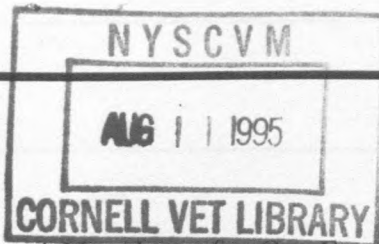
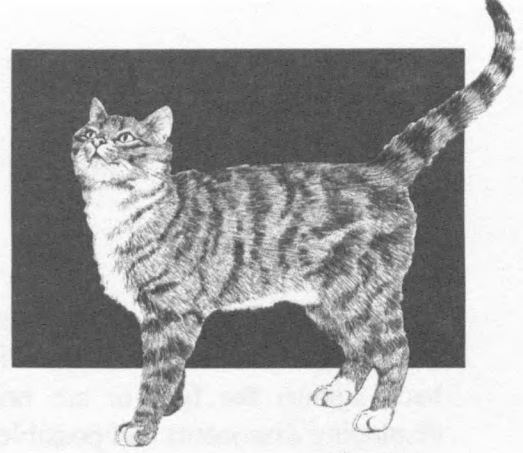


Perspectives On Cats

Summer 1995



*A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers
From The Cornell Feline Health Center*



NEWSLETTER

Body Language

June E. Tuttle

I have four cats, giving me ample opportunity to observe their body language with each other, with our dog, and with people. I continue to be amazed by the controlled muscle movements from head to tail that provide the subtle expressions of a cat's mood. These body gestures can translate into friendly greeting, fear, defensiveness, anxiety, and aggression. According to animal behaviorists, animals that use forms of visual communication must have a certain degree of sociality. Therefore, cats must be social enough to visually communicate with each other, despite their reputation as solitary creatures.

Body language is comprised of words and sentences, except that the words are in the form of specific body movements, like a twitch of a tail or an arched back. Likewise, the sentences in body language are a combination of these movements to

express a mood. First, we will look at the words in body language and then we will look at the sentences the cat forms to express itself.

From Head to Tail

Eyes:

The pupils of animal's eyes respond to the amount of ambient light: they contract in bright conditions and dilate in low light conditions. However, the cat is unique in that its mood can also affect the size of the pupil, thus the pupil size may not directly correlate to the light conditions. In such cases, contracted pupils mean that the cat is taking an aggressive stance as the initiator, or it could mean aggressive-playfulness. Dilated pupils indicate that the cat is fearful, but could become aggressive if the intruder gets too close.

Ears:

Cats are like horses in that their ears are quite expressive of their moods. When a cat's ears are pulled back it means that they are fearful and submissive. However, don't misinterpret submissive as nonaggressive. A submissive cat will fight in self defense if it is challenged sufficiently.

If the ears are slightly rotated with the back of the ear more forward than back, beware. This cat is finely tuning it's body into the attack mode.

Twitching ears can mean the cat is submissive or aggressive, or merely showing pleasure or irritation at the current circumstances.

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Whiskers:

When a cat is relaxed and content, the whiskers are outwardly extended. If the whiskers are pulled back against the face or are bristling, then it is displaying discontent and possible aggression.

Mouth:

Curled or pulled back lips indicate aggression. Otherwise, the lips remain in their normal position. A unique mouth and facial position of the cat is the gape or Flehman. The result is an open-mouth gape followed by licking the nose. The response is elicited by the scent of foreign cat urine. The process helps the cat identify the intruder by using the vomeronasal region. This sensory region is located between the mouth and the nasal cavity above the hard palate.

Paws:

Any cat person knows that cat paws can be very strong communication devices. The paws can provide the softest touch, as in the kneading of a con-

tented cat, or they can become dangerous daggers as the claws are extended in an attack.

Tail:

Although long-tailed cats are better able to visually express their moods by their tail carriage, you can still interpret a short-tailed cat's communications, although the message will be abbreviated.

An erect tail with a slight bend to the tip is a form of friendly greeting. However, if the tail is straight or slightly arched with bristled hair, the cat is showing that it may attack if provoked. An imminent attack is indicated if the cat is thumping or swishing its tail. The increased frequency of tail movement indicates a greater degree of aggressiveness. If only the tail tip is in motion, the cat is in a predatory-aggressive frame of mind or irritated.

