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How do we talk to animals? Modes and pragmatic effects of communication with pets

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Abstract

This article examines how an interactionist linguistic approach could contribute to the analysis of human/animal communication. Communicative exchanges between humans and animals take place on a frequent, commonplace, and daily basis, whether at home or at work. However, they have so far been the subject of few in-depth investigations, since they are difficult to analyze from either an ethological perspective (which is usually interested in the communicative behavior of a specific species) or a linguistic perspective (which focuses on articulated verbal language, namely that of humans). Using audio and video data collected in various contexts and in “natural” situations (as opposed to experimental ones), which give access to forms of address that have been little-documented in the literature to date, this study identifies three recurrent modes of addressing the domestic animal, and examines their pragmatic effects.

This indicates the need to re-examine, using precise empirical data, some of the more general questions that are usually raised when dealing with human/animal relationships, including that of the agency of animals, the attribution of intentions, and the possible means of mutual adjustment.

Keywords: interspecific communication, pragmatics, verbal interactions, multimodality, conversational analysis, human/animal relationships.

Introduction

What could be more ordinary than speaking to one’s pet at home? Few may admit it, but careful observation indicates that this practice is extremely common among both owners and all those who come into contact with animals (including breeders, hunters, and groomers). But, precisely because of the private—and might we say little considered—nature of these practices, limited data are currently available to precisely describe the modes and effects of talking to animals. An investigation of this nature can by no means settle the contentious debate about animal intentionality, or the no less fierce debate about anthropomorphism, but may however shed light on some of the most ordinary aspects of daily domestic life—which, as many interactionists have highlighted, shed light on the understanding of social behaviors as a whole (Goffman 1986; Garfinkel 1967). Such a study also makes it possible to identify, with the help of precise empirical work, the actual methods by which we call, address, or even hold strictly *conversational* modes of communication with pets. These sometimes resemble the methods (relating to prosody, intonation, and sequence) used when speaking to very young children, but are sometimes entirely new. Above all, they provide decisive evidence of the kinds of social

bonds that unite us with domestic animals, and indirectly provide new arguments for broadening our consideration of the sociality of our interactions with non-human living creatures (Mondémé, 2019).

There is however no evidence to suggest the existence of forms of linguistic, let alone verbal, communication between humans and animals. The idea of an “animal language” has been around since ancient Greece, but has always been conceived of as a system of signs specific to a species—and not therefore capable of use in an *interspecific* manner. In Aristotle’s various zoological treatises, and in a famous passage from *Politics* (I, 2),¹ the question of animal language is dealt with as follows:

Nature, according to our theory, makes nothing in vain; and man alone of the animals is furnished with the faculty of language. The mere making of sounds serves to indicate pleasure and pain, and is thus a faculty that belongs to animals in general: their nature enables them to attain the point at which they have perceptions of pleasure and pain, and can signify those perceptions to one another.

While they can emit sounds (*phonê*) to manifest pain or pleasure, and sometimes even articulate these sounds by means of the tongue (*dialektos*),² animals are unable to produce *logos*.³ In both academic thought and the modern Cartesian tradition, language was thus established as one of the key sites of anthropological difference. The idea that there might be an animal language, conceived as an organized and systematic form of sending and receiving messages with informative semantic content, did however enjoy a certain degree of success in the first half of the twentieth century, as shown by the debate between Karl Von Frisch and Émile Benveniste. In an article first published in the journal *Diogenè* (1953) and republished in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, the latter sought to demonstrate that the “waggle dance” identified by entomologist Von Frisch had nothing in common with human language. While bees may succeed at a minimum in symbolizing (the distance and location of food by their “dance”), and there is indeed a collective dimension to comprehension of the message, there is no possible vocalization, dialogue, or metadiscourse.⁴ Finally, there are no discrete linguistic units (semantic or syntactical) to speak of to support a combinatorial or generative dimension. The idea of an “animal language” clearly has a long conceptual history.⁵ But it has served less to describe actual communicative practices than to support speculative discussions—either metaphysical and concerning the criteria for humanity, or conceptual and relating to the nature of what we normatively call “language.”

Communicative practices *between men and animals*, on the other hand, precisely because they are situated beneath or beyond the codes specific to a species (whether these are language codes, or simply signal codes), appear until now to have largely escaped scientific description. There are two key reasons for this. First, scientific ethology, despite having an intuitive interest in this topic, has until recently shown itself to be significantly lacking in terms of the *interspecific*

¹ This is the famous passage that defines man as a *zoon politikon* (cf. Aristotle 1998: I, 2, 1253a, 10–11).

