

**THE LANGUAGE
USED IN TALKING TO
DOMESTIC ANIMALS**

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The Language Used in Talking to Domestic Animals by H. Carrington Bolton

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INTRODUCTION

The driver who stops his horses by crying *wéwa!*; the teamster who directs his oxen to the right or to the left by the terms *gee* and *haw*; the farmer's lad who calls the scattered cattle *boss*, *boss*, *come boss*, or the timid sheep with the musical *ko-nanny*, *ko-nanny*, and the grunting hogs with the prolonged *chéé-ôô-ôô*; the playful child who calls her pet *puss*, *puss*, and drives it away with *scat!*; the farmer's wife who calls to feed the peeping chickens and clucking hens with *coo-chee*, *coo-chee*, afford familiar illustrations of a language having peculiar characteristics. The words of this language are chiefly monosyllabic and dissyllabic, and are generally repeated in groups of three; although entirely devoid of grammar, consisting exclusively of exclamations and words in the imperative mood, and although, with few exceptions, the words are omitted by the most comprehensive dictionaries, the language serves as a ready and sufficient means of communication between man and the many races of animals under his subjection. This language has but little in common with that used by the animals themselves. The hen clucks, the duck quacks, the dog says *bono-wow*, the cat *meow*, the horse neighs, the ass brays, and the sheep cries *baa*; but man, in responding, does not confine himself to imitations of these dialects of the several races; he forces upon them original sounds better adapted to his own vocal organs, and by constant repetition compels their comprehension.

An interesting feature of this language is, that while the custom of talking to animals obtains throughout the civilized and uncivilized world, the terms used in different countries in addressing a given race of animals vary greatly. This does not, however, prevent the animals reared under diverse conditions from understanding their masters, thus showing the superior intelligence of the animals. Cattle in the field will answer to the call *sake, sake*, in Connecticut, as readily as their cousins will respond to *koeb, koeb*, in Maine, *cusha*, in Scotland, and *lloñ, lloñ*, in Russia.

The Scotch dairymaid sings to the kine *pooh-leddie*, the French peasant urges on his team with a guttural *huc*, the German bauer stops his horse with the sound *brrrr*, the Russian serf summons his chickens with *tsupp, tsupp*, the Egyptian donkey-boy urges forward the donkey by the ceaseless cry, *āāā, āāā*, the Bedouin camel-driver makes his animal kneel by a guttural throat-noise incapable of representation in Roman letters, and yet each animal shows evidence of intelligence by obeying the wishes of his master.

In thus controlling the actions of domestic animals by the voice, man makes comparatively little use of that language with which he is wont to communicate with his fellow-creatures, and employs a peculiar vocabulary supposed to be better adapted to the comprehension of his dumb, though by no means deaf, slaves. Feeling a difficulty in making himself understood, man tries to lower his language to the level of animal intelligence somewhat in the same way that young mothers resort to that preposterous travesty of speech known as "baby-talk." Why infants and domestic animals are supposed to understand inarticulate sounds better than ordinary speech is difficult to explain; perhaps, however, as Bossuet wrote: "Les oreilles sont flattées par la cadence et l'arrangement des paroles."

Man pays an unconscious tribute to the intelligence of his faithful companion, the dog, by addressing him with words of ordinary speech; but in commanding the movements of the other domestic animals—horses, cattle, sheep, swine, poultry, etc.—he employs a variety of singular terms never used in speaking to his fellows; these comprise inarticulate sounds and musical calls, besides whistling, chirping, clicking, and other sounds not

easily represented by any combination of letters of the English alphabet, nor by musical notation.

I have said the dog is treated with exceptional dignity by man, but the Orientals confer with their camels and horses in strains of affection that are astonishing; the Arabic word *gamel*, camel, signifies "beauty," and the Bedouins become strongly attached to their useful, though ungainly, ill-tempered beasts of burden. The Tartars live in close companionship with their horses, talking to them as freely as if every sentence would be appreciated. When they wish to encourage the animals they whistle to them as if they were birds; when the horses do not travel well the Tartars address them with gentle reproaches; and to stimulate them to special efforts they say to them: "Come, my doves, you know you must go up there; courage, my pets, come, go on." And when the difficulty is surmounted they praise and caress the animals like much-loved pets.

Bulgarians, Bosnians, and Servians are said to speak in most endearing terms to their horses at one moment and to beat their wives unmercifully the next.

I have read that in northern India the natives "carry on long conversations with their bullocks, which consist chiefly in abuse of their female relations," but I am in doubt whether the pronoun preceding "relations" refers to the natives or to the bullocks.

When the isolated Hawaiian Islands were discovered by Europeans the natives had no domestic animals except swine and dogs, and when sheep, goats, cows, asses, and horses were introduced from England, the expressions used in controlling them were imported also, and to this day the Hawaiians employ English terms for these animals.

