

HORSE SPEAK

THE EQUINE-HUMAN TRANSLATION GUIDE



Conversations with Horses in Their Language

SHARON WILSIE & GRETCHEN VOGEL

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:

Everything Means Something 1

What Is Leadership, Really?	3
<i>The Ideal Connection</i>	3
True Dialogue	4
<i>Species Relationships</i>	4
12 Easy Steps	5

Step 1:

Building Your Foundation 7

Finding Your “Inner Zero”	7
Managing “Outer Zero” and Adjusting Volume	9
Observation	12
Mapping the Language	15
<i>Signs of Emotion</i>	16
Mirroring	18
The Art of Conversation	19
<i>A Sense of Humor</i>	21
<i>Ask Good Questions</i>	22
<i>Pausing</i>	23
<i>No Wrong Answers</i>	24
Breath Messages	24
<i>Greeting Breath</i>	25
<i>Beckoning Breath</i>	25
<i>Interested Breath</i>	25
<i>Nurturing Breath</i>	25
<i>Relaxing Breath</i>	26
<i>Yawns, Big Sigh, and Shuddering Breath</i>	26
<i>Sentry Breath</i>	27



<i>Trumpeting</i>	27
<i>Deliberate Breathing</i>	28
The Bubble of Personal Space:	
Circles and Arcs	28
<i>Contact versus Space</i>	30
<i>Approach and Retreat</i>	32
<i>Go Away and Come Back</i>	33
The 13 Horse Speak Buttons	36

Step 2:

Observing Facial Expressions 41

Head Height	42
Muzzle	42
<i>Lick and Chew</i>	42
<i>Biting</i>	43
<i>Tight Lips</i>	43
<i>Curling the Lip</i>	44
Chin	44
Nostrils	44
Jaw	45
Eyes	45
<i>Blinking</i>	47
Ears	47
Learning to Read	50



Step 3: The Four Gs of Horse Speak and the Greeting Ritual 51

Greeting	52
<i>First Touch: Formal Greeting, "Hello," and Copycat</i>	52
<i>Second Touch: Getting to Know You and Copycat</i>	53
<i>Third Touch: What's Next?</i>	53
<i>Conversation: Greeting Ritual</i>	53
Rocking Together	55
<i>Conversation: Rock the Baby</i>	56

Step 4: Going Somewhere 57

Going Somewhere Part One	57
<i>Go Away Face Button and Play Button</i>	57
Scanning the Horizon and Sentry	59
<i>Conversation: Scanning the Horizon and Sentry</i>	61
Going Somewhere Part Two	62
<i>The Forehand</i>	62

<i>Conversation: Please Don't Pick Up/ Do Pick Up Your Feet</i>	64
<i>Conversation: Move Your Feet Over</i>	65
<i>Beckoning and "O" Posture</i>	66
<i>Conversation: Greet, Send Away, and Beckon Back with "O" Posture</i>	67
<i>Core Energy</i>	68
<i>Conversation: Back Up</i>	69
<i>Conversation: Blocking Forward Movement</i>	70

Joe: The Conversation Begins 71

Step 5: Horse Speak In-Hand 78

Calming Halter Conversations	78
<i>Conversation: Rock the Baby with Halter</i>	79
<i>Conversation: Rope Slide</i>	80
Furthering Our Claims to Space in Front of the Horse	81
<i>Conversation: Therapy Back-Up</i>	81
Going Somewhere Part Three	84
<i>Moving Forward Together</i>	84
<i>Conversation: Matching Steps</i>	85
<i>Target Hand and Understanding the Horse's Circles and Arcs</i>	87
<i>Variations for Fun</i>	88
<i>Conversation: Fun with Feet</i>	88
<i>Conversation: Obstacle Course</i>	90

Step 6: Grooming Ritual: Finding Unity 91

Sharing Space and Revisiting Pausing	91
<i>Conversation: Sharing Space</i>	92
Making Contact	92
<i>Don't Forget Your "Xs" and "Os"</i>	95
<i>Conversation: Managing Your Belly Button</i>	95