² Aristotle attributes some birds, such as the nightingale and the partridge for example, with a “*dialektos*” (cf. Aristotle 1883: IV, 9, 535a, 536b).

³ Which corresponds to reasoned discourse.

⁴ As Benveniste says himself: “We are faced here with a language in the strict sense of the term, considering not only the way it functions but also the medium in which it takes place: the system is operative within a given community, and each member of the community is capable of using and of understanding it” (1972, 52).

⁵ See also Gaborieau and Beaud (2016) for a discussion of the various conceptions of language and what they mean in relation to debates on the origin of human language.

approach (ethograms are in fact developed to meet the descriptive needs of a particular species). Second, these data are rather challenging to obtain, precisely because they arise spontaneously in domestic, private, and ordinary interactions, and as such often defy scientific analysis, particularly the experimental approach.

The first section of this article will therefore be dedicated to this question of inter-species communication, which has until now been primarily understood through biology and ethology (1). The argument of this article, however, which will be developed in the second section, is that a linguistic approach with an interactionist focus is able to fulfill this mission—as long as a corpus of natural data on verbal interactions between humans and animals is available, as is the case here (2). Close examination of the ways of talking to animals does not simply describe one practice among others, but enables us to see in what sense and what manner we can speak, as a fringe of the contemporary social sciences enjoins us (Latour 1994; Haraway 2007) of animal “actors” or animal “participants.” Furthermore, it demonstrates how certain very ordinary, very anodyne, but entirely fundamental forms of inter-species sociality are deployed.

1. Interspecific communication: Which discipline?

Interspecific communication denotes the forms of communication that are deployed between two or more different species. Under this term, it has primarily been studied in the field of behavioral ecology or scientific ethology (or social cognition).⁶ Looking back at the way in which these disciplines have considered communication between individuals from different species helps explain the shortcomings of the current scientific landscape, and thus supports an argument in favor of linguistic consideration of this phenomenon.

In behavioral ecology, communication is not truly seen as a specific research topic, but rather as a macro-phenomenon superimposed over all behaviors relating to areas such as food, reproduction, and conflict. When considered in its own right, it is often via the concept of signals (with a study of their form and function). While there is clearly an abundant literature on the signals deployed by individual species, the interspecific dimension is always considered on the basis of functional relations such as prey/predator, or even host/parasite—and never seems to take place between two species who seek nothing further than a more or less free form of sociality, as is the case between humans and dogs, for example.⁷ Behavioral ecology is generally uninterested in human/animal communicative interaction (Campan and Scapini 2002).

In the fields of ethology and social cognition, the problem appears to be posed in a rather different way. As it is currently practiced, the modern form of the discipline is deeply anchored in a comparative approach—meaning that when communication phenomena are observed, for example through the tool of the ethogram, it is necessarily in a species-specific manner. This would appear to have a significant impact on the way in which *inter-species* communication can (or rather cannot) be described. Thus, at the risk of making a sweeping statement, but by the admission of ethologists themselves, ethology and social cognition struggle to tackle the interspecific dimension of communication.

⁶ While the discipline was initially clearly naturalist and based on field work, modern ethology as currently practiced by research groups appears to appropriate the frameworks of experimental psychology and have more in common with the field of “social cognition” (see Mondémé, 2019).

⁷ By “free” here I refer to the work of Jerolmack (2009) on interspecies play, which is based on the Simmelian definition of sociality.

It should be noted that over the last two decades there have been an increasing number of studies in this field, with a specific focus on human/dog interactions (including Miklosi 2007; Hare and Tomasello 2005; Schwab and Huber 2006; and Kaminski and Marshall-Pescini 2014). On the whole, however, these research programs have all been marked by a strongly comparative dimension, associating the sociocognitive abilities of dogs with those of humans. As a result, the issue of interspecific communication is effectively rolled into another question, which I would argue is very different: the question of “what communication skills do dogs have? To what extent are they human-like?” (Hare and Tomasello 2005). In other words, there is a drive to isolate the abilities, capacities, or skills of a particular species (here, *canis familiaris*), but these abilities are identified and made measurable on the basis of those identified in human cognition and behavior.⁸

Without going into the detail, this would appear to reveal a kind of logic problem in the way in which questions are posed: as the focus is solely on “human-like” communication skills, this approach begins with the idea that the efficacy and intelligibility of a situation must emerge *from* the competence developed by the animal *toward* the capacities of humans. In the context of evolutionary theory this raises questions, as it overlooks a whole other dimension: (i) that of the faculties that humans might have developed themselves through contact with dogs (Guillo 2009), and beyond this, (ii) that of the general communication phenomena that might be deployed in an interspecific manner between social individuals.

