Do Dogs Understand English?

Materials

- Dog trained to understand at least three commands

- Pencil

- Notepad

Method

- First, make sure that the dog you are working with in this experiment can respond to at least three commands. The dog should be very familiar with these commands.

- Create a hypothesis: If you ask your dog to do something in a voice that's similar to the voice you use when you say "sit" and "stay," will the dog still obey?

- Now think of the words your dog is trained to know. If your dog can stay, you might say "pay" or "may" instead of "stay". These words sound alike. Can your dog tell that you're using the wrong word?

- Call the dog over, and tell it to sit, using the word that you've chosen as an alternative. Use the same tone of voice that you would if you were telling the dog to sit. Don't use any hand commands.

- Try each word five times, moving through them in a different order each time. How does your dog react to each one?

- Try a word that sounds completely different than "sit" or "stay," but say it in the same tone of voice. How does your dog react this time?

Why?

- Your dog speaks fluent dog. All of that barking, growling, tail wagging, crouching and running is part of a dog's vocabulary. You might understand much of your dog's language, but does your dog understand your words?

- When you train your dog, you help it understand the connection between a sound and an action. Over time, your dog begins to understand that when he sits down on the ground when you say "sit," you will praise him or give him a treat. This positive reinforcement helps dogs learn human language. A dog can usually understand about 100 words. Depending on your dog and the amount of training and experience it has had, it might understand more words.

- This ability to learn human language isn't just something that dogs can do. A lot of animals can learn a second language! While cats might seem disinterested when we speak to them in a human language, many of them respond to their names and to other words that humans use. Some birds can speak in human words, and some chimpanzees can even use sign language!

- Dogs don't just understand us through the words we use. Animals use a lot of actions in their language, and they look to humans for movements, expressions, and tones that will help them understand what to do as well. This is why you tried to avoid hand signals when speaking with your dog in the experiment above, because dogs also understand human movements.

- It's easiest to train a dog or another animal to attach a single word to an action or an object. For example, you might train a dog to pick up a ball. It's harder to get dogs to understand concepts that aren't associated with an action or a thing. If you tell your dog you love her, she might not understand the word "love," but she probably understands what the pets and snuggles you give her mean.