**Step 7:
The Five Levels of Intensity 100**

Learning the Levels	100
<i>Outer Zero and "O" Posture</i>	100
<i>Conversation: Practicing Posture</i>	102
<i>Exercise: "Assertive" Practice</i>	105
Fine-Tuning Your "X" and "O" Postures	107
Fine-Tuning Core Energy	108
<i>Conversation: Managing Your Core Energy</i>	108
<i>Conversation: "Are You Ready?" "Yes, I'm Ready."</i>	110
<i>Conversation: The Waltz</i>	113
Phasing Down	115
Fine-Tuning Approach and Retreat	116
Fine-Tuning Go Away and Come Back	118
<i>Conversation: This Hay Is for You</i>	118
<i>Conversation: Go Back, Come Forward</i>	120
<i>Conversation: Beckoning for Bonding</i>	120
<i>Conversation: Horse Hug</i>	121

**Step 8:
Negotiating Areas of Vulnerability and Defensiveness 123**

Getting to Know the Horse's Vulnerable Bits	123
<i>The Girth Button</i>	124
<i>Conversation: Breathe Up the Girth</i>	125
<i>The Jump-Up Button</i>	125
Making Friends with the Defensive End	125
<i>Conversation: "Making Friends" Behind</i>	126
<i>Punctuation</i>	127
<i>Gone</i>	129
<i>Conversation: Tail Swish</i>	131
<i>Hindquarter Sending Messages</i>	131
<i>The Hip-Drive Button</i>	131



<i>Conversation: Send</i>	133
<i>Conversation: Turning the Canoe</i>	133
<i>The Yield-Over Button</i>	134
<i>Conversation: Step Over and Rebalance</i>	134

Joe: In Hand 135

**Step 9:
Moving with Grace 141**

Becoming More Horizontal	141
<i>Conversation: Dancer's Arms</i>	142
<i>Pivoting Energy</i>	144
<i>Conversation: Pivoting with Dancer's Arms</i>	145
<i>Lateral Movement</i>	146
<i>Conversation: Lateral Yield</i>	146

Step 10:
Who's Driving Anyway? 147

Conversations on the Longe Line	148
<i>Understanding Your Whip or Crop</i>	148
<i>Conversation: Greeting Your Horse with the Whip</i>	150
<i>Conversation: Practice with the Whip</i>	151
<i>Conversation: Forward on the Longe</i>	152
<i>Conversation: Trace My Bubble</i>	153
<i>Conversation: Drop It to Stop It</i>	155
<i>Conversation: Completing the Circle</i>	156
<i>Conversation: Changing Direction</i>	156
<i>Adding Obstacles</i>	157
<i>Stepping Up the Pace</i>	157
<i>Conversation: Trotting on the Longe Circle</i>	157
The New Longeing You	159

Step 11:
Let Them Be Free 160

Horse Speak at Liberty	160
<i>Observe and Mirror</i>	161
<i>Conversation: Over the Fence</i>	161
<i>A Delicate Balance</i>	166
<i>Conversation: Liberty Trotwork</i>	166
<i>Releasing Old News</i>	167
Conversations on the Inside	168
<i>Conversation: Beckoning and Sending from the Inside</i>	169
<i>Predictable Directions</i>	170
<i>Conversation: Parallel Tracks</i>	171
<i>Target Practice</i>	171

<i>Conversation: Moving on Target</i>	172
<i>Picking Up Speed</i>	174
<i>Conversation: Trotting on the Inside</i>	174
<i>Conversation: Go Ahead, Canter!</i>	176

An Open Forum	178
---------------	-----

Joe: At Liberty 179

Step 12:
Now You're Up There... What Should You Do? 186

Mounted Conversations	186
<i>Around the Mounting Block</i>	186
<i>Conversation: Mounting with Breath</i>	187
<i>Letting Go</i>	190
<i>Conversation: Gumby Pose</i>	190
<i>Conversation: "Hello" Rein</i>	192
<i>Conversation: Copycat Reins</i>	193
<i>Conversation: Up-and-Over Rein</i>	195
<i>Building Body Awareness</i>	196
<i>Exercise: Palms Down vs. Fingernails Up</i>	197
<i>Conversation: Fingernails-Up Rein</i>	197
<i>Claiming Space in Front</i>	199
<i>Conversation: Mounted Therapy Back-Up</i>	199

Joe: Under Saddle 201

The White Mare: A Poem	207
Acknowledgments	208
Index	210

STEP 3

The Four Gs of Horse Speak and the Greeting Ritual

The Four Gs of Horse Speak are: *Greeting*, *Going Somewhere*, *Grooming*, and *Gone*.

