

Your Cat Hears You

By Anthony Ham



- 1 Every cat owner has a story to tell of being blanked by their cat: We call to our cat, it turns away, and some of us might be left wondering why we didn't get a dog. But your cat may be listening after all. More than that, it cares more than you may think. A study by French researchers found that not only do cats react to what scientists call cat-directed speech, a high-pitched voice similar to how we talk to babies, they also 22. "We found that when cats heard their owners using a high-pitched voice, they reacted more than when they heard their owner speaking normally to another human adult," said Charlotte de Mouzon, an author of the study and cat behavior expert at the Université Paris Nanterre. "But what was very surprising in our results was that it actually didn't work when it came from a stranger's voice."
- 2 Unlike with dogs, cat behavior is difficult to study, which is part of why humans understand them less. [... 23 ...] "Their reactions were quite subtle," Dr. de Mouzon said. "It could be just moving an ear or turning the head towards the speaker or even freezing what they were doing." In a few cases, the cats in the study would approach the speaker playing a voice and meow.

- 3 Unlike dogs, most cats actually prefer human interaction over other rewards like food or toys, “so cats are paying close attention to their caretakers,” said Kristyn Vitale, an assistant professor of animal health and behavior at Unity College in Maine. The new study complements Dr. Vitale’s own research into relationships between a cat and its owner. This relationship is so important, Dr. Vitale’s research has found, that it replicates the connection between a kitten and its mother. “It is possible that attachment behaviors originally intended for interactions with their mother have now been modified for interactions with their new caretakers, humans,” Dr. Vitale said.
- 4 Genetics may also play a role in why dogs are easier to study and are assumed to be friendlier. “Dogs were artificially selected hundreds or thousands of years ago based precisely on their capacity to be trained, whether as sheepdogs, hunting dogs or something else,” says Sarah Jeannin, a dog behavior expert at the Université Paris Nanterre. Dr. Jeannin disputed the stereotype that dogs are closer to humans than cats. “People say that dogs are a man’s best friend, that you can trust them and that they are very loyal. But we don’t know what dogs actually think,” she said. “It’s really just projection by us that dogs are in love with us.”
- 5 Now, those who are convinced of the 26 of cats won’t like the answers that are emerging. Cats don’t hate us after all, Dr. Vitale said, adding that “a growing number of studies supports the idea that social interaction with humans is key in the life of a cat.” According to Dr. de Mouzon, just because cats react in subtle ways doesn’t mean they are unfriendly snobs. “Cats don’t do what you expect them to do. But if cats don’t come when we call them, it may be because they’re busy doing something else, or they are resting,” she said. “People have these kinds of expectations because when you call a dog, the dog will come. But if someone called you when you were having a nap at the other end of the house, would you go?”

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