

# What Language Do We Talk to Pets

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to present research results examining the language use and switching between different languages when talking to pets. Based on a survey of 130 interviews and recordings, the findings indicate that people talk with pets using normal common adult language, slightly adapted sentences or baby talk. As Crystal (1987) points out, we see that switching code is connected with: 1) the inability to express oneself in a language – to compensate for the deficiency; 2) the intention to convey one’s attitude to the listener; 3) the wish to create a special effect. The paper uses sociolinguistic and folkloristic methods.

**Keywords:** pet culture, human-animal communication

“What language will we speak in heaven?” asks Matt Dabbs in his blog and offers a number of answers, for example: “I often wonder if when we get to heaven we will all speak our own language and hear each other in our own language” (Dabbs 2008). One of the possible answers is a common mythical language that everyone understands. The famous studies by sociolinguists Dell Hymes (1974) and Wade Wheelock about the language god is spoken to (Wheelock 1987) point to the higher status of some languages as compared to others, simply because they were the original languages of the Bible. Preference of one language over others is characteristic of other religions besides Christianity as well. Considering the Czech linguist Jan Purcha’s postulation that “All of linguistic reality is determined by certain purposes, programs or aims reflective of societal needs” (Purcha 1988). How do we communicate with our pets? Mankind’s history of communicating with pets and cohabitating animals is long, but there have been significant changes in the last decades – some

species have become urban habitants, some are more and more often found in homes under human care. The statistics of European advanced industrial countries shows a sharp increase of pets. In Great Britain, in 1995 50% of families had at least one pet (5.2 million dogs, 4.8 million cats, 2.7 million fish, 0.8 million parrots). The statistics of 1997 about Ireland are similar. The statistics of 2009 counted 8 million cats and dogs both (PMFA 2009; more than half of households of the US also have a pet – Human Society 2008; in Australia, more than 60% of households have a pet – PetNet 2008). Let us say for comparison that in 2004 Estonia had the largest percentage of dogs per person in Europe.

Recent developments are most commonly summarized as “pets today have a completely different social function” (Gustavsson 2008: 101; cf. Vesik 2008: 69 ff.; cf. Manning & Serpell 1986; Ingold 1988; Baker 1993). The latest studies about the relations of people and animals do actually abolish widespread prejudices and stereotypes, pointing out that the mean age of pet-owners is less than 65, they are more often married than single or widows.<sup>1</sup> Pets are more common in families with children, especially families with more than four members (Serpell 1986, cf. PMFA 2008). Quite often the pet is a part of one’s self image. Many studies indicate that in the western culture pets are treated like relatives or family members; sociological studies show that in many cases the family considers their dog a closer relative than an aunt, uncle, grandparents or even parents.<sup>2</sup> Also, people often express more emotions when talking to or about their pets than when the topic is other people. Swedish researcher Anders Gustavsson generalises: “The spiritual dimension after death is actually much more pronounced in Sweden with reference to animals than to humans” (Gustavsson 2008: 121). All the above demonstrates significant changes in kinship and family relations, and consequently also in power and obeisance relations and communication.

Folklore is a socially cohesive phenomenon, expressed via various communication acts. Changes in the social cultural and economic sphere are reflected in folklore by the re-emergence of stereotypes, beliefs, prejudices, preconceptions and specific narrative types. Folklore is closely related to not only changes in the society but also to the dialogical development of a person’s self.

I presume that folklore includes numerous beliefs and information about attitudes about whether and how do animals

understand human speech, having an influence on our verbal communication. I believe that a part of the traditional communication means has stood the test of social change and loss of traditional genres they belonged to, and that there are no sudden crises or transitions in communication means, being rather characterized by Laozi's "flowing with the moment".

Conversations with Ülo Tedre, and Liisa Vesik as well as the seminar series exploring human-animal relations organised by the ELM Folklore Department is what made me examine more closely the forms of communication between animals and people, as well as the change that has been there over time, making use of folkloristic material and methods and some sociolinguistic methods. The source material comes from the manuscript collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives, my own records of oral and written interviews, including recordings in natural and artificial communication situations. For background, I took into consideration the 2002 on-line conference "Dialogue between public and private lives" subtopic "People and animals" (Jaago & Kõiva 2002) and the 2007 school lore collection's subsection "Free time about pets, their names and stories about them".