- Greeting is how one horse meets another horse or human, or other animal for that matter (see p. 52).
- Going Somewhere (see p. 57) entails movement: a horse or human moving another, a horse or human being moved by another, or a horse moving together with another. This movement can be minor (yielding the head from your Bubble of Personal Space) or major (changing locations in the arena or pasture).
- Grooming (see p. 91) is a mutual invitation for touch. A willingness to Groom or be Groomed on the withers or crest or other places (with the lips or teeth between horses and with our hands and fingers when we're involved) indicates an intimate connection.
- Gone (see p. 129) is the horse's way of saying, "I'm finished with this," or flat out, "No!" It is a period at the end of a sentence; a break in Conversation. It is an important element that you both need to be able to recognize and to use when talking to your horse in Horse Speak.

In this chapter, we'll learn about the *first* G: Greeting.

Keys to Horse Speak: Step 3



Processes of Three (p. 52)
Knuckle Touches (p. 52)
Copycat (p. 52)
Greeting Ritual (p. 53)
Rock the Baby (p. 55)

GREETING

Humans greet each other with a formal handshake the first time they meet, and horses have a similar system. The Greeting Ritual is the basic platform I have created to teach humans how Conversations with horses can exist.

The Greeting Ritual consists of *three separate moments* in which horses that are meeting touch noses on the Greeting Button (see p. 36). The speed at which they may perform these three touches varies from lightning-fast to very slow. The reason for three official touches is simple: there is much to say in a first, formal greeting, and it takes two subsequent touches to sort it all out. Plus, I find that horses learn about the world around them in processes of three or more.

First Touch: Formal Greeting, “Hello,” and Copycat

A horse’s pecking order is different from a dog’s, for example, because horses are concerned with how to run and move together in case of emergency. In a horse’s world, any moment could bring danger, and the more alpha a horse is in pecking order, the more responsible that horse is for fending off attackers. In dog psychology, the alpha dog calls the shots, but in horse psychology, to lead is to be responsible for the welfare of those that are weaker. The only difference in horse social order occurs between stallions. A herd is typically made up of grandmothers, aunts, mothers, and daughters. There is one dominant stallion, and he not only guards his ladies from other rogue stallions, but from mountain lions, wolves, and bears. Stallions that have no mares band together in bachelor herds, and although they can enjoy some rowdy play, they tend to develop strong emotional bonds with each other and follow the same herd dynamics as any other herd.

Domestic horses are bought and sold and moved from barn to barn, and have to deal with new herd members often. Sometimes they are not turned out directly with other horses and can only socialize over a fence, if at all. But the formal Greeting Ritual remains essential for horses who are just meeting each other to be able to sort out who will tell who what to do.

The First Touch is much like a formal human handshake (fig. 3.1). It is the “Hello” followed by an immediate question: “Where

3.1 The First Touch in the Greeting Ritual: “Hello!” and “What’s your status?”



are you in the pecking order?” Horses size each other up and assess very quickly as much as they can about each other’s herd status. There is much more to it than just calling one “Alpha,” because a healthy herd has many diverse roles that get played out: the “Peacemaker,” the “Bully,” the “Sentry,” and the “Joker,” to name a few.

Immediately after the first nose touch, one horse will make a move in one direction or the other, which can be as subtle as a shift of the head position. The question is: “If I want to go that way, will you follow?” I call this *Copycat*, because in a friendly exchange, one horse will Copycat the other’s movement to indicate, “Yes, I will follow you.”

