

# **DOG WORDS ~ OR, HOW TO THINK WITHOUT LANGUAGE**

**Mariam Motamedi Fraser**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is situated in the context of debates about animals and language, and animal-human relations. It is also informed by the argument that words are neither the exclusive property of language (Motamedi Fraser 2015), nor the exclusive property of humans. The paper illustrates this point by exploring how some companion dogs make 'dog words' with their bodies and, further, how they are able/can be enabled to transform the meanings of these words by inventing and/or participating in word encounters. In the spirit of Lev Vygotsky, the paper argues that such encounters are a way of thinking with words in 'complexes.' Through a series of concrete examples, the paper shows how intimacy is integral to this thinking, in its every dimension. The ethically optimistic dimension of this analysis, however, simultaneously draws attention to how fragile are the relations between dogs, humans, and words, and how proximate intimacy is to 'other kinds of relations.' With this in mind, the paper addresses three 'other kinds of relations' that potentially limit animal-human 'talking' and thinking: scientific behaviourism, speciesism, and 'languagism.'

## **KEY WORDS**

companion dogs, Vicki Hearne, word encounters, ethics, behaviourism, speciesism, languagism.

**DOG WORDS**  
**OR, HOW TO THINK WITHOUT LANGUAGE**  
**Mariam Motamedi Fraser**

Sit!  
Fetch!  
Sit-Fridge!

How does one establish intimacy with a domesticated dog (*canis familiaris*)? The vast contemporary literature on companion dogs and their 'guardians'/handlers in north European and North American societies tends to focus on how emotional and affective relations are generated through social and material practices (such as the intimacy of living together in the same household, often for many years), bidirectional physical care and support for one another, and, especially in the light of recent research on the co-evolution of dogs and humans, shared neurophysiological mechanisms, such as the release of oxytocin (also known as the 'cuddle chemical' and the 'hug hormone') by way of gazing and stroking, which reduces stress and may enhance human-canine 'affiliative behaviours' (Uvnäs-Moberg et al. 2015). The striking absence of words in most of these accounts (excluding the much broadcast health benefits, to humans, of monologuing at your dog), finds a curious resonance with the 'turn to animals' in the social sciences and humanities, which Kari Weil proposes could also be described as a 'counter-linguistic turn' (Weil 2012: 11).

Curious, because scholars who work on/with animals are often much preoccupied by language. Necessarily so, for language has long been the vehicle, especially in western philosophy, through which animals are denied 'the right and power to "respond,"' and, hence, 'many other things that would be the property of man' (Derrida 2002: 400). By way of a counter to such claims of human exceptionalism, researchers have developed theories of communication that seek to dislodge the apparently privileged relation between humans and language. With regards to humans, for example, theorists continue to interrogate those aspects of language that once secured the autonomous, self-reflexive, self-governing subject (the humanist subject) on which human exceptionalism mostly rests, and to develop challenging accounts of communication that bridge and/or complicate the boundaries between animals and humans (e.g. Wolfe 2003). With regards to animals, researchers have shown how the evolution of language is linked to activities such as 'territory mapping, spatial navigation, and foraging' (Haraway in Wolfe 2010: 41), or how all life is semiotic – representational, but not necessarily linguistic (Kohn 2013).

Today, even Noam Chomsky will admit that language in its narrowest sense – that is, 'the recursive ability to "generate an infinite range of expressions from a finite set of elements"' (Wolfe 2010: 41, references omitted) – cannot be considered a solely human capacity.

In this paper, I too seek to engage with the question of animals, humans, and language. I do so, however, from a different and more concrete angle. I foreground this issue of concreteness because, while I am sympathetic to the debates described above and share their agenda, I am struck by the level of their abstraction - which can on occasion lead, I think, to a neglect of the rich and varied ways that words are deployed in practice by both humans and some animals. Here, therefore, I will be asking not after the conceptual dimension of language, but the pragmatic use of words; not after shared linguistic operations, but on-goingly negotiated meanings; not after obedience (or compliance, as trainers more often describe it today), but specific modes of existence (Despret 2008). I will be exploring these issues in relation to three dogs – Bandit, Salty, and Monk – and the particular dog words they use, in particular situations. In each case, it will be not their referential understanding *of* words that will be of interest, but their intimate relations *with* them. In short, I will be concerned less with whether a dog 'understands' a word (in the way, say, that his owner does), and more with what a dog in an intimate relation with a word can *do*.

Intimate relations with words is another way of describing what I have, elsewhere, called non-linguistic word relations. I argued in *Word* (Motamedi Fraser 2015) that although words are ubiquitous, *relations* with words are mostly rather narrowly confined (unsurprisingly) to language. And yet, while it is true that words are recognized as such *through* language, their force is not always defined *by* it. Close attention to 'words themselves' reveals that histories and theories of words and language are often divergent, and that words can flourish in many complexly non-discursive assemblages. In *Word*, I developed an account of the bodily, sensory, affective and non-conscious relations – the intimate relations - that some humans have with words, as these are shaped by the sound, feel, touch, taste, place, position, speed, and direction of them. In this regard the analysis in *Word* could be understood to be oriented by a question posed by Lauren Berlant in the introduction to her special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on intimacy. 'What happens,' Berlant asks, 'to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon?' (Berlant 1998: 285). *Word* was an attempt to think through the 'energy of attachment' to words, outside the canon of language.

In this paper I extend the argument that words can generate meaning without first passing through language, and that words can forge and are forged through intimate relations, to dogs. I want to suggest that some companion dogs make 'dog words' with their bodies and, further, that they are able/can be enabled to bend and transform the meanings of these words through specific word encounters. I will explore this notion of 'word encounters,' and its implications for debates about animals and language, by posing a contrast between Vicki Hearne's understanding of dog gestures (which are ultimately linguistic) and my understanding of dog words (which are not). Although I will be drawing on other theorists also, who address either human or conspecific communication exclusively, my own argument is confined to companion dog-human communications.