## **Animal Speech**

Research into human thought processes, perception and language development has induced a revival of interest in animal communication and studies of their understanding human speech. However, different species have attracted varied amounts of attention – the number of experiments and interest is profound in humans' close cousins apes and species whose signal range or learning capacity have promised interesting results. In this context it is interesting to consider the results of, for example, experimental psychologist Juan Manuel Toro's group (2005), showing that rats were linguistically more capable than previously thought, being able to differentiate languages, just like humans and apes. At the same time, rats could not differentiate the same languages played backwards. By the by, this study received the 2007 IgNoble award in linguistics (AIR 2007).

Increase in the number of species studied as well as new discoveries has highlighted the unique features of how various spe-



*“They are talking rubbish!” says Triibik, unaware of the fact that he will grow to be an IT-specialist and computer expert. Photo by A. Kuperjanov 2009.*

cies communicate. Discoveries given impulse to make sounds plays a key role since this takes place in a social system, and that many species make sounds that have individual, group- or population-wide specific features denoting their social system; among the results is that animal speech has a syntax and they form sentences (Rendell 2006; Rendell & Whitehead 2001; Reiss & McCowan & Marino 1997; Bradbury 2003 – parrots make sounds that are more similar to dolphins and are dissimilar to song birds) have changed both our knowledge base and attitudes. Although animal speech does not match the five key features of human speech, “figurative speech” and “syntax” do give us reason to speak of animal culture.

Contemporary people often learn about the meaning of animal mimic, gestures and sounds from media and special courses and less through empiric experience. It is estimated, however, that talking to animals is fairly common. My results from recent questionnaires can be briefed as follows<sup>3</sup>:

1. People talk to animals in full sentences, simplified speech or kid-speech depending on what level of complexity they believe the animal is capable of understanding. For special occasions such as praise, gaining attention, when hurt or ill or to subjugate, the intonation used when talking to little children is used, as well as sentences with simple grammar.
2. Change of linguistic code takes place in a manner similar to human speech, e.g. switches from normal speech to kid-talk depending on the communication situation.
3. Some pet-owners consider their language usage towards pets to correspond to the communication to someone younger, from another group, to poor language grasp or children; they also use the circumspersion and foreign languages to keep the animal from understanding things that would concern it.
4. Directing speech at an animal is believed to advance its linguistic skills.
5. An animal brought up in a multilingual setting is believed to understand more than one language.

Language usage depends on the individual and his habits, but also the environment. Replies reveal that out of sub-languages, kid-talk and other intimate methods that are out of place outside the family circle. Simplified short sentences characteristic of kid-speak, emphasis on objects and events, mispronounced or self-created words are also common in talking to animals.

Language usage is strategic – it could be rewarding: petting names, higher intonation, special speech rhythm, tempo, etc. Language tools, e.g. tone of voice are used also to convey commands, displeasure and punishment. Kid-speak, used when speaking to children, animals and one's beloved, is a taboo in Estonian public space – public verbal tenderness is condemned and regarded as a strictly private matter. Since emotional self-expression is not a part of contemporary society, using that same kid-speak in public to communicate with an animal is also considered improper (outside of pet owner group activities). Living side by side, especially in the urban setting, indoors, requires fluency in communication skills and has caused human-animal subordination to have become easygoing, and the rise of a variance of communication models.

In a world oriented to technology, there is a special freeware for bio-acoustical studies that help automatically identify species by their sounds (Lee & Chou & Han & Huang 2006), and for the common user, mechanical translators of animal speech. In 2002, the Japanese company Takara marketed its Bowlingual and in 2003 Meowlingual, translating respectively dog and cat talk into human. The revolutionary bestseller met, however, an unexpected obstacle in its conquest of the American market – the regiolect of the same species living in different geographical regions. Another obstacle could be seen in the fact that animal speech is not only made up of sounds, but the semantic meaning is detailed by body language. That same Japanese invention received an insightful online comment in the Estonian media: “In itself, an interesting undertaking where the translating technology breaks out of the borders of human speech. Maybe they should consider working out a reverse translating device that would translate human speech into barks, meows, oinks or something else” (Eesti Patendiraamatukogu 2003).

Matt Dabbs’ dream of a universal form of communication does have a counterpart – there is a number of people who following the traditions of horse whisperers or speakers-to-animals advertise their skills in talking to animals. The head of their world organization, Penelope Smith, advises: “Is there a way to understand what your dog, cat, horse, and even wild animals are thinking and feeling? You can tap into the universal language of all species through telepathic communication with animals.” (Smith 1997). The network of telepathic communicators is worldwide, but they are most numerous in North America. Only recently the Estonian national television interviewed an Estonian woman who offers our pet-owners that same service, introducing that movement to our cultural corner.