Second Touch: Getting to Know You and Copycat

After the delicate first encounter, there will be a second nose touch, usually with a deep inhale. This touch is a getting-to-know-you breath and will usually be accompanied by another Copycat gesture to confirm the leader/follower roles. This step can be performed slowly or very quickly depending on the personalities of the horses.

Third Touch: What’s Next?

Now the third and final nose touch can occur. This touch is the lead to other avenues of contact or the opportunity for the horses to break contact and go their separate ways. The Third Touch is important and in a superfast greeting ritual—such as may be likely to occur between two highly charged horses—this final straw can erupt into squealing, striking, or other displays of contest or play. However, in relaxed horses this touch leads to the other Gs: Going Somewhere, Grooming, or even Gone. This is when the peaceful herd dynamic that horses desire most starts to emerge.

Luckily for us, horses seem to be impressed when humans figure out to extend their knuckles in *one* “Hello” touch, and they are happy to welcome us into their world even without the entire formal Greeting Ritual. However, when a person can perform the whole Greeting Ritual, there is so much information exchanged that both parties will feel a much more intimate and intense understanding of each other.

Conversation: Greeting Ritual

1 Knuckle Touch to the horse’s Greeting Button to say, “Hello,” followed by an obvious turn to the side to see if the horse will Copycat your movement and offer to be your follower (figs. 3.2 A & B). The Knuckle Touch should be made with your hand in a soft fist, knuckles up.

3.2 A–F *First Knuckle Touch: A cautious, “Hello,” staying mindful of our Bubbles of Personal Space (A). Copycat: I offer to lead; Vati cocks an ear in that direction (B). Second Knuckle Touch: A more comfortable touch as we are “getting to know” each other. Vati offers to sniff my hand and begins to cock her ear to the side (C). Copycat again: Vati keeps sniffing my hand as I look again to the side, indicating she is trusting me more (D). Third Knuckle Touch: We breathe softly at each other... (E) ...and then ask, “What’s next?” (F).*



2 A second Knuckle Touch to say, “Getting to know you!” followed by one more turn to the side to confirm the horse will offer to follow you (figs. 3.2 C & D).

3 A third Knuckle Touch to say, “What’s next?” with soft breathing. This could lead to you going somewhere together, grooming, or separating peacefully (figs. 3.2 E & F). The third touch is where the next level of Conversation begins. This is where some inherent differences in what humans and horses value can lead to misinterpretations of actions (figs. 3.3 A & B). Horses value space more than touch, but we value touch more than space (at least with animals).

ROCKING TOGETHER

No doubt, you’ve seen horse friends express connection with each other by grooming each other with a rhythmic toothy scratching of each other’s withers and back. We are going to discuss Grooming at greater length later in the book (see p. 91) but for now you should know that a horse may invite Grooming from a human by lingering at the *third* Knuckle Touch in the Greeting Ritual. When this happens, naturally reach to scratch the withers area. I recommend placing your other hand, knuckles up, below the horse’s muzzle so he has something to target if he feels like lipping you in return.

When you watch two horses scratching each other’s withers with their teeth, you will see them rocking together slightly. There is a sweet Conversation you can mimic—I call it *Rock the Baby*. It takes advantage of this friendly area just where the withers slope toward the horse’s back—the Grooming Button (see p. 39). If you are comfortable in your relationship, you can Rock the Baby on the horse’s withers while he is at liberty in his stall or pasture. Later, we will discuss doing it with a halter and lead rope (see p. 79).



3.3 A & B
Some horses naturally enjoy friendly touch (A). Others are more reserved about touch—horses value space over touch (B).

Conversation: Rock the Baby

- 1 Stand with Inner Zero (see p. 8) at the horse's girth line, facing the same direction your horse is looking.
- 2 Place your hand closest to the horse across his withers.
- 3 Now slowly shift your weight from one foot to the other. Start connecting your shift to your in-breath and out-breath.
- 4 With your hand, feel the effect you are having on the horse's body. You'll begin to feel his weight shift from one front leg to the other. You can begin to quietly encourage his internal "rock": Slightly increase your movement, perhaps by swinging your hips slightly with your weight shift. The idea is not to forcibly rock him but to let him *join in the movement* if he wishes.