Intimate entanglements are woven into this account in several ways. First, some companion dogs – arguably many such dogs - have intimate relationships with words, by which I mean they know how to make and use them. This is how it comes about, second, that words, dogs and humans can become entangled in word encounters that are themselves a locus for the establishment of intimate relations between dogs and humans. Finally, word encounters are also sites for experimentation, where a dog is able/enabled to create new meanings for words by bringing together potentially diverse, but nevertheless intimately familiar, resources in novel combinations. Concreteness, specificity, non-discursivity, intimacy: these are the tools that I will use to argue that words are neither the exclusive property of humans, nor are they the exclusive property of language.

In addition, where Cary Wolfe seeks to disarticulate 'the category of language and the category of species' (Wolfe 2003: 38), my parallel goal is to disarticulate language and thinking. Dogs, I suggest, do not use words unthinkingly; on the contrary, words can be a part of what enables a dog to think. I am not proposing that using words is the only or even the primary way that dogs think. It is, however, an arguably especially significant method by which dogs invent the opportunity to shape the worlds they share with humans, and through which, moreover, dogs and humans can think together. Herein lies the ethical significance of these relations: when intimacies with words are enabled to flourish, a dog can use words not only 'to control, or at least influence, his [or her] environment' (Despret 2008: 125) but also to resist the invitation to be confirmed as 'stupid' (Despret 2015). Nevertheless, the ethically optimistic dimension of this analysis – '[i]ntimacy was supposed to be about optimism, remember?' (Berlant 1998: 288) – simultaneously draws attention to how fragile intimate relations between dogs, humans and words are, and how proximate they are to (or 'haunted' or 'threatened' by, Berlant writes) 'other

kinds of relations' (Berlant 1998: 282).<sup>1</sup> 'Other kinds of relations,' here, point most obviously to scientific behaviourism and speciesism, which I will address in the penultimate section of this paper, and to what I will call 'languagism,' which is the subject of the conclusion.

## PLAY BITES AND PARADOX

I begin with a brief account of Gregory Bateson's analysis of monkey play, and Cary Wolfe's critique of it. This serves as an introduction to what is at stake in some of the debates about animals and communication, and also highlights some of the tensions that are generated by the demand that communication be simultaneously abstract and specific.

In his chapter on play and fantasy, Bateson argues that play can only occur successfully (i.e. will not degenerate into combat) if the animals in question are 'capable of some degree of meta-communication, i.e., of exchanging signals which would carry the message "this is play."' (Bateson 1987: 185). Following his observation, during a visit to a zoo, of monkeys at play, Bateson proposes that 'the playful nip denotes the bite, but does not denote that which would be denoted by the bite' (Bateson 1987: 189). The message 'this is play' is denotative insofar as it bears propositional content - it may be confirmed or denied, believed or not, considered true or false. In this regard it is distinguished from 'the rules and contingencies of relationship' (Bateson 1987: 371) and, as such, represents an 'important step in the evolution of communication' (Bateson 1987: 186). In relationship, Bateson writes:

Always the relata are perceptibly present to illustrate the discourse, and always the discourse is iconic in the sense of being composed of part actions ('intention movements') which mention the whole action which is being mentioned. Even when the cat asks you for milk, she cannot mention the object which she wants (unless it be perceptibly present). She says, 'Mama, mama,' and you are supposed from this invocation of dependency to guess that it is milk that she requires (Bateson 1987: 150-151).

---

<sup>1</sup> Berlant contrasts intimate relations to 'other kinds of relations.' Please see, however, articles in this volume which show how 'other kinds of relations' - violent, pathogenic and parasitic in Giraud et al's chapter for example, and scientific as well as local relations in Friese's chapter – may also be characterised by intimacy.

The cat's mewing instantiates dependency. The play bite by contrast, despite – in Bateson's view - its iconic resemblance to the non-play bite, does not instantiate a combative, non-play, relationship. The monkeys' perceived ability to generate and recognise denotative signs – intentional biting movements that do not map on to actual biting intentions - is significant for Bateson because it suggests that playing monkeys are able to understand and manipulate a metacommunicative frame (Wolfe 2003:41). Indeed Bateson argues that paradox is critical to the success of monkey play:

Paradox is doubly present in the signals which are exchanged within the context of play, fantasy, threat, etc. Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional. Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist (Bateson 1987: 188).

The 'discovery' that 'signals are signals' – or rather, that they are '*only* signals, which can be trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected, and so forth' - gives rise to 'all the complexities of empathy, identification, projection' (Bateson 1987: 184, my emphasis), as well as the complexities of deceit. Language – by which Bateson means the language of not only of humans but also, for example, of bees - follows from this: from 'the possibility of communicating at [a] multiplicity of levels of abstraction' (Bateson 1987: 184).

The argument is both exhilarating and troublesome. Exhilarating, because Bateson considers animal play not in terms of its function as a behaviour, which is how play is often (narrowly) conceived in animal research, but as an illustration of social and cognitive skill, which is the kind of interpretation more commonly reserved for humans. It is troubling however because – and this is Cary Wolfe's concern (with which I am sympathetic) - Bateson's analysis 'remains tied to an essentially representationalist frame' (Wolfe 2003: 43). To take just one example: Wolfe argues that Bateson is committed to an essentially 'objective' view of the world in which animals 'internalize the environment in the form of "representations" or even "information," and that they do so more or less accurately, depending on 'the sophistication of their filtering mechanisms' (Wolfe 2003: 43). Bateson, in short, 'continues to believe in "objective" or "correct" interpretations of heterophenomenological observations' (Wolfe 2003: 43). One might ask, in view of this critique, whether Bateson's *visual* 'filtering mechanisms,' which implicitly undergird his identification of both a resemblance and a difference between play

bites and a non-play bites, is necessarily all there is to it (or is more than there is to it), as far as a monkey is concerned.<sup>2</sup>

Although many of the debates that have followed from Bateson's analysis of play are preoccupied with the issue of representation, Wolfe notes that, '[f]or Bateson ... it may be that "the great new thing" in the evolution of human language is not "the discovery of abstraction or generalization, but the discovery of how to be specific about something other than relationship" – to be denotative about actions and objects, for example' (Wolfe 2003: 40, references omitted). Herein lies my own difficulty with Bateson's analysis: it implies that, unless 'being specific' is rendered flexible by some meta-communicative, usually linguistic, operation such as denotation (which allows for a message to be possibly about play or possibly about combat or possibly undecided), it *must* be narrowly fixed by way of relationship. But surely there are other ways of being specific? Over the following two sections I will argue that the way dogs use words, in non-linguistic word encounters, allows for both specificity *and* flexibility, concreteness *and* elasticity. This analysis is intended to ease somewhat the broader polarization of this debate, in which either animals have a meta-communicative relation to the world or they have no access to sophisticated communication at all. I will explicate this point first, with reference to the use that a dog called Bandit makes of the word 'Sit,' and then illustrate it with an analysis of the use that a dog called Salty makes of the word 'Fetch!' For the sake of clarity, I will also refer to my own dog Monk's use of Sit-Fridge! by way of further example.

