

HOW GOOD IS MY DOG AT UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS I SAY?



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Recently I visited a friend who has two energetic border collies, and while we were sitting outside, a friend of hers arrived with her children. The kids got out of the car and were, well, normal kids, which got the border collies all excited and jumping up on them. The kids started repeating “OFF” to the dogs, but as soon as their Mom saw this, she interrupted the kids, asking them, “Have you taught these dogs what ‘OFF’ means?” “No,” the kids replied. “Then stop saying it!” their Mom said. I was in awe!

Dogs are very bad linguists. They have no way of knowing what our words mean. I like to illustrate this point in my dog training classes by switching to speaking Finnish for a while. That’s how your dog feels when you talk to him. Dogs learn words by association, which we see in our everyday life: it doesn’t take many repetitions to teach a dog “let’s go out,” “let’s eat,” or “squirrel” because we say these things right before or as we get up and grab the leash, start filling the food bowl, or a squirrel runs up a tree. The word is followed by a consequence that is very meaningful to the dog, and he will start responding to the word pretty soon, just like Ivan Pavlov’s dogs responded to his bell.

The exact same principle applies when we want our dog to perform a behaviour when we say a particular word, which is called “a verbal cue.” We have to first start saying the word when the dog is

about to do the behaviour in question. If we first say “off” when the dog is jumping on us or “leave it” when the dog is about to eat garbage, what do you think the dog will associate the word with? Yup, you got it, quite the opposite from what we want to teach her. That’s why it’s important to first teach the dog to offer the behaviour and to only say the word when you can bet \$100 that the dog will offer it again. This way the dog will associate the verbal cue with the behaviour she is doing. After enough repetitions, a simple test will reveal whether your dog got the word: say it when she is not looking at you and see if she will do what you want.

A big part of training is generalization. This means your dog will not understand the words you are teaching him outside of your kitchen if you only train him in the kitchen. For dogs, learning is very context dependent. It doesn’t mean that he is stupid or stubborn if he doesn’t “sit” or “come” in the park. You need to train your dog to respond to verbal cues in different places and with different distractions, such as people moving around, cars, other dogs, tennis balls, etc. Also, dogs don’t necessarily transfer words spoken by one person to another person. Everyone has a different tone of voice, and often our body posture becomes part of the equation. For example, if you always lean forward when saying the word “sit,” your dog will probably take the leaning forward as the cue. No wonder he has no clue what to do when he is not facing you! That’s why I like to do silly things when teaching verbal cues to dogs: I sit, stand, move around, scratch my ear, do jumping jacks.

Recently, my own dog was playing with his buddies outside when he started chasing another dog. One of the other dog owners decided to yell “sit” to my dog when he was in full motion. Seriously, did you really think it was going to work?! My dog’s sit has never been generalized to a distance of more

than a few meters away from me, and he has never done it with a complete stranger and certainly not when he is running after another dog!

Next time you are teaching your dog to listen to the words you say, think about the following:

- Say the word 10–20 times when your dog is about to do the behaviour you want.
- Test the word by saying it when your dog is not expecting it. If it works, great! If not, go back to the previous step.
- Take the word and the behaviour on the road: start asking your dog to do the behaviour in different places and with different distractions. If nothing happens, consider whether your dog values the reward that you have and whether the distractions are too much for her.
- Reward your dog generously when she does the right behaviour, as no one likes to work for free!
- Repeating the word teaches your dog that she has a choice. We all want to have elegantly trained dogs who respond to us right away. Therefore, make the training successful by building the behaviour from easier environments to harder ones gradually.