## **Early Archival Records Of Human-animal Communication**

Some folklore genres are dominated by metaphoric or symbolic approaches. Figurative speech requires a solid object for comparison, and well-known (domestic) animals provided that object splendidly. Poetic songs use animals as descriptive objects or

symbols, the text reflecting the close bond some owners had to their animals are rare. Arvo Krikmann has highlighted a significant statistical fact about proverbs: proverbs are dominated by domestic animals (even in the case of hunters' cultures, for example the Yakuts) (Krikmann 2001: 11). The same applies to narratives of religious experience. A remarkable number of animal-, bird- and object-shaped beings act as mediators between people and the supernatural, the world of the living and the dead. The most common haunting beings are dog, cat, cockerel or hen, sheep, swine, cow, horse, goat (usually associated with the devil) and goose – domestic animals are much more common haunts than wild animals (Kõiva in press). The haunting stories in our folklore archives display no such abundance of species as found in the haunting stories of English writers (Presnakova 2010 – 31 species), the animals are those found in the everyday rural environment. On the other hand, folk-



*Mimi and Riku at the window.*



*Expressing emotions is one of the benefits of animals: Kusti and the joy of snow. Photo by A. Kuperjanov 2010.*

lore texts see a wild animal coming to the house or meeting them on the roads as a bad omen that was nothing to desire.

Early folklore records include accounts of communication with both wild and domestic animals. There are records of using instrumental, vocal and verbal means: whistling, musical instruments or auditory signals (cries, shouts, imitations of animal sounds). Most common verbal communication types were onomatopoeic sounds, calls and incantations. Other ways of communication are described in belief accounts and narratives, but in stories animals are addressed briefly, sometimes in phrases in mixed languages and due to the genre specifics, long dialogues are avoided.<sup>4</sup> Since folklore collecting was for a very long time dominated by genre-centrality, we can only make assumptions about some of the possible means of wider communication.

Animal and bird sounds were imitated by handy crude instruments (whistles, tree leaves) or vocally. This was of practical use in hunting, but also used for magical purposes and for fun, to confuse the birds or animals. For entertainment, a bird or animal was lured closer, for example a cuckoo was baited by cuckooing or domestic animals by imitating their sounds – their responsive actions and as-if-understanding replies made them attractive “conversations partners”. Folk stories tell us about goats, rams or cockerels attacking because of such fooling. Ethnographer Aleksei Peterson quotes Reidolf’s descrip-



tion of imitation used in elk hunt: “One ancient and interesting hunting method was baiting hunt. Namely when they were in rut, an elk bull was lured within shooting distance by imitating elk roars. Today there is probably no single hunter who could masterfully mimic the voice of an elk bull, but there used to be. An hour before sunset, they went to the forest to the sites where elks usually mate, betrayed by the clammy trampled ground and twisted bushes. Hunters walked stealthily. In dusk, they started to make sounds – first quietly, then more loudly and with greater intervals; first with roars characteristic to a younger bull. When an elk replied, they quickly chose a good site for shooting. It also happened that the elk bull did not receive the challenge and instead retreated together with the cows. In that case, they were followed, making sounds. Such onslaught does not scare the bull away but instead irritates him until he rushes towards the supposed challenger” (Peterson & Hiimäe 1968: 651).

Hunters oriented and communicated in the forest by certain whistles and sounds. This archaic method of keeping contact was only recorded for archival purposes in the 1980s. On the other hand, onomatopoeic sounds of nature that concentrated on presenting a minimal verbal text in a tempo and intonation characteristic of that animal’s sounds (“Siit, siit metsast ei vii mitte üks pirrutikk!” “You shall not get a piece of kindling from this forest!” – Chaffinch) is a genre that has received thorough philological attention. In 1931, Eduard Laugaste published a taxonomy oriented to the international (German) reader together with a foreword, and later also some monographs about bird song onomatopoeia (Laugaste 1931, 1931a, 1932, 1935). The songs of song birds with their easy to follow melody and tempo have been set to tens of different wide-spread versions (swallow, nightingale, jay, tit), with some text types having a clearcut distribution area, and some partially overlapping with Scandinavian traditions. A witty text helped characterize a bird, but their cultural bonds with, for example, legends, had been forgotten already by the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