## DOG GESTURES

For the rest of this article I will be drawing on Vicki Hearne's book best-known book *Adam's Task* (2007a) and her less-cited *Bandit* (2007b). Hearne, who received an award in 1992 for outstanding literary achievement from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, was an animal trainer, philosopher, poet and novelist. Her books are often referenced in studies of animals (see for example Haraway 2008; Patton 2003; Weil 2012) where she is seemingly much respected, while at the same time often accused of anthropomorphism and, especially when it comes to the subject of animal rights, of humanism (Wolfe 2003: 1-11). With regards to her dog work, Hearne was schooled by the controversial William Koehler, and both used

---

<sup>2</sup> Visual likeness would almost certainly be incomprehensible as the foundation for an explanation of dog bites, which are understood by dogs, according to Hearne, not by how they *look* but by what they *are* (Hearne 2007b: 229).

'training' techniques and tools (such as choke collars, tabs, bats, light lines and throw chains) that, today, are rightly condemned by animal trainers and behaviourists. Hearne's positions in all these areas have unfortunately, as Carol Adams notes, been 'left fixed by her death' (Adams 2006: 125) in 2001, at the age of 55. Hearne's training philosophy is nearly always read through the lens of language, and justifiably so. She was especially influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, and writes about training as though it were a grammar: 'Whenever I say, "Bandit, Sit!" you have to assume this formal posture. If you sit crookedly, or ahead of me, or only after a few moments of continuing to study the robin, that is ungrammatical' (Hearne 2007b: 77).

For Hearne, as for Donna Haraway, training is one way to try to establish relationships – albeit unequal relationships - with animals (Weil 2012: 59). Training gives animals 'tokens' (Hearne 2007b: 69) through which, if the handler is any good, they are enabled to have their 'say.' There are no guarantees, however, that the 'new world' (Hearne 2007b: 70) that a new vocabulary inaugurates will not itself turn out to be impoverishing. ("I didn't think it would turn out this way," Berlant writes, 'is the secret epitaph of intimacy' [Berlant 1998: 281]). The following extract will serve as an example, and also introduces Hearne's conception of 'sitting' as a 'family of gestures.' She writes:

Diminishment is a thing that can be learned, a thing dogs can learn in relationship to people, and learn it as we do through new vocabulary words when the new words displace instead of learning to dance with the old ones, or the old versions of themselves. When you teach a dog to sit through dominance, or through so-called positive rewards, such as biscuits, you diminish his world by reducing the complex of meanings that the family of gestures we call 'sitting' can have to the impoverished meanings, referents, and emotions at work in phony (human) games of 'pack leader,' or worse, far worse, you strip the gesture of any possible referent beyond 'dog biscuit' (Hearne 2007b: 71).

The rights or wrongs of Hearne's training methods are not under discussion here. What is of (ethical) note is Hearne's assertion that the diminishment of the gesture 'sit' is a diminishment of the dog: it turns the dog into a sitting-machine. As I understand it, the binding of the gesture sitting to a biscuit means that the biscuit becomes its sole association or connection. 'Sit' = biscuit. Not only, when taught in this minifying way, is the gesture yoked (from the dog's

perspective) to a single outcome (a food reward), it is also reduced to nothing more than a stimulus. And what else can one expect from a dog, in reply to a stimulus, than a reaction?<sup>3</sup>

'A computer,' Hearne writes, 'is not restless with intelligence, and so is quite happy for a given "word" – the command key plus "v" - to continue meaning one and only one operation until the end of time' (Hearne 2007b: 74). A dog, by contrast, who is not a machine, learns by using, or by 'projecting' as Hearne puts it, a gesture into new contexts.<sup>4</sup> Hence while formal training is a way of tying down the potential meanings of a gesture – '[i]n an obedience trial you don't want your dog to woolgather, experimenting with new meanings of "Sit"' (Hearne 2007b: 73) – in everyday life, a gesture can be a tool with which a dog can learn about the world, and even try to organise it according to his own satisfaction. This is what Bandit does. For instance: having been ignored by Vicki (who is writing a paper), Bandit gains her partner Robert's attention by using the posture that shows he needs to go out. When Robert gets the leash however, Bandit leads him to Vicki, where he sits until she finally concedes to take him. Once outside it transpires that Bandit does not want to pee at all but rather 'indicate[s] quite plainly, by heeling with enormous precision whenever I moved off toward another tree ... that he wanted to work' (Hearne 2007b: 70). Hearne writes: 'I have not asked the dog to mean "I'm ready for work," but the dog has projected the gesture so that it now does' (Hearne 2007b: 73). Such projections, with all due respect to Bandit, are hardly exceptional. Monk regularly 'projects' the gesture sitting into 'I'm ready for food' by adopting this posture in front of the fridge.

So far, so much in common. Why, then, does Hearne describe sitting as a gesture, and *not* as a word? After all, a dog's gesture, as Hearne describes it, shares many of the properties of a word in language. A word in language is an interesting thing: although it must have a certain degree of visual, sonic/aural and semiotic elasticity – an elasticity that will enable it to be recognisable despite its different material instantiations - such elasticity is not limitless, for obvious reasons.

