

SCOTTIE SPEAK

by Lee Netzler

I speak a lot to my dog, and from that, over time he and I develop a "vocabulary." Piper, my Scottish Terrier, probably could discern somewhere from 100 to 150 words and phrases. By that I mean he could understand them if any one spoke them. Rusty right now probably has a vocabulary of about 30 or 40 words and phrases. The more you communicate with them, the more they learn.

What is interesting is that I find the communication is really in two distinct parts. First, they learn the actual sound of the word, such as their name--anyone can call their name and they will recognize it. That is the same for basic vocabulary such as "No," "Come," etc. When I say they have a vocabulary, I mean that when that word is spoken, often without special emphasis but when they are aware it is directed at them, they comprehend it. So, for example, I could say "Come Here" to a room full of dogs, but if I were directing it specifically to my dog, the others probably wouldn't recognize it as meaningful to them. On the other hand, if you said "No" to my dog, and he realized you were speaking specifically to him, he would recognize that even if he were one dog in a room full.

The second part, which is tremendously more advanced, is the way in which something is spoken. We have many ways to say things--like the simple word "No." The dog picks up on how that is spoken--how loud, how fast, whether it is a command or more of a "don't you think about doing that," and so forth. When you reach a communication level where the manner in which you say things is perceived by the dog, then the actual word becomes less important, perhaps to the point of becoming immaterial. I can be across the yard and raise my voice to Rusty and say something cautionary like, "I wouldn't do that if I were you," and he will recognize that I am speaking to him, and that what I am saying is a warning about his behavior. Either approval or disapproval can be best expressed in the manner of speaking, which includes body language, and the actual words used are less important.

Then there are the "dog words." That is, the ones they use to talk to us. Some familiar ones:

Aroooooo!

RowerRowerRower

Huff Huff

Pffft, Pffft

These, of course, usually are accompanied by what could probably be called "display behavior." When a dog says "Aroooooo" to you, his back is stretched, his neck is extended, both front legs are uniformly straightened out in front, he bows down slightly at the front end, etc., etc. I'm sure you recognize those "dog words" listed above--which are indicators of the dog's state of mind. And notice that never have I mentioned what we conventionally call "barking." Barking, in the sense of two-way communication, isn't very useful except that the dog uses it to get somebody's attention--ours or another dog's.

Dogs love to learn vocabulary. When you have them chase a ball, for example, they enjoy hearing you shout things at them like "Over there, Over there" or "Out--Further Out." They may

not quite comprehend what you are trying to tell them, but they relish it as part of the game and are enthusiastic to respond, even if they don't have a clue what it means.

Perhaps one story you might enjoy retelling is a training lesson that Piper and I had. We hiked a lot, and he was often so spirited that he would get a little too far ahead of me (we hiked off-lead most of the time). It was OK for him to do that as long as I had a clear view of him ahead of me--up to about 30 yards away or so--which was about the limit that I felt comfortable with and would require him to come closer if he started to go beyond that. He soon learned that "Slow Down" or "That's far enough" meant he was at the limit of what I would tolerate as to how far ahead he could hike.

However, on one hike we ran into a situation that we hadn't encountered before. That particular trail followed the edges of vertical rock walls on one side with steep drop-offs on the other side for several long stretches. The trail had many turns to it, and often one could not see beyond 10 or 20 feet ahead because the view was blocked by another turn in the trail which curved around another rock outcropping. Well, Piper was eager to hike and to my dismay I found that he was often keeping 20 or 30 yards ahead of me. However, because of my limited view of the trail, this placed him out of my sight much of the time, which I was very uncomfortable with. I kept calling him back, and he would return and then a minute or two later would be out of sight ahead of me again. It became frustrating for us, because he was doing what he always did, but in this situation, it put him out of my sight, and I was insisting he do something unfamiliar to him.

Well, the hike was successful and he didn't get into any trouble, but I was determined to fix the problem that the limited views of the trail had presented. After some thought, I decided that I would teach Piper to walk in single file behind me, so that when we encountered similar trail situations in the future I could command him to walk behind until it was prudent to let him go ahead again.

In order not to confuse this training with other voice commands, I settled on the word "Back" to use to let him know what behavior I was identifying. And so we started training. I put him behind me (on our sidewalk--so that the pavement itself defined some limits) with his training collar and lead attached. From that position I simply said "Back" and started walking forward. Of course, he started to walk up next to me, at which point I repeated "Back" and with a short lead on him I guided him directly behind me again as I continued to walk forward. We practiced this many times in the next few weeks. He soon learned that he was supposed to walk directly behind me and it wasn't long before I didn't need to physically guide him behind me, but that he would respond to the command "Back" and would realign himself in single file to the rear. As he progressed, we added stops and starts and turns left and right. I'm sure we made a humorous sight to the neighbors as we traipsed around our sidewalk and on the street in single file--me in front and a dog following behind! We continued training until he worked well both on and off-lead with few mistakes.

Well, when we became pretty good at it, I took him to the supermarket parking lot. (By the way, that is a marvelous "final" training environment! It is an unfamiliar place, has lots of noises, distractions, movement, etc.--all the things that interrupt concentration and must be overcome.)

We picked out a nice open area (again--to work in a spot where there were no guiding lines or boundaries so that he had to follow me without any cues as to where I was going to go). We set up and started our routine training--me in front and dog in back.

I wouldn't exactly say we drew a crowd, but seeing the two of us marching out, starting, stopping, turning left and right, and me barking "Back" every so often did cause a number of people to stop and stare at us, then load their groceries and drive away shaking their heads!

I'll conclude the story by saying that the training was a success, and I used the "Back" command on the trails many times in the following years. And, like any well executed command, we trained from time to time even if the command wasn't necessary, just to keep in practice. So, every once in a while other hikers were treated to the sight of this fellow and his Scottie marching along for no apparent reason in single file with the fellow ahead and the dog behind.

Now, one last thought on this subject. I think that dogs can learn practically any word and associate it correctly to any behavior, provided they are given the opportunity to learn them. I have taught such things as "Find the Bird," to command my Scottie to track pheasants, and "Out" to send him further ahead of me when we are out walking or hiking, and "This way" to let him know he took a wrong turn ahead of me and needs to reselect the right path. After a terrifying encounter with a rattlesnake, I now insist my dog learn "Wait," where he must freeze in place and is not allowed to move until I walk to him, touch him, and then tell him "OK," which is the universal term I use as a "release" from any restriction. "WAIT," by the way, ranks just behind "NO" and "COME" as the 3rd most valuable command.

So, to sum up my experience: If you tell them, they will listen.