Furthermore, while the analyses performed in an experimental context provide detailed information on the acoustic forms chosen by human protagonists to address their animals (Burnham et al. 2002; Jeannin, Gilbert, and Leboucher 2017), they struggle to consider the full range of different situations of interaction that may occur in the domestic setting, and would not in principle be captured by the experimental protocol. Without going into the sometimes exaggerated debate that pits “natural data” against “contrived data” (Speer 2002), it can at least be said that they may indeed lack the private dimension that authentic data in the domestic setting allow us to appreciate.

I therefore aim to examine the way in which a section of the social sciences, particularly its interactionist wing, and in particular interactionist linguistics, can contribute to tackling this question—and what adaptations this requires.

2. The contribution of linguistics to the analysis of interspecific interactions

I note by way of introduction that approaching animal communication through linguistic-related disciplines is by no means an entirely new idea, even if it is presented in a very different way from in the past.

The 1960s in fact saw the emergence of a discipline “at the intersection of semiotics, the general theory of signs, and ethology, the biological study of behavior” (Sebeok 1969, 200), called zoosemiotics. Contemporaneous with other reductionist naturalist programs (Wilson-style sociobiology was then at its height), zoosemiotics proposed looking at animal communication

⁸ To take just one example, the protocols that have been developed to investigate the (affective) attachment of dogs to their masters (Topál et al. Dóka 1998 or Prato-Previde et al. 2003) are based on those conducted by experimental psychologists in the 1960s (for example, Mary Ainsworth’s “strange situation test”) based on mother/child attachment.

behavior through the prism of linguistic analysis, by observing the syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic properties of the communication methods proper to each species.

My proposal is entirely different from this approach, which essentially aimed to transpose an analytical model—that of structural linguistics—onto the study of behavior. Once again it was applied at the species level, and once again there was no consideration of interspecific communication. Structural mechanisms predominated over signification, and the idea of a possible systematic code prevailed over the practical dimension of situated communicational exchanges.

The interactionist approach that I seek to defend in this article is attentive to the way in which the actions (be they *verbal* actions such as turn-taking) of one party are produced in a consequential relationship to the actions of others. By observing how both one and then the other are mutually configured, such an approach is able to tackle the description of communicative exchanges between humans and animals.⁹ It can be done with a degree of finesse that transcends the very general discourse on human/animal relations, and which reveals particular conversational formats. I have identified three principal formats, which will be outlined in detail below, following a brief discussion of the data and the methodology used to handle them.

2. 1. Data and methodology

The data used in this analysis are derived from several corpora of interactions between humans and domestic dogs across various contexts, which have been gathered over a number of years from field studies. These interactions bring together:

- visually impaired individuals and their guide dogs (ECGA1 Corpus);
- dog trainers and puppies (future guide dogs) in training (ECGA2 Corpus);
- owners and their dogs at dog training courses (CLICKER Corpus);
- owners and their dogs, during ordinary interactions in a domestic setting (DOMUS Corpus).

These data were all recorded using one or more video cameras and microphones, and have been accurately transcribed using the standard conventions of conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974; see Mondada 2008 for multimodal conventions).

This methodology was chosen as a result of a theoretical and analytical bias originating in the desire to consider the interaction, rather than the supposed ontological properties of the participants present (Goode 2007; Mondémé, forthcoming). By carefully observing how one turn follows another, or the consequential relations in which the actions of some relate to the actions of others, this framework makes it possible to consider the way in which meaning emerges from interaction, and the way in which the intelligibility of a situation is constructed for practical purposes, without presupposing the cognitive capacities of the participants, or without having to raise slippery notions such as animal intentionality. Observing the signifying actions of humans and animals when they are taking part in a shared course of action appears in any case proof in itself of the rich forms of social communication deployed.

⁹ See also Beaud (1998) for in-depth analyses of so-called “exosemic” exchanges between a linguistically competent speaker and a silent partner (very young child, pet).