---

<sup>3</sup> I write this with the prejudicial contrast, between reacting to a stimulus (such as hunger or pain) and responding to a question (such as 'did you really mean that?'), in mind (Steiner 2005: 20-21).

<sup>4</sup> Hearne's implicit distinction, between a computer/machine and a dog/subject, is problematic. Partly because, historically, this distinction is more nuanced than it is often given credit for (see for example Riskin 2016), and partly because contemporary developments in machine learning are raising new and challenging questions about the status of machines.

Language, one might say, is an obedience trial for words; words in language are words in formal training. A dog's gesture too, as it is conceived of by Hearne, is at once relatively plastic (I understand, for example, that although Monk's bottom is not quite on the ground he is nevertheless attempting to 'sit' in front of the ball I am about to throw) *and* relatively constrained (jumping up at the ball is not at all the same thing as attempting to sit in front of it). Thus it is that Hearne can describe sitting as a '*family* of gestures' whose variations might be comfortably compared, say, to different styles of handwriting, or different accents.

Or perhaps not so comfortably. For Hearne, a dog's gesture is both the 'signifier and thing signified in one motion' (Hearne 2007b: 76). This is why, contra Bateson's claim that 'playing animals [do] not quite mean what they are saying,' Hearne argues forcefully that a dog always means what he says. Dogs, she writes, are incapable of the 'tricks of abstraction that give our species the ability to produce self-reflexive objects such as the liar's paradox or sentences that read "This sentence is false"' (Hearne 2007b: 76). A sit executed during an obedience routine is not therefore a false sit, but rather the true exercise of loyalty, friendship and commitment (Hearne 2007b: 76). This is just one of Hearne's many examples of a dog's projection of the meaning of the gesture 'sit.' The sheer number of her examples, however, serves as a caution that the uses a dog might make of this gesture extend further than any formal training would allow, or any language could contain. What word in language, for instance, could stretch so far as to mean not only 'Please can *you* take me out' and 'I'm ready for work' – which is how Bandit uses the word 'sit' - but also, as Hearne describes 'sit' elsewhere, "I don't know what that noise is, boss, but I don't think it's gunfire," or "That man isn't drunk, he's dead," or "There's a person lost in this thicket," and ... "I don't know how that garbage got in the hallway!" (Hearne 2007b: 73).

In the end, I think Hearne is right to call sitting a gesture and not a word. For if the meaning of the word 'sit' – understood as a word in language - were really so extensive (so flexible, so unspecific), it would lose all meaning entirely. But this is also why, while I agree with her that training gives dogs a vocabulary (Hearne 2007a: 21), I am less convinced that it is a grammar, or that dogs are obedient not only to trainers but also to language (Hearne 2007a: 56). A dog's gesture operates linguistically in Hearne's work, but the relations between training, grammar, and language are metaphorical.

## DOG WORDS

For the sake of simplicity and continuity, I will begin by framing my account of dog words in terms of signs and signifiers, as Hearne does. But: rather than collapse the two elements of a sign (recall that, for Hearne, a gesture is 'the signifier and thing signified in one motion'), I would argue that a dog word – a 'sit,' or 'heeling with enormous precision' - is a signifier to which *no* signified is attached. A dog makes a dog word by shaping her body into a particular position, or by moving her body in a particular way (in the way of a retrieve for example), just as a spoken word is made by the sound that is shaped by the face, mouth, larynx, etc. and a written word is made by the movement of the hand and the marker.<sup>5</sup> A dog makes a word with her body, and this is all that she makes, no more and no less than a word.

Although I am privileging the signifier over the sign here, I am not suggesting that a dog word has no meaning, or that a dog does not mean what he says. On the contrary, *the conceptual dimension of the sign is suspended only until the dog word arrives at its meaning by way of the relations that constitute it*. These relations are not with other words – to be blunt: Monk uses words, but he does not make sentences – but with close-to-hand and familiar resources that enable a dog to *intimate*. 'To intimate,' Berlant writes, 'is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity' (Berlant 1998: 281). To return to my previous example: it is with the greatest eloquence and brevity that Monk generates the meaning 'I am ready for food' by putting the sitting posture into a relation with a fridge - with a specific fridge, with *our* fridge, with the fridge with which he is intimate, and not with just anyone's fridge. As Hearne's work warmly illustrates, dogs are especially adept at insisting, in this way, on the established meanings of words, and also at creating for them new connections. I will illustrate this point in more detail, in the following section.

My claim has many progenitors, one of which is especially suggestive with regards to the argument about dogs, words and thinking that I am developing here. It is Lev Vygotsky's arresting proposal that, in humans, linguistic competence and the development of thought advance separately, and that it is only at puberty that they 'cross and mutually inform each other' (Steiner 2005: 29). I come to Vygotsky's work through Gary Steiner, who uses it in the

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course speech and writing are not entirely equivalent to gesture, and my assertion here that they are cannot undo the centuries of (western) prejudice that has aligned nearly all forms of signing with the 'primitive, rudimentary, and animal' (Taylor 2017: 51). See Taylor for a discussion of sign language and the categories of race, disability, and animality (Taylor 2017: 47-55).

context of his argument that '[f]undamental to the task of understanding animal experience is the problem of conceptualizing animal consciousness in terms that do not require recourse to concepts and propositional attitudes' (Steiner 2005: 27). Before I briefly address Vygotsky's thesis, it is worth noting that both his work on animals, and on children, which was written during the 1930s, has been contested; but also that it is not the scientific accuracy of this work which is at stake here. Nor am I claiming that either dogs or humans, when they 'think in complexes,' as Vygotsky puts it, are *like* children. Instead, I find in Vygotsky's fearless approach a rare example of a theorist who attempts to break down the gates, as it were, of the 'prison-house of language' (Jameson in Weil 2012: 12) without leaving words behind to fester.