Communication with animals is also found in herding songs and calls that gave signals to the herd and other herders (see musical analysis by Vissel 1986). In a rural household, calls and herding repertoire were a part of everyday human-human and

human-animal communication. After vocal pieces, the second largest portion of herding songs is that of texts with nonsensical words or minimal text. Calls were often performed with a special higher and faster intonation, using mitigating, diminutive animal names that are today found only in kid-talk. When used, the names are repeated several times: *vissi, vissi* (lehm - cow); *notsu, kossu, kotsu* (siga - swine), *kiisu, miisu, kiss-kiss* (*kass* - cat), *kutsu, kutsa* (koer - dog); *ute* (lammas - sheep), etc. In religiously critical situations (respectively also in religious and fictional folk tales), but also when talking to little children, the name could be replaced with another derived from onomatopoeic rendering. E.g. *mää* - baa = sheep, *auh, aua* - bow-wow = dog, *nurr, nurr* - purr-purr = cat; or by combining several names (*vissi muu, ute mää* - a combination of diminutive and onomatopoeic names).

Folklore collected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also reflects the taboo system: a complex system of prohibited words, a behest to not name or directly talk about the prey when fishing, using instead fishers' secret language and euphemisms (Loorits 1939). The same applied to hunting - or beginning important tasks, killing an animal and during meals. The many practical and religious explanations of such behaviour include the causal explanation that careful adherence to verbal magic keeps wild animals from multiplying and keeps them away. Some of these prohibitive phrases have survived in the language and become part of common speech (e.g. Where there is talk of the wolf, the wolf is behind the fence). However, the underlying logic of the taboo system is the belief that the animal will hear and understand what people talk about.

Traditional ways of communicating with animals included incantations to keep birds and animals away, to manage a dangerous animal (mad dog, wolf, bear, snake), getting rid of bugs and parasites (flea, cockroach, tick, cricket). Incantations were also used with maladies whose etiology related them to some animal (e.g. hare lip). Such formulae addressed the malady-causing animal or bird and asked it to take the disease away. Some incantations were based on old symbolic healing principles - the incantation was used to transfer the disease to a bird, animal, stone or tree. Well-known words for easing the pain send it to birds:

*An aching stomach is healed by squeezing it, saying at the same time:*

*Disease to magpie,*

*Pain to crow,*

*Other illnesses to the black bird,*

*Our N.N.'s tummy [to] get well*

(E 902 (17) < Suure-Jaani – Ernst Saabas (1893)).

Communication by way of incantations is characterised by addressing the animal in fully-fledged (poetic) language, it is cajoled by use of metaphors and figurative poetic address.

## **Human-animal Communication in the Light of Recent Folklore Tradition**

The modernization and fast urbanization that began after the Russian-Japanese war culminated with the 1905 revolution and had a profound impact on the genre structure of folklore and their positions in the general heritage landscape. In the case of folklore genres related to disappearing (agrarian) practices, the question of how they can survive became acute. Do their texts or performing convey an aesthetic, ethic or religious message that would keep the repertoire alive without the support of function and milieu? Part of the folklore that was quickly becoming archaic had a shift in function and by adaptation and accommodation became part of the secondary tradition. For example, imitations of songbirds were used in pedagogics (published in primary school textbooks, taught in kindergarten) and in public events (actress Laine Mesikäpp blended them into her performance at the opening ceremonies of the general song festival). Secondary tradition also embraced herders' cries, calls and hoots, thought these found (due to scant verballity) less wide use.

Socio-cultural and lifestyle changes caused stories animal-related everyday activities or personal experience narratives, oral history narratives and true stories to become carriers of important cultural messages. That is also the narrative form that is the most common in relaying records and belief that animals understand human speech and can act with reason. The narratives reflect the whole spectre of verbal communication – discussions, orders and