From this point of view, recent contributions to the study of multimodality (Goodwin 2000, 2013; Mondada 2009, 2016; see Deppermann 2013 for an overview) serve as a key point of reference. The data have thus been transcribed with particular attention paid to non-verbal actions, gestures, postures, and exchanged glances, in order to make the animal visible in the very mechanism of analysis. I have therefore gone back to the basic format of verbal transcription, adapting it so as to incorporate, at the time of their occurrence, the actions of the dog at the same level as those of a human participant. More than a simple methodological gesture, this strong analytical focus would appear to be a prerequisite for appreciating the signifying and configuring relations in which animal actions are situated—particularly in order to render visible the way in which they are treated as such by human participants.¹⁰

In each of these fields of investigation, which are very different, and conducted in both domestic and institutional settings, the data recorded immediately revealed a rather striking phenomenon: instances of *directly speaking to the animal*, or *through the fictive voice of the animal*.

I have isolated three principal modes: the first, already documented in the literature, draws an analogy between speaking to an animal and speaking to a young child, or “baby talk” (2.2); the second reveals ventriloquism phenomena, or speaking on behalf of an animal (2.3); and the third, which concerns phenomena that I have termed “morphism,” consists of talking to an animal through the modes of expression supposedly relevant to its ecology (2.4).

2. 2. “Animal-directed talk” and “baby talk”

A few rare studies, situated in disciplinary terms in the field of psychology or psycholinguistics, have made speech addressed to animals their subject of study, primarily through the concepts of “pet-directed speech” or “pet-directed talk” (Hirsh-Pasek and Treiman 1982; Mitchell 2001; Burnham et al. 2002). To summarize their argument in brief, these studies, carried out in an experimental context, compare ways of speaking to pets with those documented in interactions with very young children (“infant-directed speech” and “baby talk”). In particular they examine the features of intonation, semantics, and syntax that are used by a competent adult when addressing a very young child.

Comparative hypotheses have been tested to see to what extent “infant-directed speech” might have a number of similarities or differences with pet-directed speech. A number of identical elements have been identified (use of a high-pitched voice, choice of relatively simple syntax and lexis; use of the present (verbal tense); repetition; numerous “attention-getting” methods) but also some slight differences (more imperatives and fewer syntactically complex sentences when talking to animals). These differences have been interpreted as follows: infant-directed speech looks toward the future state of the competent speaker, which is clearly not conceivable in the case of pets (Mitchell 2001).

My data, recorded in a natural setting with French speakers, also reveal phenomena of this kind, as shown in the following extracts.

¹⁰ For more extensive discussion of this approach, see Mondémé (forthcoming).

Example 1_Domus_you want to go on the internet¹¹

Lisa (LIS) and Dimitri (DIM), two friends, are on the couch drinking a beer and looking at the computer. DIM's dog, Hourra (HOU) is sat beside them on the couch.

```
1      HOU      ((places muzzle on the neck of the bottle))
2      LIS      ah beer is good/
3      DIM      oh yeah she loves it doesn't she
4              (1.0)
5      DIM      °you want to go on the internet/°
6      LIS      er julia rully: [is she in your class or not//]
7      DIM              [you want to go on the internet my
8      DARLING/]      ((strokes the dog))
```

In this short sequence, the copresent dog is addressed on several occasions. Firstly in line 2, where Lisa asks the dog the question “ah c’est bon la bière/” [ah beer is good/] to which Dimitri, the dog’s master, appoints himself the recipient and produces a response, by speaking of the dog via a third person pronoun “ah oui elle adore” [oh yeah she loves it] (line 3). Coming closer to the dog, who is sat next to them on the couch, Dimitri addresses the dog again in line 5 with “tu veux faire de l’internet/” [you want to go on the internet/], repeated in line 7, overlapping a verbal turn from Lisa that concerns their ongoing activity on the computer. In these direct addresses we find both semantic changes “de l’internet” [‘on’ the internet], repetitions, and a common figure in addressing animals: hypocorism (“mon chouchou” [my darling]).

The following extract exhibits similar phenomena.

Example 2_Domus_we got it

The same protagonists are on the couch, as in the previous extract. Stroking the dog, Dimitri finds a tick in her fur and tells Lisa, panicked, to get her to remove it.

```
1      DIM      er: : #lisa I think there's a tick there#
              #looks at LIS#
2              # (3.0) #
      DIM      #shows LIS#
3      LIS      how do you get ticks +in this day and age/
              +leans toward the chest
4              + (6.0) +
      LIS      +removes the tick from the dog+
5      DIM      ((high-pitched voice)) it's: ok: doggie
6      LIS      there you go/ my darling\
7      DIM      it's #gone: (.) we #KILLED IT (.) we GOT IT#
              #leans over #presses his head #strokes
      LIS      ((gets up to throw the tick in the bin))
8              (0.4)
9      DIM      we got it we got it (.) oo: :h we got it/
```