A common tail position for kittens is the inverted u-shape with the tail raised. This position is typical when the kitten is in a playful mood.

A relaxed and content cat will carry its tail at about a 40 degree angle with the tip slightly curved upward.

Spine:

The arched spine shows that the cat is fearful, usually in the presence of an intruder. It does not indicate aggression, it is more of a defensive position.

Interpreting Body Language

Now that we looked at individual components that comprise a cat's body language, it's time to combine the body "words" into the various messages the cat is trying to convey. Body language can be divided into two categories— distance-reducing (friendliness or playfulness) or distance-increasing (aggressive or defensive). Within each of these categories, there are various subtleties.

I'm glad you're home!

The typical feline stance is with the head lowered and the hindquarters slightly raised. The tail will be

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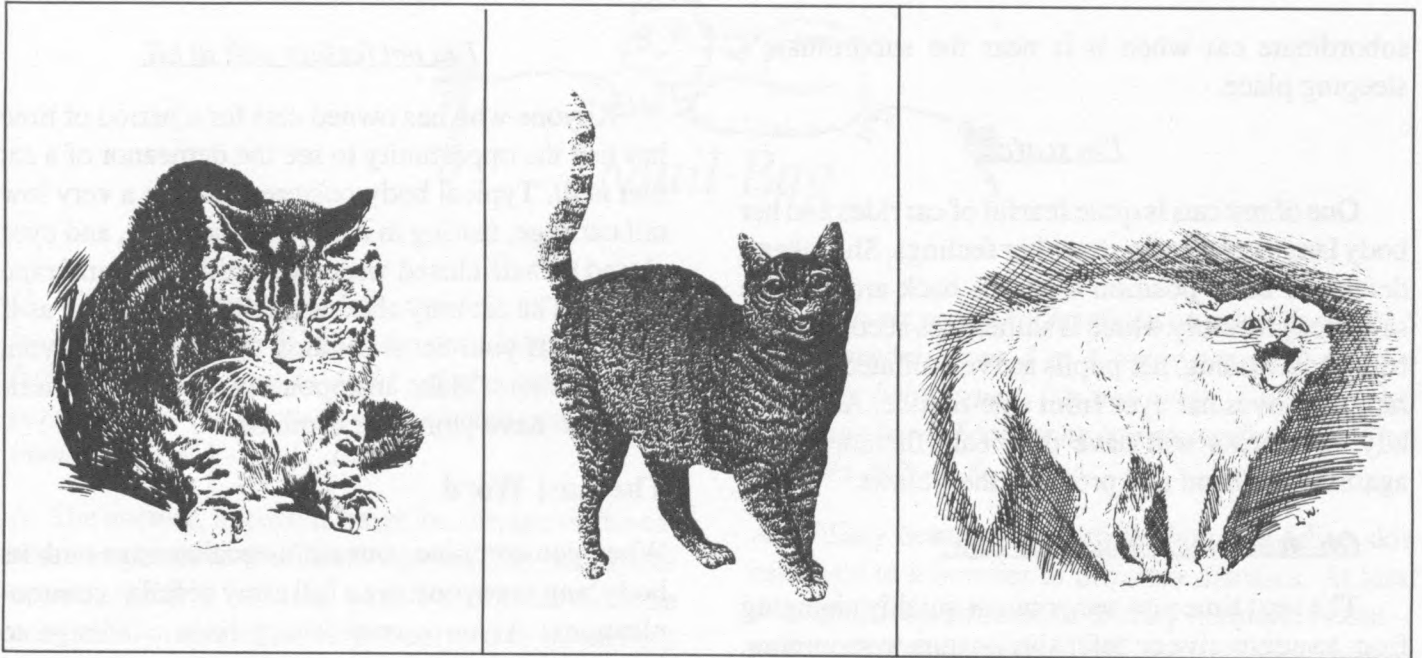
The ultimate purpose of the Cornell Feline Health Center is to improve the health of cats everywhere, by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases, and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. All contributions are tax-deductible.