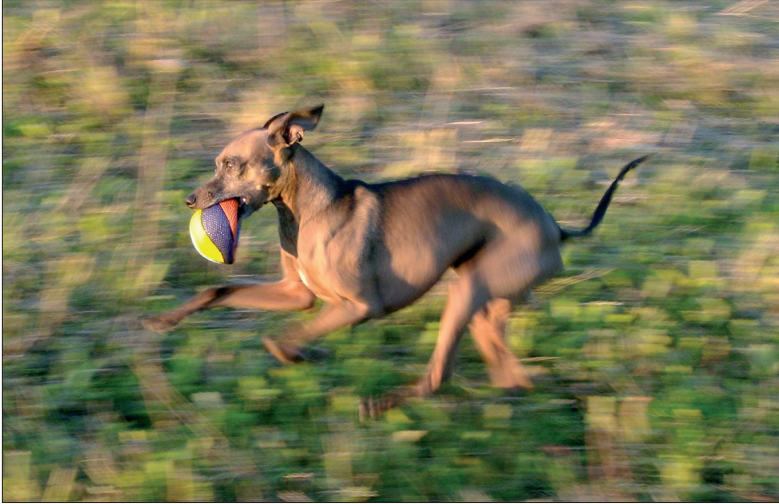
prohibitions, talking as if to a friend, companion, pet or merely domestic animal, as someone you train, order or employ.

One illustrative example of heritage shaped by social change is the Estonian hunters' folklore that became in the 20<sup>th</sup> century folklore of a group joined by common activities. They elaborated on the traditional hunting calls, interpersonal signals, signals to hunting dogs and hunter's tales – in short, they became a greenhouse for folklore. If the importance of training (purebred) dogs and horses to follow signals and orders was stressed even before that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this became a prerequisite of the subculture. This, in turn, became the basis for the emergence of pet culture and related folklore (see about the Estonian case Vesik 2008). The recent questionnaire about pupil tradition revealed the standards of pet culture and that taking care of a pet was one of the more common household jobs for children.

*Training the dog and cat. I actually don't train the cat, it's stubborn. I train the dog for dog shows. It is kind of funny to spend time with the dog as it's a bit of a bonehead. [---] (EFA, KP 2, 121 (1c) < Tallinn – Helena Pruuli, 15 yrs. (2006)).*

*My hobby is having pets. I play with him, clean his cage, change the water, and feed him. Once the rat cage door was left open and he ran into the clothes cabinet. When my brother came home, he was afraid that the rat has run away. When my brother looked into the clothes cabinet, the rat was sleeping between clothes (EFA, KP 3, 36 (1c) < Tallinn – Anna Hiob, 11 yrs. (2006)).*

Animal stories circulating among family, friends or workmates or based on personal experience are events worth retelling and remembering, coming from all periods of an animal's life arc (see Villandi 2007). Although the stories, as a rule, do not have a high aesthetic value, these stories are a part of the narrator's self-image and as such, important to him, but these are their stereotypical features that make them easy to listen to the others as well. They are usually situative stories of humorous or comic events, funny incidents, animals-clairvoyants or helpers, their loyalty and heroism, mischief and smartness, illness and old age. The discourse includes the supernatural (e.g. animal revenants in the classic revenant tradition) and animal-related



*Expressing emotions is one of the benefits of animals: Tango and the joy of playing. Photo by L. Vesik 2012.*

customs. Although roughly similar topics are found in earlier records, their social setting is different. Today, the stories have become more liberal, from higher and wealthy middle class heritage to urban and rural middle class and blue-collar heritage, and in the case of purebred animals the ethnic composition of owners has diversified. There has also been ongoing uniformication of ethnic groups – purebred and pet culture is similar in all ethnic groups. There is no longer such a gap as there used to be between Baltic Germans and rich landowners versus Estonians and other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary pet culture displays rather a greater conservativeness on the side of Estonians towards novel phenomena such as pet cemeteries, compared to Russians and other recent immigrants (Kõivupuu 2003: 74; for the Scandinavian context see Gustavsson 2008).

As classic folk tales were dying out, everyday animal stories have gained a larger part of the tradition as a topic that is usually emotionally neutral or positive. Pet culture is based on social cohesion, significant in my opinion especially in its emotional aspect, including the feeling of exclusion and possibilities of easing this. Pet culture has been in constant development for

the last five decades, from the choice of domestic animals kept for practical purposes to the fact that the whole discourse is part of the general wider social discussion.

Preconceptions about the language grasp animals have and their language behaviour are reflected in questionnaires and narratives – an animal is sad or dumb after losing its habitual language environment. For example a dog bought from Russians is at first slow at catching on because it can't speak Estonian too well. Spontaneous evaluations about animals belonging to neighbours of a different ethnic group are the same type: the dog understands Estonian enough to follow orders. Special use of language includes praise and punishment. Most usual punishment and admonitions are in the animal's "first language", e.g. the language it was spoken to in its childhood home.