In the above sequence, bold font indicates the moments of address that reflect previously documented examples in the literature on “animal-directed speech”: numerous examples of syllable lengthening (lines 5, 7, 9), broad intonation curves and emphases (lines 6 and 7), repetitions (lines 7 and 9), and consonant changes (line 6, “ch (h) éri” [darling]). We can observe

¹¹ For the full transcription conventions used in this extract and the following extracts, see the appendix at the end of this article. The speech of participants is shown in courier font on numbered lines. Non-verbal actions are shown in *italics*. The phenomena I want to highlight to the reader are emphasized in bold.

in particular the participants' actions, and notably in line 7 Dimitri's attitude to his dog: he leans toward her, presses his head against her fur and strokes her. We can also see that the units making up his verbal turn, produced by repetition, serve to punctuate the activity of "congratulation," which is also accomplished in an embodied manner. This observation supports the claim of the value of a multimodal, rather than strictly logocentric, approach to addressing animals. The address does not consist only of verbal forms and paraverbal forms used in their place, but also involves all the proxemic, postural, and gestural manifestations that accompany speech.

We find analogous elements in an institutional context, despite the fact that the interactions taking place are supposedly less intimate, and thus less concerned by these forms of address.

The following two extracts are taken from the corpus produced by the École des chiens guides [School for Guide Dogs] (ECGA1 Corpus). A visually-impaired person (CAT) addresses her dog while travelling through an urban environment.

Example 3_ECGA1_come on girlie

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | CAT | STRAIGHT <u>ON</u> / GIRL |
| 2 | | (0.8) |
| 3 | CAT | come on darling |
| 4 | | (1.8) |
| 5 | CAT | come on: let's go:/ (.) come on/ girlie |
| 6 | | (1.3) |
| 7 | CAT | let's go/ babeautiful |

Example 4_ECGA1_come on buhbeautiful

| | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | CAT | that's: good |
| 2 | | (0.6) |
| 3 | CAT | °there you go beautiful/° straight on |
| 4 | | (2.2) |
| 5 | CAT | straight on/ (0.6) come on buhbeautiful |
| 6 | | (0.9) |
| 7 | CAT | .h <u>LEt</u> 's go buhbeautiful (0.7) <u>come</u> on/ let's <u>go</u> / |
| 8 | | (1.3) |
| 9 | CAT | <come on babeautiful> (.) straight on |

The data are clearly very different from the previous cases since here, the dog is "at work" and the repetitions produced by the visually-impaired owner act as solicitations to encourage the dog to focus on her task. In this sense, they have an identifiable pragmatic function, and act as a true "attention-getting device." My first observations relate to the terms of address utilized, and the grammatical forms in which they are included. There are numerous uses of hypocorism ("ma fille" [girl], "ma belle" [beautiful] and their respective derivatives "ma fille" [girly], "ma b  belle" [buhbeautiful], sometimes in the variant "ma babelle" [babeautiful]). These forms are pronounced in turns in the imperative form, often after the form "come on," and thus function as encouragements directed at the dog. Based on the analyses by Mitchell (2001), in these instances we find lexical features (action vocabulary, imperatives, short utterances, numerous repetitions) and prosodic features (high-pitched voice, marked emphasis) characteristic of dog-directed speech. Mitchell identifies four primary functions shared by "baby talk" and "talk to dogs":

- controlling the addressee’s attention and behavior by focusing on an object or activity (2001, 202);
- communicating with a limited and inattentive addressee (2001, 202);
- expressing forms of affection (2001, 203);
- treating the addressee as a conversant, even if this is not the case (2001, 203).

Similar phenomena can be seen across all settings. Speaking to animals by altering the normative forms of interlocution is therefore fairly routine in nature. These variations are identifiable across intonation, prosodic, semantic, and syntactical aspects, and are used recurrently and routinely by different speakers, in domestic or institutional settings, and in all languages.¹²

2. 3. Ventriloquism

A second phenomenon becomes strikingly clear when observing animal-directed speech, or rather in this case speech *in the presence* of an animal. This concerns phenomena related to “ventriloquism.” Previously documented in an English-language setting by Tannen (2004), the act of ventriloquism consists of a fictive form of reported speech, in which human participants literally embody the animal’s voice to make it speak.

This act has been closely observed during domestic interactions involving an animal, within the family setting (Tannen 2004), and in a veterinary context (Roberts 2004). It has ultimately been interpreted in view of the role it plays in managing human interpersonal relations: mitigating reproaches addressed to another family member, for example, by expressing them through the mouth of the animal (Tannen 2004, 408).