Vygotsky argues that, while children use words that resemble those of adults, '[t]he child's framework is purely situational, with the word tied to something concrete, whereas the adult's framework is conceptual' (Steiner 2005: 30). Children, according to Vygotsky (but there are surely other categories of people that might be included here, such as some painters and poets), think in 'complexes.' This means that they 'group or associate different particular objects in virtue of perceived similarities, commonalities, or relationships' (Steiner 2005: 30). So too, one might argue, do dogs. For example: dogs are vulnerable to what B. F. Skinner called 'animal superstitions,' superstitions that result from 'mistaking' a coincidental relationship, say, for a causal one (Skinner 1948). This disposition makes classical conditioning possible through the pairing of a neutral stimulus, such as the sound of a tone, with a naturally occurring stimulus, such as food, in order to elicit a learned response, like salivating. It also obliges owners to be careful that their dogs don't make associations between objects or events and emotions, such as fear. Temple Grandin describes the case of Red Dog who, following a traumatic event with a single hot air balloon, ultimately became afraid of all red, round objects seen against a blue sky (Grandin and Johnstone 2006: 223-224). Vygotsky would probably describe Red Dog's relationship with red, round objects as somewhat 'pseudoconceptual' which, in the context of thinking in complexes, is about as close as it is possible to get to conceptual generalisation. The pseudoconcept remains pseudo however, Vygotsky writes, because it is 'only an associative complex limited to a certain kind of perceptual bond' based on a 'concrete, visible likeness' (Vygotsky in Steiner 2005: 30). Or as Grandin diagnoses Red Dog: 'she was over-generalizing in a hyper-specific way' (Grandin and Johnstone 2006: 224).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> It happens that Red Dog was over-generalising in the mode of visibility, which is the sense to which Vygotsky refers in his analysis of pseudoconcepts. While visual perception may be the most common basis of pseudoconcepts, it is not the only sensory mode through which dogs

At first glance, my application of 'thinking in complexes' to dogs hardly seems encouraging: first, because Vygotsky is writing about children, and the implied comparison between children and dogs is, I think, unhelpful; second, because 'associationist principles' are often linked, as I indicated above, to the dismal models of stimulus-response that define behaviourist theories of learning, but which have little to say about *how* those associations are forged in practice (other than that they are strengthened by spatio-temporal contiguity and can be manipulated by intervals and ratios of reinforcement); and finally, because Red Dog is suffering. Nevertheless, 'thinking in complexes' is not inherently negative, nor are the modes by which the elements in a complex are connected necessarily limited to visual likeness. Indeed: '[w]hile a concept groups objects according to one attribute, the bonds relating the elements of a complex to the whole and to one another may be as diverse as the contacts and relations of the elements are in reality' (Vygotsky in Steiner 2005: 30).

Although it is precisely this diversity which prevents me from offering any general definition of what are 'the bonds' that secure the meaning of a dog word in advance, they are likely - as I have already noted - to be informed by intimacies, of whatever kind. Dogs, like most humans, do not make or use words *ex nihilo*. But unlike most humans, a dog will often bring a dog word together with new combinations of elements or resources that may *appear* somewhat arbitrary from the 'outside' but which, from the 'inside,' from the 'inwardness of the intimate' (Berlant 1998: 281), have all the coherence of the familiar. Monk brings to the Sit-Fridge complex an infallibly accurate sense of time and timing based on his intimate relationship with the different temporal rhythms and habits of members of the household. ('Since you are about to go to the fridge anyway ....'). To think in complexes, as Vygotsky describes it, is to think in intimate relations. And to think *with* complexes, which is how I would develop the point, is to be so intimately implicated (in a complex, in thinking), as to transform those relations from within. Further progenitors of this argument then, would be theorists of the encounter: 'Something in the world forces us to think,' Deleuze writes. 'This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter' (Deleuze 1994: 139).<sup>7</sup>

---

over-generalise. For the sake of interest: Grandin notes that '[a]nimals seem to over-generalise within the sensory channel that first frightened them' (Grandin and Johnstone 2006: 224). This is also true of humans, of the war veteran, for instance, who jumps at loud bangs.

<sup>7</sup> Hence my emphasis on the diversity and particularity of the bonds that secure a complex. In his helpful discussion of how theories of relationality differ from those of the encounter, Martin

## WORD ENCOUNTERS

I have argued, first, that a dog's gesture, as Hearne understands it, does indeed operate linguistically (at least in some respects), as she claims. I also suggested however that, despite the temptation that follows – which is to identify a dog's gesture as a word - the novel meanings that Hearne and I both agree dogs bring to the gestures they make with their bodies are too expansive to enable them to be defined as a word *in language*. This is unquestionably why Hearne, who is a conscientious writer, never conflates the two. Nevertheless, in part in order to bring a fresh perspective to debates about animals and language, and in part to draw attention to rich diversity of both human and non-human pragmatic word practices, I proposed, second, that a dog's gesture *can* be understood to be a word, if a word is understood as part of an 'associative complex' or encounter. Inventing associative complexes or participating in word encounters is a way of making and using words (non-referentially), and also a way of thinking (concretely). In an associative complex, meaning is generated when any number of ostensibly 'disconnected' entities are brought together on the basis of 'perceived similarities, commonalities, or relationships.' While the bonds that define such relationships will necessarily be many and varied (Monk and I, for instance, especially with our different *umwelts*, identify similarities very differently), they will always be situational, and specific. It is for this reason, I wager, they will also intimate.

In this section I want to contrast Hearne's and my own (now more fully developed) understanding of a dog's gesture once again, and to further explore the implications of our differences – for dogs, for words, for thinking - in the light of something that Hearne's own dog Salty did, which Hearne describes a 'form of dishonesty' (Hearne 2007a: 73). This reference to dishonesty is challenging with regards to my conception of dog words, because dishonesty and other similar practices are usually explained, as they are by Bateson for example, with reference to some notion of metacommunication. And this, both Hearne and I am arguing, is not how dogs communicate with humans. How, then, is it possible for Hearne to describe something that Salty did as a 'form of dishonesty'?

---

Savransky underscores the importance of *how* things come together: 'what allows for qualitative differences between things to be discerned is the specific trajectories and habits they inherit, the particular social order that each grouping enjoys' (Savransky 2016: 93).

