

HOW DO YOU TALK TO A RUSSIAN ROOSTER?

A few weeks ago I heard a report about a German shepherd that is working for our police department. The dog is a truly a remarkable animal: he sniffs out narcotics and explosives, pursues and subdues criminals, and can follow any trail. But, the report said, the dog reacts only to commands that are given in German!

I didn't like it. I am a strong supporter of English as the official language of the United States of America. Even if this dog is a recent immigrant from Germany he should be smart enough – just to be polite – to learn English and start understanding just the simplest commands like, “stop him”, “sniff” and “follow this smell”.

But then I looked at the problem from the dog's point of view. What about us, humans? How well do we understand what the animals are saying to us?

Before you assume that this is a theoretical problem that might be eligible for a government research grant but is of no practical use whatsoever, just think of this: most of our human unpleasantness is caused by our inability to understand one another.

Sociologists call this “ethnocentrism”. In the language of an ordinary person this means that we, that is, Americans, vegetarians, Irish Catholics, private pilots, democrats – members of any kind of a grouping to which we belong for one reason or another – believe that we are the ones who are right and that our opinions are correct. Even if we somehow manage to tolerate the peculiar people who hold, say, conservative, liberal, atheist, religious, chauvinist, socialist (and any others – you pick them) views, deep down inside our souls and minds we are sure that those misguided individuals are mistaken, or not thinking clearly, or misinformed or, maybe, they are just misled by the Devil.

We may be right or we may be wrong when we think that all those who do not share our views are barbarians. By the way, the word “barbarian” was invented by the ancient Greeks who believed that their culture and language were the only

ones that deserved respect; all those who spoke another language could be teased and humiliated for making incomprehensible sounds that sounded like “brr-brr” and thus, they were “barbarians”.

I am not attempting here to define who speaks and listens correctly. I simply want to show how different people hear the same sound differently. You can draw your own conclusions. If you wish, you can use Freud and Jung to analyze the discrepancies or just think of it as an amusing topic without social significance.

Here is my thesis: we don't really listen to our animals all that often, but when we do, we hear and imitate them differently. I am certain that French and German dogs bark indistinguishably and that a Russian and American chickens cluck the same but we hear them differently.

Every culture transfers animal “speech” to its own language, literature and folklore (especially in fairy tales and children stories). For example, an American rooster crows “cock-a-doodle-doo”, right? No, it isn't. In Russian he sounds, “koo-ka-ree-koo”!

I regret that I do not know how animals sound to Chinese or Indians but since I speak Russian as well as English, here is short table of comparisons for these two languages:

<u>Animal</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Russian</u>
Pig	<i>oink-oink</i>	<i>khriu-khriu</i>
Frog	<i>gribbit-gribbit</i>	<i>kvah-kvah</i>
Horse	<i>neigh-neigh</i>	<i>yo-go-go</i>
Chicken	<i>quak-quak</i>	<i>kudakh-kudakh</i>
Dog	<i>bow-wow or arf-arf</i>	<i>av-av or gav-gav</i>
Sparrow	<i>chirp-chirp or cheep-cheep</i>	<i>chirik-chirik</i>
Cow	<i>moo</i>	<i>moo</i>
Cat	<i>meow</i>	<i>meow</i>
Parrot	<i>Polly wants a cracker</i>	<i>Popka doorak!</i> (Transl. “silly parrot”)

Actually, the last example is not quite applicable since the parrot was taught by humans to say what he does. But think, the American parrot wants a cracker and the Russian one admits that he is a fool. Doesn't this point to a deep and significant difference between the two societies? America is a prosperous country with crackers for everyone, including parrots, but in Russia food is scarce, while one fool more or less makes no difference.

You probably noticed that both the cat and the cow make the same sound in both languages and that these sounds both start with "m". I want you also to note that both of these animals' names start with a "k" sound in the two languages: "cat" and "cow" in English, and "koshka" and "korova" in Russian. I am convinced that this is not just a coincidence and that linguists and philologists can, after lengthy investigations and studies, come up with several meaningful and groundbreaking explanations that would result in several doctoral theses.

As for myself, I confess that I have no idea why this is so.

Some of you may think that this article is meaningless. There is, however, an obvious meaning to it: we have been listening to the same sounds for thousands of years and we perceive them differently. After all, it is possible that the bark of a dog and the neighing of a horse is neither "gav-gav" and "yo-go-go", any more than "arf-arf" and "neigh". Maybe the truth is somewhere in between. But meanwhile I am quite sure that it would not be possible to convince a single American that roosters do not crow "cock-a-doodle-doo" but rather a peculiar and ridiculous "koo-ka-ree-koo"!