Significantly, a fairly large number of examples of this practice were also found in my corpus, particularly and unsurprisingly in the domestic setting.

Example 5_Domus_quickly mom

Éva, the dog’s owner and mistress (below EVA), her friend Lisa (LISA) and the dog Hourra (HOU) are on the couch. EVA and LIS are talking about the cake that has just gone into the oven. The dog suddenly tries to get her owner’s attention (as she has just stopped stroking her) by pressing her head against her.

| | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | EVA | ((hugs her dog)) well crumble is good/ |
| 2 | LIS | yeah\ (.) a little longer: er to be honest I didn’t look at the timing [<u>very</u> carefully but: |
| 3 | EVA | [nah but @ as long as: @ @stops stroking HOU:@ |
| 4 | LIS | *I added [two] little apples |
| 5 | EVA | [oh]@ |
| | HOU | *turns head toward EVA--> |
| | EVA | @hugs HOU |
| 6 | EVA | *mom (.) quickly mom (1.2) °quickly° (.) quickly |
| | HOU | *lies on EVA--> |

¹² Comparative data is lacking, but this has been documented for American English (Hirsh-Pasek and Treiman 1982), Australian English (Mitchell 2001), British English (Ringrose 2015), and French (see Jeannin, Gilbert, and Leboucher 2017 for an in-depth acoustic and prosodic analysis of speaking to pet dogs).

It would be difficult to analyze this extract without knowing the limited participatory framework for the interactions between the two human participants. LIS and EVA are discussing the baking of the cake that one of them has just put in the oven. But in parallel, EVA is also involved in a focused interaction with her dog. At the beginning of the extract (lines 1 to 3) she is stroking her with relative inattention. At this point the dog is a discrete “bystander” (Goffman 1986), copresent in the scene without being a truly active participant. It is not until EVA stops stroking her that she tries to get her attention again by turning her head and chest (the dog is lying down) toward her mistress. She then produces a sign of surprise or tenderness (“oh”) and hugs her dog (line 5). Immediately after, EVA ventriloquizes her dog “maman, vite, vite” [quickly mom, quickly] (line 6), appointing herself “maman” [mom] and attributing to her dog the desire to quickly resume the affectionate activity in which they were occupied.

It is not unusual for acts of ventriloquism to take place at times when the family is coming together and forming itself discursively. As Tannen also observed in relation her data: “I believe that ventriloquizing the dog in this context serves another interactive purpose as well: linguistically constituting the interactants as a family.” (2004, 410)

This can also be seen in the following extract.

Example 6_Domus_I like that better daddy

Dimitri (DIM) and his dog Hourra (HOU) have just been playing at “biting,” with DIM getting the dog excited and forcing her to bite him. He finally brings the sequence to an end with an affectionate exchange.

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | DIM | #°come° #puts hands on his knees--> |
| 2 | | * (0.9) * |
| | HOU | *comes toward DIM grovelling and wagging her tail* |
| 3 | | * (0.3) * |
| | HOU | *sits in front of DIM* |
| 4 | DIM | oh yes/ I like that <u>better</u> daddy/ when you do th(d)at |
| 5 | | that's better hmm\ |
| 6 | | # (2.5) # |
| | DIM | #strokes the dog# |
| 7 | DIM | she prefers/ cudd(gg)les after all |
| 8 | | mhh: ((smiles)) |

Here the dog’s owner embodies her supposed words after a rather physical play session, in which the two participants have been pretending to attack and gently bite each other. DIM calls his dog (line 1), and she immediately comes running over, wagging her tail (line 2). DIM then offers a form of translation, in vernacular human language, of what he interprets his dog’s thoughts and intentions to be: “Oh oui, j’aime mieux papa quand on fait ça quand même hein” [Oh yes, I like that better daddy when you do that that’s better hmm]. He attributes not only speech to the dog, but also preferences and desires (that of preferring affection to fighting, “elle préfère quand même la tendresse” [she prefers cuddles after all], line 7). At the same time, he appoints himself, as in the previous extract, as “papa” [daddy] (line 4).

In both extracts, in fact, the owners attribute speech to their dog, appointing themselves her parents (daddy, mom).¹³ In general, ventriloquism phenomena are significantly associated with changes in intonation (truly embodying the dog’s supposed voice).