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What messages are these cats trying to convey?

straight with just the tip bent slightly forward or to the side. Sometimes the cat will quiver it or wave the tip slowly from side-to-side. When the cat approaches it is noticeably stiff-legged and seems to be carrying its hind end weight more on its toes. Once physical contact with the owner is made, the cat usually rubs its face against the owner, beginning with its cheeks, whiskers and finally the top of its head. This endearing expression of attachment actually is the cat's way of leaving its scent on the owner for all other cats to know that this person belongs to it. The owner usually responds by petting the cat. At this point the cat may close its eyes halfway and perhaps roll over, showing that it feels relaxed and trusts the person.

Hello. Are you my friend?

If the cats are familiar and friendly with each other they will sniff each other around the head and nose. This can be followed by mutual grooming or they just amble away from each other. However, if the cats are unfamiliar with each other, a different display occurs. The more aggressive of the cats will

have direct eye contact with the other cat. The eye pupils are constricted, the whiskers are directed forward, ears are erect, the head is held down, walks erect on tiptoe, claws are protruded, and the tail is lowered and the tip may be swishing from side-to-side and bristling may occur.

A cat showing only a moderate degree of aggressiveness will have a vertical tail position with hair bristling. The cat taking the more defensive position will arch its back, the tail will be raised but arched with bristled hair, the ears will be flat back, the mouth corners are pulled back to expose the teeth, and the whiskers are pulled against the cheeks. This position equates to the pose depicted for the Halloween cat.

A low ranking cat (the pariah) will go into a crouched position with ears flattened against its head when it is approached by a higher ranking cat. This is the closest posture conveying submissiveness in the cat. However, the usual feline social rank changes with location and circumstances. For example, it has been observed that a high-ranking cat will defer to a

subordinate cat when it is near the subordinate's sleeping place.

I'm scared.

One of my cats is quite fearful of car rides and her body language clearly states her feelings. She takes a defensive body position with her back arched, she salivates profusely which is sometimes accompanied by a vocal hissing, her pupils are very dilated and she rapidly moves her eyes from side-to-side. Additionally, some cats will have their ears flattened back against their head and protrude their claws.

Oh, dear, what should I do now?

The next time you see your cat quickly changing from an aggressive or defensive posture to grooming, it is displaying the feline form of displacement behavior. This rapid change to grooming usually occurs when the cat is facing a perplexing or frightening situation. Some animal behaviorists compare it to people biting their fingernails to displace their nervousness.

I'm not feeling well at all.

Anyone who has owned cats for a period of time has had the opportunity to see the demeanor of a cat that is ill. Typical body postures include a very low tail carriage, resting in a hunched position, and eyes closed or half-closed with the nictitating membrane visible. The cat may also swish the tip of its tail as if agitated. If your cat is sending this message to you, don't hesitate. Make an appointment with the veterinarian to have your cat examined.

The Last Word

When you combine your cat's vocalizations with its body language you have a full array of feline communications. As an owner it can be a challenge to interpret your cat's message, but if you listen and observe carefully you will begin to understand what you cat is trying to convey to you. ■

Book Bits—Food Hypersensitivity

Food hypersensitivity is an uncommon, nonseasonal, itchy skin disorder of cats. Unfortunately, information on the specific dietary substances involved in feline food hypersensitivity is meager at best. Many of the skin lesions seen in this disease mimic those of atopy. Surprisingly, signs related to the gastrointestinal tract (vomiting, diarrhea) are seen in fewer than 10 percent of cases.

Diagnosis of food hypersensitivity may be made by feeding a hypoallergenic diet for three weeks and observing if the skin problem improves, then refeeding the normal diet and observing if the skin problem worsens again. Therapy consists of avoidance of

offending food or administration of glucocorticoids. Long-term hypoallergenic diets may be developed by adding single dietary items to the basic hypoallergenic diet and evaluating each item for seven days.—*From The Cornell Book of Cats by Mordecai Siegal and Cornell University. Copyright 1989 by Mordecai Siegal and Cornell University. Reprinted by permission of Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.*





Q. What percentage of cats exposed to the feline leukemia virus (FeLV) become only transiently infected and are able to fight off the virus? What percentage of these transiently-infected cats are then immune to FeLV—T. L., Iowa

A. The answer, in part, is based on the age of the cat when exposed to the virus. Almost 100 percent of neonate kittens infected with FeLV will become persistently infected, whereas only 70 to 80 percent of 6- to 8-week-old kittens will suffer the same fate. Mature cats are more resistant persistent infections.