An animal can also be an object of language practice. I saw one such instance in the case of a Vepsian kitten that spent a month with our family. The kitten became increasingly sad and only became happy again when the owner returned. There is an analogous story about a new melancholic elephant in the Riga zoo – an Indian was invited to help the elephant and its health and mood improved much when it heard the familiar language.

Instead of its home language, a pet can also be addressed in the majority language. For example, Estonians in the Diaspora often talk to their pets in the language of their hosts. The motive could be the animal's better understanding of orders and general well-being, but also automatism – pet training and addressing a pet outside the home environment supports the use of the majority language. Possibly some Estonians abroad are also limited by their command of the Estonian language in this subject. A decade ago, I interviewed an old Estonian lady in Malmö, Sweden, who had two cats that she addressed only in Swedish, despite her perfect command of Estonian. Her conversation language was on par with the conversation partner's language; her speech was characterized maybe a bit simpler or shorter sentences. My question "Why do you talk to your cats in Swedish?" she replied "It is better for the cats, they get along better in life then." I still remember the somewhat patronizing reply that seemed to be based on the belief that such an independent animal as a cat would need a Swedish-language envi-

ronment. First of all, however, I was surprised by the elderly woman's assessment of the cat's ability to learn a language – it can only properly master one language.

The above cases are based on the folk logic that animals can best understand the language they grew up with. Change of code is used to keep the pet from understanding what is talked about and to keep some things secret. Dog-owners are well familiar with how their friends get quietly lost when “cutting nails” is mentioned. A frequent motif tells how the family uses a foreign language to keep some things from their dog but the dog quickly learns the key words in that language as well (drive, to the country, food, nail-clipping, bath, combing, etc) and the family is forced to change language once more. Using change of code for service purposes is described in a narrative about US police dogs who received their orders in Hungarian.

*[--] This comes from Paul Mulick. He writes, “In the official police handbook for the Springfield Police Department, there are two pages printed in Hungarian. The rest of the book is in English. None of the men or women on the Springfield police force is Hungarian. In fact, not one person in the entire city of Springfield speaks or understands Hungarian.*

*The question is why the official police manual includes two pages in Hungarian. Here's a hint: the fact that no person in Springfield understands Hungarian is one of the reasons that Hungarian was chosen.*

*You will remember that some time ago you and Berman and I were going to NPR in Washington.*

**TOM:** I remember it!

**RAY:** *We were at South Station and we met some law enforcement people. I think they were in the process of strip-searching Berman, but I'm not sure.*

**TOM:** *And they had dogs.*

**RAY:** *Right. And the fellow to whom we were speaking-- once he got the dog off your leg, that is-- said the dog understood only French. That's why the police manual has these pages in Hungarian because the police dog understand only Hungarian. There're two good reasons for that. Number one, they were probably trained where? In Hungary. And number two, commands can be given only by the person handling the dog. For example, a would-be*

*felon couldn't tell the dog to sit, stay, roll over or play dead*  
(Car Talk 200342).

## Discussion and Conclusion

A folklorist commonly sieves a part of socially cohesive communication flow for his research topic. The current cross-cut took into account the communication within folklore genres as well as the communicative behaviour of stereotypes, prejudices and everyday communicative behaviour as expressed by the respondents. Folklore genres acquire and lose their meaning in a social setting. Of the types discussed above, bird song imitations were predicted to disappear already in 1931 (Laugaste 1931) and indeed the genre has become a part of the institutionalised curriculum and repertoire of hobby groups, along with a portion of herding traditions. Some of the traditional genres have irrevocably made their way to professional art: incantations are part of the New Age movement and neoshamans' orchestrated rituals. The classical genres of narrative have also disappeared from common use and have instead become part of the professionals' performance or the repertoire parents have garnered from media. Many instances, tendencies and motifs described above are still in need of further study, their fate in the changing society and folklore is undecided yet. This in itself is an area in need of study, though undoubtedly there is the rule of Laozi at work – according to this, everything acts spontaneously and transforms to better correspond to the ideal (Laozi 1916: 29). Convergence, on the other hand, is characteristic not only to the pet heritage but to the contemporary folklore as a whole. We can confirm that only the oldest universal simple communication means (the whistle, signals and calls) as well as telepathic communication, have remained relatively unchanged.