During a retrieving exercise, when Hearne calls Fetch!, Salty picks up a stick instead of the dumbbell that Hearne has thrown for her. Initially Hearne wonders whether, by picking up the stick, Salty is saying something paradoxical like 'It's not this one but that one' (Hearne 2007a: 73). But about this interpretation, Hearne continues, 'there are some queer things:' 'For one thing, I assume that Salty doesn't imagine that *I* don't know the difference between the stick and the dumbbell' (Hearne 2007a: 73). Hearne rejects the idea that Salty is being paradoxical on largely empirical grounds: because she (Hearne) insists on recognising that the stick is not the dumbbell, and because she believes that Salty is aware of this, they cannot be said to be engaged – as Bateson's monkeys are – in a game that is based on the mutual suspension of disbelief. This is how it comes about that Hearne, alternatively, charges Salty with lying. But note: Salty is 'lying about *herself*, not about the dumbbell. She wants me to believe that *she* believes I meant the stick rather than the dumbbell' (Hearne 2007a: 73).

Although this certainly makes Salty sound as if she is mired in a web of linguistic recursion, in fact Hearne's conclusion is consistent with her claim, which I discussed earlier, that a dog's gesture is both the 'signifier and thing signified in one motion' (Hearne 2007b: 76). Since there is no 'space' between Salty's retrieve gesture and what Salty means by it, there is no space for Salty to be lying about anything *but* herself. (In effect, Salty is what Salty does). This is an improvement, in my view, on the proposal that Salty is lying about the dumbbell (Hearne's first proposal, which she rapidly dismissed), not least because it goes some way to dodge the anthropomorphic bullet that would almost inevitably pursue it. That is, the irresistible temptation to ask *why* is Salty lying about the dumbbell, and to answer in terms like: because she is sloppy; because she does not care what Hearne wants; because she is wilful and disobedient; etc. But still, Hearne's conclusion remains constraining because it privileges only one relation – the relation of Salty to herself - and, notably, because it excludes a fuller discussion of Salty's relation to the retrieve, and therefore of her responsivity, which Hearne describes elsewhere as the dog's 'power' (Hearne 2007b: 78).

I want to propose that if Salty is lying at all, then she is lying about *more* than either the dumbbell or herself. This is because, in order to be an 'honest' dog, a dog who means what she says, the 'lie,' one might say, must be total, must encompass *all* the elements in the Fetch! encounter - which includes Hearne, Salty herself, the cue 'Fetch!', the throw, the retrieve, the stick, and the dumbbell - as well as the relations between them. And of all the possible relations that constitute this encounter in its specificity, the most intimate among them is surely Salty's relation to the dog word 'retrieve.' For the retrieve is the *raison d'etre* of Salty's part in the

encounter and the mode of her engagement. It is the dog's response to the human's request, the dog word answer to the human word 'Fetch!.' It is the word that Salty is given to make, and the *only* meaning therefore that she can potentially manipulate. How does she do this? Not by extending the meaning of the dog word 'retrieve' so far that it turns it into a *different* word altogether (which is what Hearne's understanding of a dog gesture permits), or by replacing the meaning of the *same* dog word - by replacing a 'genuine' retrieve, for example, with a 'playful' retrieve (as Bateson might suggest) - but rather, simply, by connecting the dog word 'retrieve' to something different: to the stick, which now qualifies as the proper object of the retrieve, and not to the dumbbell, which is now legitimately ignorable. In this way, Salty makes the same word differ from itself.

For me, a dog always means what she says because the meaning of a dog word is always arrived at by way of a particular encounter. Somewhat counter-intuitively, this specificity – of relations and modes of relationality - gives dog words a greater pliability than is available to words in language. (And also arguably makes them less likely than words-in-language to become a 'trap,' as Latimer and López, in the introduction to this volume, argue they so often are). Salty's Fetch! illustrates that when the relations that constitute a dog word changes, the word *in itself* comes to differ *from itself*. In practice Hearne, I believe, would not disagree. The 'curious thing about dogs,' she writes, 'is that the more talent they have for retrieving, the more they tend to think of inventive variations of this maneuver' (Hearne 2007a: 73). Or: the more intimately implicated they are in the dog word 'retrieve,' the more thought-full their encounters with it are likely to be.

## ENTANGLEMENTS OF ETHICS AND POWER

Of course a word is not a wand, and Salty cannot simply magic new meaning into being. In the encounter described by Hearne, the Fetch!-Hearne dyad exerts a special force, determining to some degree that it is the dumbbell that must be retrieved, and not the stick. (I say 'the Fetch!-Hearne dyad,' rather than Hearne, because there is a long history enfolded into the word 'Fetch!,' which administers anyone who uses it). Clearly, as Paul Patton notes in his analysis of Hearne's training philosophy, 'relations of communication are not external but immanent to relations of power' (Patton 2003: 91). The cue 'Fetch!' is an exercise of power, even if it 'recognizes and engages with those things that are important to [dog] being' (Patton 2003: 97). The point returns me to the uncomfortable proximity between 'the utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy' (with which I have been mostly preoccupied in this paper) and 'the normative practices, fantasies, institutions, and ideologies' (Berlant 1998: 282) to which

they are vulnerable. It also suggests that power as an analytic, as Kanyeredzi et al. propose (in this volume), cannot always capture the subtle ways in which intimate relations between 'unequal' parties are created and sustained in practice (see also in this volume Ramírez-i-Ollé on the complexities of friendship).

