

# Woofs Become Words

What's your dog trying to tell you? Here are some answers

By Amber Smith  
Staff writer

One afternoon not too long ago, Janet Restante's golden retriever let out a little bark for no apparent reason.

C.J. wore a microphone on his collar. Restante carried a receiver. On its screen, his bark was decoded into English: "I love you."

Restante was impressed with the precision of the new Bow Lingual dog translator. But the Manlius woman had to admit, it didn't tell her anything she didn't already know. C.J.'s playful whole-body wags communicate plenty.

Like new mothers discerning the cries of their newborns, people who share their lives with dogs strive to differentiate yips from yaps from grrs. This new Bow Lingual purports to do just that, converting barks into one of six dog emotions — happy, sad, on-guard, assertive, frustrated or needy — and further, into words.




Japanese toymaker Takara teamed with an acoustic scientist to create Bow Lingual, using voiceprint and behavior analysis from more than 5,000 barks. The device is such a hit in Japan that Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi presented Russian President Vladimir Putin with two Bow Linguals as gifts for his two dogs when they met earlier this year.

Bow Lingual is not meant as a gag gift — it retails around \$120 — but can it really tap into the four-legged psyche?

Central New York dog lovers like to think so. Those who tested Bow Lingual got confirmation of what they thought their dog was saying all along. Some were surprised their dogs could curse. (One of the phrases on the receiver is a collection of symbols.) Others were amused or

## One dog's bark

C.J. is a golden retriever who lives in Manlius with his family, Paul and Janet Restante, and children, Anthony and Alexa. He has occasion to bark a few times a day. To try to understand him, we consulted the Bow Lingual, as well as Clay animal communicator Colleen Nicholson and the Sharper Image Q-ball, the next generation 8-ball. (For the Q-Ball, we had to ask a direct question.)

Barking conditions	Garbage can across the street blows over in the wind. What is C.J. saying?	Neighbor dog, Max, walks by on a leash with his owner. What is C.J. saying?	On his front porch in the late afternoon. What is C.J. saying?
<b>Bow Lingual</b> 	"Pay attention to me!"	"Let's play!"	"Can't you hear me?" "I want to help." "Don't you know how frustrated I am?" and "Aren't I great?"
<b>Colleen Nicholson</b> 	It scared him. It startled him. He didn't know who knocked it down.	He wanted Max to come in and play.	Nonsense barking. He's just barking to bark.
<b>Sharper Image Q-Ball</b> 	■ Was C.J. scared? "The stars say 'yes'."	■ Did C.J. want to play with Max? "Count on it."	■ Was C.J. trying to say something? "I don't know."

The Post-Standard

## Communicative dogs

Dr. Katherine Houpt, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, says dogs communicate, in some ways, better than the higher primates. Are you listening?

■ With your dog in the same room as your friend, have your friend place a favorite toy or biscuit out of your dog's reach and then leave the room. When you come into the room, does your dog try to "ask" you to get the treat for him? He may look at you, then the toy, then back at you and back at the toy.

■ Hide your dog's favorite toy or biscuit in a room. Then bring her into the room with you. Tell her to get her treat and look directly at the hiding spot. Does she go to the spot? You may have to emphasize the location with a more intent stare.



JANET RESTANTE and her golden retriever, C.J., are shown at their Manlius home. C.J. wore a device on his collar that decoded his barks into words.

David Lassman / Staff photographer

*"For dogs that are pretty vocal, the owner already knows. This is the bark that means, 'I'm hungry.' This is the bark that says, 'I want out.' This is a bark that means, 'I'm going to tear you limb from limb.'"*

— Dr. Katherine Houpt,  
Cornell University

less than impressed with the gibberish Bow Lingual deciphered from human barks.

You program the device to your dog's breed, or a close approximation based on weight and shape of snout. You can set it on "home alone mode" to collect a day's worth of barks, or view translations in real time.

The machine dips into a reserve of 50 or 60 common phrases for each of the six emotions. Bow Lingual publicist Willie Norkin says it's 94 percent accurate for the emotion.

Bow Lingual is based on voiceprint analysis that required recordings of thousands of barks from more than 80 breeds of dogs. Matsumi Suzuki, the scientist behind the Animal Emotion Analysis System, has analyzed some of the Osama bin Laden tapes. His work shows that the digital recordings of sound frequencies from dog barks fall into six distinct categories.