One study investigated the infection status of cats in multiple-cat households that housed FeLV-infected cats. Thirty percent of cats in those households apparently were not exposed to enough viruses to trigger a measurable immune response. Twenty-eight percent were persistently infected, and the remaining 42 percent were infected at some time but were able to mount an effective immune response and eliminate the infection. In other words, approximately 60 percent of the infected cats were able to eliminate the infection (i.e., transient infections).

Unlike what was previously thought, cats that have once fought off the infection are not necessarily immune for life. In a recent study, only 50 percent of cats that had transient infections were able to resist infection three years later. This particular study involved inadequate numbers of cats to draw any firm conclusions on percentages, but clearly, the same cats that have recovered from infection may not be immune to future infections.

Q. Three of my seven cats have been diagnosed with feline miliary dermatitis. I'm particularly concerned about my 10-year-old cat that has had this condition

for about six years. He has been on a low dose of 2.5 mg of prednisolone 3 to 4 times per week for two years. It helps some, but not much. I've read that prolonged use of cortisone can cause diabetes. What should I do?—L.S., Texas

A. Miliary dermatitis describes how the feline skin can react to a number of different diseases. At least twenty different causes of miliary dermatitis exist—mostly allergic, parasitic, or infectious conditions—so the best way to control the problem is to try to find the cause and treat appropriately. Basic diagnostic tests to perform on any cat with miliary dermatitis include a complete physical examination, multiple skin scrapings, ringworm culture, fecal examination, and flea combing to look for evidence of fleas. The most common cause of miliary dermatitis is flea bite hypersensitivity. Many cats with flea allergy do not have a heavy flea load, but it only takes a few bites to cause some cats to react. Strict flea control will make a big difference to these cats, but admittedly, reducing the flea population is a difficult task.

Cats that require some kind of cortisone to control their skin disease often do quite well at low doses given every other day. The dose your cat is receiving—2.5 mg every other day—is a low dose. In fact, many cats are able to tolerate a much higher dose than this with no problems. Although diabetes and immune system suppression are concerns, at low doses they are uncommon side effects, even with long-term usage. Some reports indicate that over 50 percent of cats with an itchy skin disease respond favorably to a combination of fatty acid supplementation with an antihistamine, thus allowing a reduced dose of corti-

(continued on page 8)

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Mail Bag (continued from page 5)

sone to control the problem. There is a delay in how quickly the fatty acid supplement takes effect; it may take several weeks or longer in some cats before any positive benefit is seen.

Q. Would adding a little vegetable oil or cod liver oil help a cat that is prone to constipation or bladder disease? If so, how much should be added to the food?—L.F., New York

A. Adding vegetable oil or cod liver oil to the food normally won't have much effect on stool consistency. These are fats that are digested and then absorbed by the gastrointestinal tract, and won't act as fecal lubricants unless they are given in quantity that overload the gastrointestinal tract. Fat supplementation to a balanced diet is not necessary and can actually be harmful. It disturbs the balance of nutrients, can cause obesity, and may cause toxicity as in the case of cod liver oil. There is no evidence that either of these oils are beneficial to cats with bladder disease. ■

Have a question about cat health? Send it to Mail Bag, Cornell Feline Health Center, College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, NY 14853-6401 or FAX it to (607) 253-3419.

Sale of Stamp Collection Will Benefit Feline Health Center

The Cornell Feline Health Center recently received a stamp collection from an anonymous donor in memory of their cats. The collection is being sold in its entirety, and is valued at \$17,000. The condition of the stamps are rated fine to extra-fine quality. The oldest stamp dates to 1908. The collection includes such valuable stamps as the Presidential set (32 stamps), dated 1938; Famous Americans series, dated 1940; and the Library series, dated 1954-61. Interested philatelists should contact Dr. Jim Richards, Assistant Director, Cornell Feline Health Center, College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, NY 14853 for a complete listing of the stamps in the collection.



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