The Rock the Baby Conversation connects your horse's sense of balance to your own. Anytime you foster balance with your horse you create mutual balance. When you create physical well-being (via balance) with a horse, you are also creating emotional well-being.



I must note that many horses will choose Going Somewhere rather than Grooming directly following the Greeting Ritual, so we are going to explore that "G" in more detail first (see p. 57). However, we as humans who crave touch usually want to put our hands on our horses as soon as possible. If we can delay our need for physical comfort and follow the horses' protocol, we will create a deep sense of trust in our horses. Even a horse who seems to *want* touch, who is either conditioned to be used to it or comes across like a sort of giant puppy, rubbing his head all over you, will benefit from your restraint and from following the Going Somewhere part of the ritual first. The reason is simple: Establishing who leads whom, and who follows whom is more essential to our mutual trust and safety and will generate more authentic affection from the horse than touch. He will enjoy your clarity of purpose.

STEP 4

Going Somewhere

Luckily, the Going Somewhere part of the Four Gs of Horse Speak can be enacted simply, painlessly, and with great effectiveness—even across a fence or over a stall door.

GOING SOMEWHERE PART ONE

Go Away Face Button and Play Button

There is a Button toward the back of the horse's cheek, which I call the *Go Away Face Button* (see p. 37). Horses use this Button by either indicating toward it in the air or by directly nudging it. This is one of the first Buttons "Momma" would have taught her newborn foal. As we discussed in Step 1, In Horse Speak, this Button simply means, "Move your face away from my Bubble of Personal Space." Since horses have such long necks, it is not always necessary for a horse to move completely away from the spot he is standing in order to give another horse space. By simply yielding his face to the side, he can give adequate room for another horse to feel respected.

You can see this "bubble dance" around horses' faces at the water tank, over a pile of hay being shared, or in manmade situations, such as when horses are in harness together or tied near each other. In these scenarios it may not be feasible or possible for horses to actually move away from each other completely, so simply yielding head space is enough to keep the peace.

Keys to Horse Speak: Step 4



- Go Away Face Button (p. 57)
- Play Button (p. 58)
- Scanning the Horizon (p. 59)
- Sentry (p. 60)
- The Forehand (p. 62)
- Don't Pick Up/Pick Up Feet (p. 63)
- The Mid-Neck Button (p. 64)
- Move Your Feet Over (p. 65)
- "O" Posture (p. 66)
- "X" Posture (p. 68)
- Core Energy (p. 68)
- Blocking Forward Movement (p. 70)

4.1 A & B

Often it is not necessary to physically push the Go Away Face Button (A), simply pointing at the Button is enough (B).



For our purposes, knowing about this Button is key to gaining a horse's respect for our own Bubble of Personal Space, without necessarily requiring him to use his feet and step away. Since this is a Button that *all* horses use, and its use is in context with a calmer space-claiming request, including it in Horse Speak taps into the horse's innate sense of calm Conversation.

4.2 Rocky curls his lip playfully as I touch the Play Button. People often push here when trying to get a horse out of their space—which sends mixed messages to the horse.

The first step to asking a horse to engage in Going Somewhere is to simply use the Go Away Face Button and request that he move his face to the side, giving your Bubble more space (figs. 4.1 A & B).

Interestingly, horses that tend to be “space invaders” often have their muzzles or noses pushed away by their handlers (sometimes with a lot of force). However,

the area between the mouth and the cheek bone, right above where the bit ring sits, is the *Play Button* (p. 36)! Horses will nudge and nip at each other's noses and muzzles to indicate they want to play, and so touching there indicates it is perfectly fine for them to invade your Bubble of Personal Space (fig. 4.2).

This major misunderstanding between our two species causes much frustration and even head-shyness in our horses. By pushing on the Play Button but intending to send the horse's face away, we end up frustrated with a horse that is doing exactly what we said he *could* do—invade our bubble and play games with us.