One might describe scientific behaviourism as an especially well-entrenched set of normative practices, fantasies, institutions and ideologies – or as an apparatus, as Vinciane Despret (2008) succinctly puts it - that exerts a certain pressure on dogs and their handlers. As such, it is one of those 'other kinds of relations' which, as I noted in the introduction, threatens 'the image of the world [that intimacy] seeks to sustain' (Berlant 1998: 288). I wrote earlier that when the word 'sit' is reduced to a stimulus (via a biscuit), a dog is reduced to a sitting-machine. I used this term purposefully, in order to recall the Cartesian paradigm of animals as machines, and the consolidation of that paradigm in Skinner's radical behaviourism which foregrounds stimuli and reactions, and which considers all mental states to be epiphenomena. Hearne's entire oeuvre is a protest against this behaviourist model of learning, as her emphasis on response – the other side of that historical coin – illustrates. But it is also a warning, for she knows how readily a word – a *dog word* no less (although of course she does not use this term) - can be deployed against a dog to reduce and curtail his or her world. Referring to the Bandit-Robert-Sit encounter described earlier, Hearne writes:

[T]hat is a work, and also a learning, because [Bandit] learns in part through his own intention and in part through Robert's response that this is what one version of 'Sit' now means. .... When a leap such as Bandit performed with Robert is not acknowledged, the nascent meaning the dog is imagining ... will subside, vanish. And now things are not the way they were before he did this, because the imagination, unlike a computer, can subside into the muddle and murk of disappointment at the failure of meaning ... failures of syntax are not primarily failures of a rule-governed sequence, but rather of response (Hearne 2007b: 76-77).

In these few sentences, Hearne implicitly imputes to Bandit nearly every capacity that (until recently) has been contested in the history of western philosophical and scientific theories about animals - intentionality, imagination, emotions, learning (including learning disappointment), and responsivity – and she shows, too, how easily they can be repudiated. Easily, because as Hearne describes them here, very few of these capacities belong solely to

the dog (if they did, he might be better placed to defend them); rather, they are distributed across/emerge out of the encounter between the dog, the human, and the gesture/dog word.

Such co-constitutions of capacities are described by Despret as exchanges and extensions of subjectivity, or as 'intersubjectivity' (Despret 2008: 135). By this she means: 'becoming what the other suggests to you, accepting a proposal of subjectivity, acting in the manner in which the other addresses you, actualizing and verifying this proposal, in the sense of rendering it true' (Despret 2008: 135). It means that, if Bandit and Salty think with Sit! and Fetch!, and if Monk thinks with Sit-Fridge!, it is not because they are reflecting on an abstract vocabulary of potentially denotative words/gestures or on an archive of objects that they hold in their heads (slyly plotting, all the while, to use one rather than another), but because they are confident that their dog word inventions will engender a response – what Hearne, elsewhere, calls the 'varied flexions of looped thoughts' between the dog and the handler (Hearne 2007a: 58). The stakes in a word encounter are thus very high, for failing to acknowledge or respond to potential meaning is likely to lead to the profound injustice of stifling thinking. Indeed by not responding to a dog 'projection,' Hearne writes, '[t]he behaviorist's dog will not only seem stupid, she will be stupid' (Hearne 2007a: 59). Conversely (or nearly), as Despret wryly notes in her analysis of Irene Pepperberg's work with Alex, a grey parrot, 'no parrot has ever spoken to a behaviourist' (Despret 2008: 124).

The implications of Hearne's claim, that the behaviourist's dog will actually *be* stupid, have a bearing not only on a behaviourist relation between dogs and humans but also on a further kind of 'other relation,' (other to intimacy), which is speciesism. I understand speciesism here not as Peter Singer describes it – as a prejudice in favour of the interests of one's own species (Singer 2015: 6) - but rather as a 'dangerous and misleading' practice, which supposes 'that attributes or behaviours "belong" to the creatures who display them, even [if] these creatures seem to be the only ones who exhibit a particular quality' (Tyler 2009: 15). For if it is the case that capacities such as thinking, learning, responsivity, or 'stupidity' are not inherent to dogs but are, rather, distributed across a specific apparatus, then it becomes at least difficult, if not probably impossible, to speak meaningfully of the capacities of *any* species in general (including the human species). This is why Despret argues that, even though Alex demonstrated that he could accomplish tasks 'that were hitherto considered as exceeding the capacities of non-humans' (Despret 2008: 125), he cannot be considered to be representative of all parrots. What Alex represents (or rather, to what Alex testifies) is 'the possibilities that

the [Pepperberg-Alex] apparatus could actualize' (Despret 2008: 128).<sup>8</sup> And so it is with word encounters, where making, using, acknowledging and responding to dog words is also about making, using, acknowledging and responding to the potential becomings of dog-human intersubjectivities, which include the possibilities of dog-human thinking. A word encounter, in short, is a site where intersubjectivities and thinking are enabled to flourish; and also where they may be demolished.

## CONCLUSION

It does not go without saying, unfortunately, that domesticated dogs, having lived intimately with humans for thousands of years, have also lived intimately with and among words. Although there is, so far, very little research into how exactly this may have affected the development of any (or even many) of their abilities, and particularly their exceptional ability to establish relationships with humans, recent studies suggest that words matter to dogs in ways that far exceed 'mere' intonation (Andics et al. 2017); that dogs are able to develop a referential understanding of nouns and may understand sentences (Pilley and Reid 2011); and that some dogs prefer verbal praise to food rewards (Cook et al. 2016).

Studies like these will take their place in a well-established tradition of research which seeks to explore the relations between animals and human language. As such, they raise an intriguing question: will dogs be able to improve on the notably poor track record of those animals to date who have been trained or taught to use words or numbers by humans, but who are nevertheless more often than not the subjects of ridicule or disappointment? (Despret 2015; Pepperberg 2008; Hess 2008). It seems unlikely – for no matter how adept with *words* an animal might be, their efforts are often dismissed on the grounds that they have no real understanding of *language*. This dismissal takes the heat out of the 'intellectual emergency' (Hearne 2007a: 18) that Hearne suggests too frequently follows from an animal's perceived use of language, and also serves to re-establish language as 'the brick-solid border' (Seshadri 2012: 12) that divides humans from all other animals. It is a symptom of what I would call languagism.

---

<sup>8</sup> It is notable that Pepperberg (1999) turned the kind of 'response-ability' that I have been discussing into a formal methodology, and that she defines it, explicitly, against the apparatuses of behaviourism and language. Pepperberg is not alone among scientists, and especially cognitive ethologists, who are troubled by the reduction of a species to a single animal 'ambassador' (see for example Horowitz 2012: 9).

