

Never Never Say It Say It Twice-Twice

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Q: What do the words "bee", "moo" and "yo" have in common?

A: Say them once and they have a particular meaning, say them twice and they mean something completely different.

While we humans are quite comfortable translating this type of "double talk", it might surprise you to know that dogs also recognize double words, such as "sit-sit", "down-down" and "come-come". Some dogs are even capable of understanding "three-peats" such as "sit-sit-sit" or "stay-stay-STAY!!!"

One of the most common training errors is repeating commands. If Fido does not "sit" at the first command, we automatically say the word again ("sit-sit"). Over a series of repetitions, we inadvertently teach the dog to wait patiently until the second or third command before he is required to respond. While the owner fumes about stubbornness and laziness, the dog's comment would probably be, "Look , boss, the command isn't 'sit', it's 'sit-sit!' I'm just waiting for you to finish the sentence!" The ironic part of this exchange is that both participants are convinced the other is mistaken.

The primary reason for this confusion is that most people take language for granted. We are so conditioned to respond to humans that we forget that animals do not think of words as we do. They know words as sounds that are connected to particular situations. Our mistake is that we assume that dogs speak "language" and that commands "cause" behaviors to happen. If we are talking to another human and receive no response to a simple request, we automatically repeat the word on the assumption that the person did not hear us. Often this second command is spoken louder than the first, still convinced that the first word was not heard. To test this reasoning, watch the way tourists attempt to communicate with people who do not speak their language. When the first word brings no response, they automatically say it again louder. If increased loudness fails, they will probably try to pronounce the word in an exaggerated manner and in sometimes add a foreign sounding ending to it, such as turning "car" into "car-o". If a person, or a dog, does not know an association between the word and its meaning, saying it twice or twenty times will make no difference.

While repeating commands tends to erode good behavior, there are two other types of repeated words that can seriously effect a dog's learning potential - praise and corrections. Dogs listen for praise to tell them which behaviors bring treats and affection, while scolding identifies those behaviors that should be avoided. Both praise and scolding are dependent upon good timing to be effective. Repeating the words that identify good or bad behavior does not necessarily give them added emphasis but does slow them down. This makes it difficult for the dog to know which behavior "caused" the praise or scolding.

For instance, if Fido likes to jump on Aunt Winnie, the time to say "No!" is at the instant he starts to jump. If you are in the habit of saying "no-no-NO!" Fido has already done

the deed and escaped before you got to the end of your double talk. In this case, Fido heard the first "no" as he started to jump on Winnie. He knows he can ignore this sound because a single "no" has little or no consequence tied to it. It is the all-important, and much louder, third "NO!" that he must pay attention to. By the time he hears the third "NO!" he is racing down the hallway and thinking of darting out the doggie door. All thoughts of jumping and Winnie are long forgotten.

Just as scolding must be quick to be precise, long-winded praise can be equally inefficient. If Fido decides to sit momentarily for Aunt Winnie and then jumps on her, a series of "Good-boy-good-boy-good-dog" will capture both behaviors. Instead of praising just the sit, Fido's owner has mistakenly reinforced the jump as well. Without a fast signal to identify good behavior, the dog will soon be convinced that the entire sequence is appropriate.

Avoiding the problem of "double talk" takes some concentration and observation. The tendency to repeat oneself is so deeply ingrained that most people are unaware that they do it. The quickest way to tell if you suffer from a case of "double talk" is to have a friend listen as you train your dog. Try to work as you always do. Your friend may surprise you by distinctly hearing you repeat a command even though you could swear that you only said it once.

If you are fairly caught giving commands twice, don't panic. Merely recognizing the problem is half the battle. First, get a package of doggie treats at the store. Offer a small treat to your dog, so that Fido knows what you are offering. Now give the command "sit," and bite your lip after you say the word. Wait for 30 seconds to allow your dog to realize that you aren't going to say it twice.

If the dog sits within the time limit, praise him and give him the treat. If Fido simply stands like a zombie, turn your back and walk away from him. A very shocked Fido is most likely to quickly follow you to get another chance for the treat. Ask him to sit again. Give him another 30 seconds. If he does it, praise him and give a treat, if not, walk away and try it again.

After several attempts at getting the dog to respond to only one command, Fido will not wait for the second one. Once he realizes that you aren't going to repeat yourself, you can give him less and less time to perform the behavior before his failure "causes" you to go away. Soon he will perform the behavior instantly, on the first command.

Reducing praise and scolding to a minimum is an even easier task. Start by developing the habit of saying the word "good" at the instant your dog performs a behavior correctly. After you say "good", wait a second before you start including the normal excited and affectionate praise. By waiting a second you are prepared to withhold the more powerful reinforcers if Fido switches to an incorrect response.

In nature, a dog rarely has a second chance to respond to the sound of a bear or the smell of a rabbit. Your dog is descended from animals that must respond instantly to the slightest hint of danger or safety. To utilize your pet's best attributes, avoid using double-talk for commands or reinforcers. It's really not necessary to say it twice twice.