Pet heritage reflects emotions and different means of communication, leading us back to the question of what gives human-animal communication its significance. There is a reason to ask, what is relayed with these simple and charming, not really virtuous but just everyday stories? Why do we need them? What is their message? Surely there is more than just a means for avoiding pauses in the conversation and give something to talk about?



Having found no explanation in the folkloristic discourse, I turned to psychology and philosophy. Clearly people today are caught in the controversial duality of globalisation and the stability offered by locality. "The self is involved in rapid movement and change, as part of the globalizing process, but at the same time, there is a deep need for local stability" (Chandler & Lalonde & Sokol & Hallett 2003). Pets are a part of the local feeling of stability, just as animals have been throughout the years something that keeps us local, creates the milieu and atmosphere of a location that we often do not subject to analysis or find it even hard to describe. The famous poet of the national awakening movement Lydia Koidula has a poem called "In our garden-bordered street" ("Meil aiaäärne tänavas") tells of the expectations towards a childhood home, the nostalgic feeling towards discovering the world that comes from the inside of every person. Most likely the mental picture and tactile memory accompanying these lines included the soft lips of a horse and the sun-heated fur of a cat; perhaps the scritch of a pig or a chick's beating heart, though they find no direct mention in the poem. They are hidden between the lines, just like the joys and worries with a contemporary pet rat or rabbit; they are part of the home-feeling that can not be put into words.

The chain of social expectations and permissions and the social setting that spurns emotions and their expression has a profound impact on our behaviour. Psychologist James R. Averill claims that rules on emotions help create a corresponding network of emotional roles, or emotional positions. An emotional position can be analysed via its privileges, limitations, obligations and conditions of acceptance (Averill 1997). From the point of view of a personality, philosophers Hubert Hermans and Harry Kempen (2007) consider it important that depending on the position people find themselves in, certain emotions can be expressed in certain situations, though at the same time certain other emotions can not be displayed or they must be suppressed. Our whole repertoire of behaviour is limited by such emotional standards.

In our relations with pets, however, we are more free to express emotions, they are less rigid than social norms, they are expressed in separated, personal room where one can determine one's own emotional positions and roles and ignores social norms.

The most significant aspect in communicating with animals is the combination of different communication means; in addition to verbal, often para- and nonverbal communication is used. Social anthropologist Tim Ingold (1988) has pointed out the overemphasis on verbal communication, which is certainly true. Even as people talking to people we use more than just words. In human-animal communication, body language is of infinite importance. Touch, body heat, closeness, observation, etc. signals received by different senses and the feelings and thoughts they provoke have a key role in communication. The benefits and veracity of communication by such means are highlighted by several researchers (Tuan 1984, Raupp 1999). The same forms apply to inter-personal relations. Universal body language signals give a faster result (calling with a whistle, sound imitations), they are easy to use, they are less confusing, have a single semantic meaning and spread easily. The simple calls, species names that have degenerated to kid-speak and calling by replacement names gives unequivocal means to the communication. Its comprehensibility is raised by intonation, tempo of delivery and other qualities. Reasons listed above could be part of the answer to the question why is animal-related folklore and communication still so important in contemporary urbanized folklore.

Principally, human-animal communication seems to follow the same model that guide exchange of code between different languages or the written versus colloquial languages (Crystal 1987). Such exchange of code helps to compensate the lack of one language as a communication device; helps to convey the attitudes and achieve the lasting effect.

## Comments

<sup>1</sup> According to statistics, in the Great Britain 60% of singles buy a pet for companionship, the predominant reason for getting a pet is finding a companion or friend; about 5% of cats are reported as choosing their own owner.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. PetNet statistics: 91% of pet-owners claim that they are very close to their pets and that their pet is a member of the family (PetNet 2008).

- <sup>3</sup> Ca 130 respondents from age group 15–70, more detailed analysis to be published.
- <sup>4</sup> We do not touch here on the fictional fairy tales, myths and legends where dialogue with animals is common or any narratives where one miraculously gains understanding of animal language and thus access to special knowledge. Also, the witch-masters of animals (wolf-masters, those who could summon snakes, etc) are not discussed here.
- <sup>5</sup> E. Laugaste points out the relation the swallow's song has with a saint legend (Laugaste 1932).
- <sup>6</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pets were first of all related to the rich landowner's culture. The same is reflected in folk tales of a gravestone or memorial for a pet, with the grandiose burial site and other privileges seen as weird habits or sins of the others.

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