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Teaching the Dog English...?

In English-speaking countries, it has long been tradition to use standard commands for dogs that are common daily English words. The advantage, of course, is that the owner then does not have to bother learning anything new here, but can safely rely on his/her already well-consolidated understanding of his/her mother-tongue, right?

Or is there more to this?

First some facts

Dogs can learn to differentiate words that are very close to each other, like Hop, Cop, and Top, as long as those words mean different kinds of action from the dog's side. It is far from simple, though – because it really takes a lot of training overcoming confusion before the dog learns to pay attention to those subtle differences. In other words, you are tremendously increasing your own workload in your training program by making such choices for commands...

Dogs do not have the linguistic capabilities as humans and monkeys do to associate words with objects and things. Dogs can, in principle, only learn to understand verbs, because verbs mean action. Dogs learn primarily from their own action, extremely rarely from watching others. Sometimes, people kid themselves into believing differently. When a dog learns the difference between two commands like, "My shoes" and "The paper" it is tempting to think that the dog understands the difference between the names "shoes" and "paper". But that's not the case. The dog understands the difference between "fetching the shoes" and "fetching the paper" – two different kinds of hunting action.

Dogs are good at reading human minds, and they are good at paying attention to tone of voice, the pitch of the voice, the rhythm of words, the intonation, etc. So, in principle and in practice, dogs can indeed learn the difference between "stay down!", "get down from there!", "lie down!" But it is not at all a simple training task to get the dog to understand those three different meanings of "down", compared to teaching the dog the same three performances on three commands that were more non-similar.

On top of this, the dog also needs to learn to ignore all other daily uses of the word "down" that are not meant as commands to the dog, but as part of some communication with other people... In other words, dogs can indeed learn when to ignore the word "down" when it is part of such human-to-human communication and when the word signals a command for action to the dog. There is a lot of serious

training involved in this, though – it is absolutely not taught in “just a few weeks”, not even by the best of dog trainers.

Dogs can learn about 50 different commands. Most training programs make do with 20-30. Humans typically learn about 2,000 before they are 3 years old.

Adding some human brain power...

I am just curious about this: wouldn't it be smart, particularly for a novice dog trainer that does not have a lot of experience training dogs, to aim at making the training task as easy as possible *for the dog*? After all, humans have far superior intelligence to dogs, so trying to complicate a training task *for the dog* in order to save self for some inconvenience that is easily overcome does not make any sense...

Let me be specific: Given the dog's learning capabilities and a human's learning capabilities, what do you think goes faster:

- A. Teaching the dog the subtle difference between three almost identical command words, plus the difference between those three and all the other possible daily uses of that same word in contexts that are not related to the dog and thus should be ignored?
- B. For the person to learn three new words that are not part of daily language used in person-to-person communications?

I am not trying to insult your intelligence. In standard obedience training in English-speaking countries, it is the rule to prefer A to B!

The result, of course, is that the training takes much longer time – and maybe it never is successful! For no other reason than this ridiculous attempt to make things more complicated for the dog in order to save self from a very minor extra challenge to the human intelligence. Sorry, but it is a ludicrous concept.

Selecting command words that make sense

The solution is obvious to any intelligent person: choose command words that are easy for the dog to recognize and to differentiate from human-to-human communications!

Kids know how to do this: they all have a time in their lives where they speak “code language” to each other.

Military operations often depend on the same principle. All US soldiers knew what “Desert Storm” meant – before the action in Kuwait.

There is no difference for the human-to-dog communication. It needs to be precise and well-defined, with no risks of confusion. Otherwise, it will be an extra burden on the dog, and it will take significantly longer time to train a reliable response to the command from the dog's side. Besides, such confusion in the learning process will seriously affect the whole relationship between dog and owner!

In other words: choosing dog commands to be commonly used words from the language you use when communicating with other people is **sabotaging your own training efforts!** Your best bet is to invent some artificial made-up code words that you would never use for anything else. Sure, if you have no knowledge of Chinese, make them "Chinese". The dog doesn't care...

The excuses...

Yes, I know all the common excuses from people who plain simply refuse to pick their commands this way. The most common one is, "but how am I to remember all those different command words?"

First a comment, then the answer. The comment is this: "If *you*, with your superior intelligence and ability to learn language, are unable to remember those command words, how on Earth can you then expect *your dog* to do that?"

The answer is this: For the dog to learn a new command, you need to instigate some systematic training. You will have to do some 10-50 repetition of the training sequence for that commands every day – and you will have to do that for a few weeks! If you do not know that command verbatim by then, you should not even think about training a dog...

I have often seen this illustrated in my training classes: Some students come to the second class, one week after the first, and were supposed to be doing homework, training the exercises we went through last week, a minimum of 10 times each every day. I do not even need to see their training in order to tell if they did their homework or not. And I do not need to ask them. *Those who have to consult their notes before they can show me what they have taught the dog did not do their homework* – they don't remember their own commands!

If you trained 10 times a day for a week, you will know that word so well that you have no need for consulting any notes in order to remember it.

I believe you can make your own appropriate conclusion from this.

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