Here several interwoven participatory frameworks can be seen, along with several interwoven discursive regimes. Once again, looking at multimodal phenomena is highly revealing. Moments of ventriloquism are closely linked to animal actions and do not simply occur at any time: in the first extract the “ventriloquism” is produced in parallel with the dog lying on her mistress’s knees, and in the second extract, it is in parallel with clear bodily manifestations from the dog (running over, grovelling, wagging her tail) that DIM speaks in his dog’s place. From this point of view, ventriloquism acts as a process of translating a visible bodily manifestation.

2. 4. Morphism

The above cases (“pet-directed talk” and ventriloquism) have previously been documented in the literature, particularly in the English-language literature. This is not however the case for the occurrences, common in the corpora I have used, of “morphism.” I use this term to denote instances where the dog is not addressed using the modes of address between humans, as in the previous cases with the use of articulated verbal language, but rather by mimicking the modes of communication supposedly belonging to the animal. To my knowledge, these phenomena have not as yet been investigated in the literature at all, although there is good reason to think that they are by no means uncommon among the ordinary modes of communication between humans and pets.¹⁴

These instances of “morphism” describe moments where the dog is addressed in the “terms”—or at least modes of expression—that might be relevant to *its* ecology, for example in the form of growls. Unlike in the example documented above, the human adjusts to the modes of communication supposedly belonging to the animal by using vocalizations or mimicking “in a mirror image” of the dog’s behavior.

Example 7_Domus_Grrr

In the following extract, DIM and the dog HOU are play-fighting together. The dog bites her master, sometimes with a growl, and he also produces growls during the game.

```

1    DIM          ((imitates snarling and holds out his forearm to be
                    bitten)) Nna: :ha: harr:: [har:ha:r har: wrarhar:
2    EVA                                     [maybe we'll put your things
3    in the room hmm: lisa/
4    DIM          rha: rha:
5    LIS          eh yeah
6    DIM          #rr[h: rha: rha                #      ]
                    #holds out his arms for biting#
7    EVA          [p'raps I'll put them on the bed]
8    DIM          #whra:wrha                # rrrh:                #
                    #hands around muzzle#hand in form of jaws#

```

It is considerably difficult to transcribe these vocal, but non-verbal interactions. Here they are represented by the decision to reproduce the “growls” of the human participant, transcribed at

¹³ See also Poresky and Daniels (1998) on this point.

¹⁴ To a certain extent the intonational modifications of “ventriloquism” can be considered as akin to this morphism and to form part of a continuous spectrum.

the time of their production, and in relation to other multimodal actions (holding out his forearm, line 6; holding the dog's muzzle closed with his own hands, line 8).

We can see that in such an interaction, everything contributes to expressing human actions and intentions in the supposed terms of canine intelligibility: the verbal turns are emitted as growls, and the human limbs are used in service of a corporeality that makes the fight possible. Here again, focusing on the forms of animal address as they are produced vocally, is neither entirely sufficient nor entirely satisfying, and a more general overview of all the actions *embodied* by participants is required (Mondada 2014).

The following example, taken from another corpus, goes even further in addressing the animal through “morphism.”

Example 8_CLICKER_niark

Jacques and his dog are taking part in a dog training course. They are sat in a corner of the room, and listening to an explanatory briefing from the trainer on dog training. Each participating pair (owners and their dogs) are doing likewise, and the dogs are sat at their owners' feet while they listen to the instructions.

As this sequence represents an entirely non-verbal series of actions, it is not shown as a transcription. Here however is the series of actions, as they occur sequentially, one after the other:

Image 1. The dog Lana lifts her muzzle toward her master, who is also looking at her.

Image 2. Jacques starts curling his lips, baring his teeth, and producing a slight sound with his mouth (“niak niak niak niak”) chattering his teeth, right next to the dog's muzzle.

Image 3. The dog slightly lowers her muzzle, and Jacques stops chattering his teeth for a few seconds, ceasing to mimic her.

Image 4. Jacques resumes his mimicking and the accompanying sound. The dog raises her muzzle toward him and licks his face.

It is very difficult to convey this short sequence of interactions. It does however exhibit multifaceted phenomena, both in terms of interpersonal relations and in terms of what interests us here: an examination of the way in which human and animal interactions are sequentially adjusted and signifying for both parties.

