

What does your cat say?

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Soon you can find out what your cat's meow, purr, growling or hissing means. A new research project will investigate how cats talk with us humans – and how we speak to them.

Humans and cats have lived together for 10,000 years; during that time, a kind of communication has developed between us. But still little is known about what this communication looks like.

This will be remedied through the new "Meowsic" (Melody in human–cat communication) research project. By studying communication between approximately 30 cats and their owners, researchers hope to get answers as to what the melody (or prosody) in cats' – and their owners' – speech looks like. Linguist Robert Eklund is doing his best to "scrape together" cats and cat owners for the project. The cats should preferably live in different areas of the country, as Mr Eklund believes that cats also speak dialects.

"There is research showing that finback whales have dialects – they found six different dialects in northern Norway alone. As regards cats, it's likely because they mimic their owners, but we don't know. Yet," says Mr Eklund, reader in computational linguistics and senior lecturer in language, culture, and phonetics at Linköping University.

The cats that participate in the project will be filmed in their homes together with their owners. Since cats are curious creatures, the cameras will be set up a few days before recording so that they will get acquainted with the equipment. Then everyday situations such as feeding

and play will be recorded.

"We'll also challenge the cats a little bit, for example by petting them so they make contented sounds, and then pet them a little harder to see how they communicate when they become irritated," Mr Eklund says.

They will also study how cats communicate with each other and how that differs from communication with people. Another part of the project consists of studying how cat [owners'](#) speech sounds, and how that affects the cats.

From wildcats to housecats

Strictly speaking, it was wild cats that were the focus of Mr Eklund's research as a linguist. But when he met Susanne Schötz, reader in phonetics from Lund University, at a conference he realised that between the two of them they could contribute to research into the cries of cats. Mr Eklund has studied things such as the purr of wild felines, the roar of lions, and the agonistic ("angry") cries of leopards. Ms Schötz, on the other hand, was entirely focused on the [communication](#) of the housecat.

Mr Eklund argues that the knowledge they bring in through the project could be used in a range of contexts. How cats express themselves is important knowledge for veterinarians; cats are also being used to an ever greater extent in health care – retirement homes, for example – and by better understanding cats, we will also know what they want.

The data gathered over the course of the project will be collected in a sound database open to those who are interested.

Will your own cats participate in the project?

"No, I'm allergic. I don't have any [cats](#). I take a lot of allergy pills. But it's worth it."

Read more about the [project](#):

vr.humlab.lu.se/projects/meowsic/index.html

Provided by Linköping University

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