT CALMING SIGNALS

These signals are, as already mentioned, used by dogs to weaken oppression or to avoid aggression, and to signal peaceful intentions. They serve with the solution of conflicts and can vary a little in the frequency of application. This depends, among others, on the appearance of the dog, (black dogs, or dogs with an extreme growth of hair in their face, use the signals depending on the facial expression less often for they would be more difficult to "read".).

In her book TR explains in full the following 12 signals, she gives examples and shows possibilities of how people could apply them. Later on I'll come back to them especially with the view on the exhibitors.



### 1. Averting the head

This movement can be carried out more or less clearly: A short, slight averting or a longer continued turning away.

A variety of it is **averting the eyes only**, a glance, as a straight stare means threat.

Dogs give this signal, if one approaches too directly, straight, bending over them without further ado, such as to feel oppressed or threatened.



## **2. Turning away**

Body totally or partly turned away from the object, sometimes used to strengthen the "averting of the head". Another variety is also moving in an arched line or bend-walking. Directly approaching somebody is avoided by dogs, as they take it to be impolite.



## **3. Licking the nose**

A mostly quick accomplished motion and very difficult to observe, occurs solely or in combination with looking-away.



## **4. Stiffen**

is shown to threatening or simply bigger dogs, if they sniff at the dog strongly. The dog stands as still and stiff as possible, moves not a single muscle.



### **5. Slowing-down movements**

A clear slowing-down particularly when approaching an other dog, which has the same effect also on that which is opposite, also in an hectic play.



### **6. Posture of Invitation to play**

is used in cases of doubt, if it is not known exactly what the intentions of the facing are, frequently when meeting other animals like horses or cows.



### **7. Sitting down**

is used when meeting other dogs, either keeping up the direction or in connection with "averting", such as to sit down with the back facing "object", which is a sign of insecurity.



### **8. Lying down**

contrary to the gesture of subjugation to "lying on the back", the normal lying down is a calming signal, but a very strong one, which is often shown by "higher ranks" to young dogs in a growing lively play.



### **9. Yawning**

It calms down clearly and is easy to be "understood".



### **10. Sniffing on the ground**

Hereby the nose can shortly or even longer glide over the ground. It is not always easy to distinguish from the real sniffing, but dogs seem to like it.

### **11. Dividing out groups, separate**

This attitude is most often observed when dogs push among people in situations they think a conflict could occur (e.g. parents "struggle" with their children).

### **12. Wagging the tail**

This is a sign of excitement, not always of cheerfulness, but must be seen in connection with the situation and the "language" of the rest of the body. Often it is used as a "white flag", or as the request: Please be nice again!

Other, perhaps not that important or often met with signals are: "play a whelp" by licking the face of the facing or giving the paw, eye-twinkling or lip-licking.

### III POSSIBILITIES OF LEARNING - AND USAGE FOR US

(being an exhibitor, racing-participant and of course an owner generally)

To improve the communication with the dog we must

1. recognise
2. avoid what creates oppression, among others, to transmit calming signals to the dog in its "language".

For oppression sets free adrenaline, on the bio-chemical level, which causes either escape or attack with the view of surviving. Do these symptoms appear increasingly, not only gastric ulcers or heart-difficulties can be given rise to, but also - according to temper - escaping-tendency or attacking-readiness. The more we learn to recognise calming signals of oppression the more we contribute towards not only not assembling aggressions with the dog but lowering them again.

Oppression for the dog may arise mostly in situations in which it feels overstrained or faint among other things by:

- **direct threat, by us or other dogs**, (the following dog which would rather like to tear to pieces its own in are the arena)
- **Violence, rage, aggression in its surroundings** (who hasn't experienced in the arena already how "infectious" aggressive behaviour of other dogs/ owners can be!)
- **Jerking the lead, pressing down it**, pulling it behind oneself such things not rarely experienced by helpless exhibitors
- Make too great demands at training or daily round
- Too much movement for young dogs
- Little movement and activity
- **Scarce access to lavatory** (considering this need could save embarrassment to many a one organiser or owner, and to the dog oppression: why not go with the dog timely before one's turn.
- **too low or too high temperature** (dogs in car in summer)
- pain and illness
- **too much noise** (noise at exhibition-halls may certainly be important to the animal-protection!)
- loneliness
- sudden frightening situations
- too much exciting playing with balls or other dogs
- lacking of free of disturbance possibilities to retreat or to recover
- sudden changes

The underlined items relate particularly to us as exhibitors whereby also the physical overstraining can be added to it, but then of course the Sighthound-owners, who are enthusiastic of racing, are concerned.

Besides the already described "language"-signals other body-functions can also be caused by oppression, like e. g. restlessness, permanent scratching or gnawing, permanent barking, whining or howling, sudden diarrhoea (many times I overheard it on exhibitions!), bad smell out of mouth or

body, sudden forming of sporiasis (have experienced it with one of my dogs, as a reaction on a brass band in an exhibition hall), shivering, running a circle and snapping at its own tail, gasping, lack of appetite, increasing piddling, allergy and last but not least **aggression**.

To learn the "dog-language", to recognise it first, we must take effort, to observe our dog in a new way, by looking at the described signals, one at a time, and thus so to speak word for word to learn the vocabulary: today e.g. I take a look whether, when and how does my dog avert its head, next time, when does it lick its nose, etc. Thus we can see at the same time in which situations our dog feels itself insecure and therefore oppressed.

Indications above all we can learn and use: Averting of head, of glance, turning away and taking up contact to the side with the dog, slowing down the moving. These are important gestures particularly when taking up contact for the first time with less "kind" Sight-hound-races. Let's try once to Approach a reserved Azawakh for instance not to demand from it, to bear if we move briskly and staring directly at it! Why not slowly approaching it slightly to the side averting our head and glance? We certainly won't suffer loss of anything but will just be fair concerning our responsibility and affection towards the dog! Should the dog then still show signals like head-averting, nose-licking or others, the gesture of yawning still remains to show our peaceful intention. In such situations one should also include one's neighbour, the other dog-owner, inform him or her, what we intend to do and why! If there is time enough we can sit down (corresponds to dog's sitting) and then take up contact with the dog from one side.

Quiet stopping, **stiffen** is often the only rescue towards aggressive dogs admittedly!

**Demanding-for-play-posture, lying down** are signals one can use at home. We can imitate the demanding-for-play by stretching our arms ahead downwards. But this signal can take to playing with our own dog so it will be only rarely used. Lying down is for lively raving young dogs at home a clear signal above all if one interferes "separating" (Signal 11) Though, one risks to get "disregarded" a little, but there is perhaps a convenient garden-bench or a sofa in the field of view of the dogs so the signal could be noticed.

That by dogs very much liked "quick-licking-over-the-nose" needs certainly some exercise, but is amazingly effective, as I have tried it out already with my own totally "crazy" and oppressed dog.

If we don't want only to pretend doing the best for our races, so we should try hard to take care of these signals and learn those few gestures. Then we can influence our dogs calming, which we want to show to advantage - in our daily society and for our pleasure at exhibitions or for the pleasure of the dogs on the racing-course or coursing-field.

Our dogs will - perhaps - at first be a little surprised, but certainly quickly enter into it, if we are eager to speak **their** language with them, even if we mangle it, because the language of the canids is so complex and our means on this field very limited.