To what extent speechless animals comprehend individual words and sentences is an interesting question, which does not fall within the scope of this essay; but we suppose the entire phrase is regarded by the animal as a symbol, and we believe that frequently the accompanying tones of the voice, expressions of the face, and gestures of the hand—precursors of the lash—are more significant than the words themselves.

Horses, dogs, and cats, and to some extent dairy cattle, receive individual names, and it is certain that the animals recognize their own names when called. Nor is it necessary to point to

animals highly trained for public exhibitions to confirm this; the hostlers and the farmers in every country have pet names for their four-footed friends, to which they respond.

The names used for animals are sometimes imitations of the voices uttered by the animals themselves; these names survive in the speech of children, and thus we have *moo-cow*, *baa lamb*, *bow-wow*, *gobble gobble*, and similar expressions. This origin of names is especially common (so far as English is concerned) with birds; thus we have cuckoo, whip-poor-will, bobolink, bob-white, and is not without an example in the insect-world, as instanced by the *katy-did*.

Semi-civilized people rely to a large extent on their power of mimicking the notes of birds for success in securing them for food. In British Guiana the Indian name for a bird is almost always an imitation of its cry (Everard im Thurn, *Among the Indians of Guiana*, London, 1883).

In some countries the calls to animals, as well as their names, are also imitations of the sounds made by the animals. Mr Ferdinand Baer, of Piep, Esthonia, Russia, whose voluminous correspondence has been of great value, sends me a list of the invitation-calls used in Russia. The similarity is not so marked to Anglo-Saxon ears as it probably is to Russian. Cows are called *myk*, *myk*; hens, *tjuk-tjur*, *jur juk*; geese, *gaga*, *gaga*; turkeys, *scheldy-baldy*; horses, *igogo*; sheep, *bebe*, *bebe*; goats, *staki-bryki*, and hogs, *wiki*, *wiki*. [The letters in these terms should be pronounced as in German.] These words are also used by children to designate the animals. This identity of calls for animals and their child-names is very general. The most familiar home example is *puss*. Ernest Goepfert, writing of the dialect spoken in the Saxon Erzgebirge, gives the following list of calls to animals and their corresponding nicknames used by children. The roots of the words, he says, are unknown.

<i>Animal.</i>	<i>Nickname.</i>	<i>Call.</i>
Cow.....	mütschl.....	mütschl, mütsch.
Goat.....	hápl.....	hápl, háp, háp.
Pig.....	boschl.....	boschl, bosch, bosch.
Cat.....	mizl.....	miz, hiz, hiz.
Goose.....	liwl.....	liwl, lib, lib.
Chicken.....	zipl.....	zipl, zip, zip.
Hen.....	butl.....	butl, but, but.

Conjecture as to the antiquity of the use of the voice in controlling domestic animals carries one back to that scene in the Garden of Eden where "Adam gave names to all the cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field," "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Gen., ii). We imagine also that Noah and his children, when assembling the animals by sevens and by twos in the Ark, found abundant scope for ingenuity in devising names for the attle, the fowl, and for "every creeping thing of the earth after his kind" (Gen., vii).

That the earliest calls were the names of the animals themselves cannot be disputed, and is illustrated by survivals of ancient Eastern names in some common cries used in the United States. The New England lad who calls the cattle morning and night, *koh, koh*, or the prattling child who calls its pet *puss, puss*, little think that they are using Oriental (Persian?) words for cow and cat respectively.

Occasional references in early literature prove the antiquity of this language. Theocritus, who wrote his poems about 270 n. c., often uses the word *σίτρα* (before a vowel *σίττ'*), for driving forward or chasing away goats, sheep, and cattle, when writing of the Sicilian peasants. The old lexicographers give as other forms of the word *σίτρα* and *ψύτρα*. Fritsche, one of the chief authorities on Theocritus, says the herdsmen in Greece still use this word.

Homer, in the *Odyssey* (ix, 315), represents the Cyclops as driving his flocks, *ροῖζα*, with a whistling or whirring sound. This word is onomatopoeic, and is also used for the whistling of an arrow or the whirring of wind. It would seem, therefore, that Cyclops used some inarticulate sound, common in driving flocks, containing the rough *r* sound, combined with a hissing one.

Xenophon's *Horsemanship* was hastily examined, but apparently contains nothing to the point.

As already stated, a large number of the sounds used by man are incapable of representation by any combination of letters of the English alphabet, and I have adopted in some familiar instances groups of letters intended to symbolize these inarticulate sounds. Though entirely arbitrary, these bear some relation to the normal sounds of the letters composing them, and will serve at least to suggest the otherwise inexpressible calls.