Aim your hand higher up on his cheek, directly under his eye, and use a firm finger when you push the Go Away Face Button. This will get excellent results because the horse will understand what this means: move his face over and keep it away from your bubble. When your horse is used to putting his face in your space, you will have to reinforce this Button several times before he understands that you mean for him to give you space *permanently*. In contrast, if you push on the side of his mouth or nose, you will see that he swings his face into your bubble very soon after, ready to play.

In some cases, a horse may be very defensive and pin his ears when you ask him to move his face away. If this happens, keep your distance for your own safety, and use a crop with a soft end or a light item that swings, such as some baling twine, toward the Go Away Face Button from a reasonable distance. *As soon* as your horse moves his head *a little bit away*, go to Zero and leave. If a horse is this defensive, there are reasons. You do not want to enter into a pushing contest with a defensive horse, and you do not need to come at this phase with an improper attitude of needing to win, prove you're boss, or any other aggressive feelings. He is already defensive, so it won't help to make him *more* defensive. Remind yourself that you are emulating his mother's first nudge, and that this Button is so engrained in Horse Speak that it has its own powerful meaning to him.

I have had incredible success with even violently defensive horses by staying at Zero and repeating my request at regular intervals after the "Hello" Knuckle Touch. As long as you thank him for complying in any way, let it go and walk away once he has made even the smallest try, this Button works miracles. The reason it can be so transformative is simple: you are not asking for any other parts of his body to yield space, you are quitting fast and returning to Zero, which imitates how horses make requests. You are also using a very intimate Button in Horse Speak. Remember, this is the Button horses use for low-impact, calm Conversation *in most cases*. This Button builds both trust and respect with very little effort on either side of the fence, and it will convince the horse that you are indeed trying to talk to him in Horse Speak.

Scanning the Horizon and Sentry

Before you are ready to move the horse's front feet over and begin the ritual of Going Somewhere with the forehead, you need to advance the Copycat game we learned about in the Greeting Ritual (see p. 53) to the next level. Horses use a gesture I call *Scanning the Horizon*. This simply means that the Alpha horses will look far and wide on occasion and decide if there are threats or not (fig. 4.3). At regular intervals in the

day, or anytime there is a disturbance, herd leaders will lift their heads high, stop chewing, perk their ears up, and sniff deeply. When one horse wants to encourage another to follow him or wants to reassure another horse that he is safe and all is well, the leader will Scan the Horizon *for no real reason* other than to prove to the “weaker” member of the herd that he is looking out for everyone, and should be listened to. If all is clear, the horse simply lowers his head and returns to eating, often with a nose-clearing snort, which I’ll discuss next.

The advanced stage of Scanning the Horizon includes the act of *Sentry*. Usually one horse plays Sentry in a herd. This is the singular animal that makes the decision



to run or not. The Sentry will often be more dramatic in his assessment of the environment and include a loud blow through the nose in the direction of any disturbance—the *Sentry Breath* (see p. 27). The loud blow happens for a few reasons: First, this clears the nose of debris so the horse can get a better sniff of whatever is out there; second, the sound is startling to hear and causes the other horses to look up and pay attention while warning the potential threat that the Sentry is on to them.

We’ve already talked about the Sentry Breath in this book—“blowing away the bogeyman,” as I call it. Making a loud blowing sound in the direction a horse is spooking at (and you may never know what it was the horse saw or smelled, so just assume that horse-eating squirrels are loose again!) causes the horse to believe you are alert to the environment and watching out for his well-being. (I have actually had horses at liberty come hide behind me after I blew away their bogeymen.)

After a horse blows the Sentry Breath, if all is clear, he will visibly relax by lowering his head, Licking and Chewing (see p. 42)—this tells the herd that everything’s fine. When you blow a Sentry Breath, you will need to return to Zero, too, and even pretend to chew gum to tell your horse that all is clear.

Scanning the Horizon and Sentry Breath are important to know about before you enter into the Going Somewhere ritual with a horse because staying safe is what horses value and are concerned about. A great deal of what horses talk about

4.3 Rocky Scans the Horizon to show Vati he is looking out for her.