Languagism is as ugly as the word sounds. It is evident in the provocation (to wonder, for instance, or outrage) that many people feel when animals come to words and/or language, and it is evident in research, whether in science or philosophy, that is captivated by those aspects of language – such as abstraction, representation, interiority, and the relation between language and thinking - that are deemed important from a human perspective. My argument here has focused, by contrast, on the concrete and pragmatic *uses* that dogs make of words by experimenting with dog words in word encounters. I have argued, in the spirit of Vygotsky, that this a way of thinking with words in complexes – which is not to suggest that words are where dogs do most of their thinking. Rather, my attention to dog words should be understood as an expression of this paper's implicit preoccupation with, and critique of, languagism.

The optimism that often animates intimate relations, as well as analyses of them (Berlant 1998), is not entirely misplaced however. Concrete work with animals in farms (Porcher and Schmitt 2012), in training (as I have illustrated here), and in research laboratories (like Pepperberg's) indicates that words and, more exactly, their meanings, are not cast in the iron of language exclusively. The choice is not, therefore – and here I am returned to the broader context of the argument - between skilled metacommunication and 'act[ing] or be[ing] one end of a pattern of interaction' (Bateson 1987: 280) nor is it between words-in-language and wordlessness. This is important, first, because many domesticated animals *do* have intimate relations with words, which is something worth recognising and reflecting upon in itself. Second, because their creative uses of words are a reminder of how restricted word-worlds are often conceived to be, and how much more diverse and fertile they are in practice. And third, because thinking about things like words differently can potentially open up new ways of thinking about animal-human intimacies, and how they are established. '[I]n the 'best farms,' Despret writes, 'talk is incessant. And because there is talk, there is talking back' (Despret 2008: 133). One might consider such talk and talking back to be an ethical barometer of animal-human relations. To be, that is, one of the ways through which a particular animal or animals, with a particular human/humans, negotiate how they are going to become together, for better or for worse.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Martin Savransky, who was an early and encouraging reader of this paper, and to Greg Hollin, for his thoughtful response at the Intimate Entanglements workshop. Thanks also to the editors of this special issue, and the anonymous reviewers, whose genuinely helpful comments were gratefully received. Thanks above all to Susan Close, for inviting me to join The Dog Hub, and for continuing to teach me how to raise, 'train,' live and work with thinking dogs.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, C. J. (2006). An animal manifesto: Gender, identity and vegan-feminism in the 21st century. *Parallax*, 12(1), 120-128.
- Andics, A., Gábor, A., Gásci, M., et al. (2016). Neural mechanisms for lexical processing in dogs. *Science*, 353(6303), 1030-1032.
- Bateson, G. (1987 [1972]). *Steps towards an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution and epistemology*. New Jersey, US: Jason Aronson Inc.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281-288.
- Cook, P. F., Prichard, A., Spivak, M. & Berns, G. S. (2016). Awake canine fMRI predicts dogs' preference for praise vs food. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 11(12), 1853-1862.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2002). The animal that therefore I am (more to follow). *Critical Inquiry*, 28(2), 369-418.
- Despret, V. (2016). *What would animals say if we asked the right questions?* Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Despret, V. (2015). Who made Clever Hans stupid? *Angelaki*, 20, 77-85.
- Despret, V. (2008). The becomings of subjectivity in animal worlds. *Subjectivity*, 23, 123-39.
- Grandin, T. & Johnston, C. (2006). *Animals in translation: The woman who thinks like a cow*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Haraway, D. (2008). *When species meet*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hearne, V. (2007a). *Adam's task: Calling animals by name*. New York, US: Skyhorse.
- Hearne, V. (2007b). *Bandit: The heart-warming true story of one dog's rescue from death row*. New York, US: Skyhorse.
- Hess, E. (2008). *Nim Chimpsky: The chimp who would be human*. New York, US: Bantam Books.
- Horowitz, A. (2012). *Inside of a dog*. New York, US: Simon and Schuster.

- Kohn, E. (2013). *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley, US: University of California Press.
- Motamedi Fraser, M. (2015). *Word: Beyond language, beyond image*. London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Oliver, K. (2009). *Animal lessons: How they teach us to be human*. New York, US: Columbia University Press.
- Patton, P. (2003). Language, power and the training of horses. In C. Wolfe (Ed.), *Zoontologies: The question of the animal* (pp.83-100). Minneapolis, US: Minnesota University Press.
- Pepperberg, I. M. (2008). *Alex and me*. New York, US: HarperCollins.
- Pepperberg, I. M. (1999). *The Alex studies: Cognitive and communicative abilities of parrots*. Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press.
- Pilley, J. W. & Reid, A. K. (2011). Border collie comprehends object names as verbal referents. *Behavioural Processes*, 86, 184-195.
- Porcher, J. & Schmitt, T. (2012). Dairy cows: workers in the shadows? *Society and Animals*, 20, 39-60.
- Riskin, J. (2016). *The restless clock: A history of centuries-long argument over what makes living things tick*. London, UK: Chicago University Press.
- Savransky, M. (2016). *The adventure of relevance: An ethics of social inquiry*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Seshadri, K. R. (2012). *Humanimal: Race, law, language*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Singer, P. (2015). *Animal liberation*. London, UK: The Bodley Head.
- Skinner, B. F. (1948). 'Superstition' in the pigeon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 38(2), 168-172.
- Steiner, G. (2005). *Anthropocentrism and its discontents: The moral status of animals in the history of western philosophy*. Pittsburgh, US: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Taylor, S. (2017). *Beasts of burden: Animal and disability liberation*. New York, US: The New Press.
- Tyler, T. (2006). The quiescent ass and the dumbstruck wolf. *Configurations*, 14(1-2), 9-28.
- Uvnäs-Moberg, K., Handlin, L., & Petersson, M. (2015). Self-soothing behaviors with particular reference to oxytocin release induced by non-noxious sensory stimulation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 1-16.
- Weil, K. (2012). *Thinking animals: Why animal studies now?* New York, US: Columbia University Press.
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is posthumanism?* Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.

Wolfe, C. (2003). In the Shadow of Wittingstein's lion: Language, ethics and the question of the animal. In C. Wolfe (Ed.). *Zoontologies: The question of the animal*. Minneapolis, US: Minnesota University Press.