While the couple sits in a corner of the room, Lana attracts her master's attention by raising her muzzle toward him (image 1). If we speak of solicitation here it is less to qualify the dog's intention, which is profoundly hidden from us, than to signify that, pragmatically, i.e. given the effects it produces, such action does function as solicitation. Her master turns toward her (image 2) and produces a “response” in an embodied form (Cekaite 2010). By curling his lips, chattering his teeth, and producing a characteristic sound, he sets up a focused interaction with his dog, in a playful form. Curling his lips as if they were a muzzle, and chattering his teeth to interact with the dog is not without interest: here the human participant appears to move toward what might here be a form of animal semiotic code. After a very short pause, this sequence resumes (image 4), and the dog approaches her master's face to lick it. While nothing can be

concluded from this final action, the dog's attitude does at least provide us with information on her engagement in "the focused interaction" (Goffman 1959) and on her active participation in it.¹⁵

Does the "form of address" shown here really deserve to be described as such? There is no interlocution strictly speaking, no verbal interpellation, but a slight emission of sound, essentially produced by a mimicking mouth action—this is all we have to go on. However, it must be admitted that in pragmatic terms, this "game" (evidently ordinary and made routine) between the participants demonstrates clear forms of mutual adjustment, and furthermore instantiates strong social bonds between the animal and her master.

As in the previous extract, the human participant thus communicates with an animal using the modes supposedly closest to its ecology. By growling, curling his lips and baring his teeth, he establishes a proximal participatory framework, which introduces (or prolongs) an interaction that is usually playful in nature. These cases are of course limited in data for the linguist, but are of value for the social sciences researcher seeking to represent the precise modes in which practical action takes place, independently of the ontological status of the participants concerned.

Conclusion

To recap, my corpus has enabled me to identify various forms of address in interactions with animals. Some of these are consistent with the pre-existing literature on "pet-directed talk," and demonstrate similar phenomena: speaking to an animal using simple syntax, stressed intonations, higher-pitched tones, more varied terms of address, and repetition. Here, grammatical and acoustic analyses demonstrate similarities with the way in which adults address young children. This analogy with the status of the child, also discussed by several authors in the field of social psychology, is reinforced by the tendency of some owners to term themselves their pets' "parents." This is particularly visible in examples of "ventriloquism," which constitute the second form analyzed. By speaking in his/her dog's place, the owner not only reports fictive speech but also minimally embodies it, by modifying the intonation contour and producing slight consonant modulations when speaking. It is the supposed language of the dog, *if it were a competent speaker*, that is reproduced in this way. The animal is thus treated *as* an intentional agent in its own right, with its own will, desires, affects, and beliefs. In these instances of "ventriloquism," verbal articulated human language is attributed to the dog. Conversely, there are cases in which it is the human participant who conforms to the modes of expression supposedly proper to the animal. This is the third case observed above, termed "morphism." In numerous instances people do not in fact use language in its articulated form to communicate with pets, but produce sounds, vocalizations, or mimics—which are rarely documented in linguistics (since they are not verbal productions) and are difficult to capture live. The entire body thus contributes to the communication process—as is true, in fact, of interactions between humans (Mondada 2016). This brings us to several remarks.

Firstly, if we want to fully represent all signifying phenomena that occur in interspecific interaction, we must take into account the actions of animal participants—and do so in the same way as those of human participants, thus treating them, like verbal turns, as their own pragmatic units. In other words, observing only verbal productions, or at least the productions of the

¹⁵ "[Interaction] [. . .] may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence" (Goffman 1959, 15).

human participant, provides us with only partial information on interspecific communication. In this sense, it represents an inverse pitfall to that mentioned previously with the ethological framework: the use of dedicated tools for observation of verbal behavior in the first instance does not allow us to reveal the complexity and richness of interspecific modes of communication. Such epistemological modifications thus provide access to the complexity with which the acting-together of humans and animals is established. The data obtained, although requiring comparison against other corpora, thus offer empirical footholds for addressing fundamental questions in the human and life sciences: questions about attributing intention, fundamental forms of communication, acting-together, and interspecies sociality.

Transcription conventions

The conventions used are based on the ICOR conventions used by the ICAR research group, and the multimodal transcription conventions developed by Mondada (2009).¹⁶

The plain courier font has been used to transcribe speech. The symbols “[” and “]” mark the beginning and end of an overlap, and “:” marks a syllabic lengthening, and the symbol “/” marks a rising intonation and “\” a descending intonation. Pauses are timed in seconds and tenths of seconds and shown in parentheses.

Non-verbal actions are shown in *italics*, sometimes in parentheses, and sometimes between tags (such as *. . .* or +. . .+) when timed in relation to verbal turns or time measures. The identity of the participant performing the gesture or action is noted at the start of the line with the initials of his/her alias.

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¹⁶ Online at: http://icar.univ-lyon2.fr/projets/corinte/bandeau_droit/convention_icor.htm.

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