Dr. Katherine Houpt, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, acknowledges advancements in dog communication. Still, she says she's skeptical of the need for a deciphering device. "A smart

person can make some fairly good guesses as to what the animal's motivation is.

"For dogs that are pretty vocal, the owner already knows. This is the bark that means, 'I'm hungry.' This is the bark that says, 'I want out.' This is a bark that means, 'I'm going to tear you limb from limb.'"

The Animal Planet's pet psychic, Sonya Fitzpatrick, says she hears what dogs say telepathically, without so much as a bark. But she has her doubts about a battery-operated bark translator. "I think it's a great gimmick," she concedes, "and people will buy it because they're like that."

Clay animal communicator Colleen Nicholson is not so quick to debunk the device. Through her company, Animal Wellness Consultants, she spends her days deciphering messages from dogs and other animals. She says they communicate through a universal language, using thoughts, pictures, feelings, sensations and sometimes words.

"Everybody can do what I do," she says. "Most people just forget how."

"We've been taught over the years not to believe that animals can talk."

Cornell's Houpt says scientists are continually impressed with what they learn about dogs. For instance, recent studies have revealed a canine ability to count, she says.

Most dog barks are responses to outer stimuli, Houpt says. When dogs try to get their own point across, they usually do so using visual signals, with their eyes.

Cats are more prone to vocal communication. Meow at your cat, and you can probably get her to meow back. "Those horrible sounds that cats make in the middle of the night, and their pre-hairball meow. Now that, I'd like to know about," says Houpt.

## Improving communication

■ **Spend time with him.** Animal Planet pet psychic Sonya Fitzpatrick, author of "What the Animals Tell Me," says one of the most important things you can do to connect with your dog is to spend individual time with him. "Get down to their level," she advises. "Immediately you love, and they feel that love."

■ **Focus on her.** Animal communicator Colleen Nicholson, of Clay, suggests you look directly at your dog when you ask, "How are you doing?" and really listen for her response. Put other thoughts out of your head for the moment.

■ **Use positive mental images.** Nicholson says be conscious of forming an appropriate picture to go with the thought you try to convey. If you're struggling to housebreak a dog, erase the image of a mess on your floor. Instead, play images in your mind of your dog running out the door to use the bathroom in your yard.

■ **Write.** Especially if you have a busy mind, keep a journal. Ask your dog a question, and then jot down anything and everything that pops into your mind, Nicholson says. After a few days, look for a pattern, maybe words you don't usually use.

## Bow Lingual at work

Several Central New York pooches participated in our trial run of the Bow Lingual. Here are their experiences:

■ A 6-month-old standard poodle, whose owner asked him to sit, barked: "Enough is enough!"

■ A 5-year-old black Labrador barked at a passing motorcyclist: "I'm strong. Are you?" and "You're not so tough!"

■ A woman sneezed near her 4-year-old black Labrador, and the device deciphered: "Take me dancing."

■ An 8-year-old beagle barked at children riding bicycles past his house: "Go ahead. Make my day!"

■ An 11-year-old silky terrier waiting by the door to be let out barked: "Don't ignore me."

■ An 11-year-old Lhasa apso taking a walk barked at a passing dog: "I don't like you."

■ An 8-year-old Jack Russell terrier, who recently had another dog added to her household: "I'm jealous."

■ A housebroken 1½-year-old Akita chow mix who had an accident indoors: "I've never been so embarrassed."

■ The doorbell rang in the home of an 8½-year-old black Labrador retriever mix. He barked: "Did you hear that?"

■ In the dark of night, an owner said "Good morning" to her 3-year-old retriever-shepherd mix. The dog barked: "You don't make sense."

She might be able to. Takara is unveiling a cat version of Bow Lingual called Meow Lingual in Japan later this month.

Do you have a story to tell of an extraordinary bond between animal and human? We're collecting them

for "Animal Tales," which runs Thursdays in CNY. Tell us your tale by calling NewsLine at 472-2111 and entering category PETS (7387); sending your tale via e-mail to features@syracuse.com or writing to "Animal Tales" in care of CNY, The Post-Standard, P.O. Box 4915, Syracuse, NY 13221.