

# Ever wonder what your Tonk would say if it could talk?

*An increasing number of cat owners are teaching their feline companions to communicate using buttons, and the results are as intriguing as they are adorable. From asking for treats to expressing their moods, this technology in cat communication offers a fascinating glimpse into the minds of our furry friends.*

***In this article Steph Newington tells us about her Catmunication story:***

I come from a long background of teaching non-verbal children with complex needs - and communication in animals and what we can teach them has always fascinated me!

**I have 4 Tonks** and I have signed key words to my cats since they were kittens to see if they could learn more words that way ('finished' was a particularly good one with Solomon after 4 hours of playing fetch!) and I've done clicker training with them since they were young.

Maisie was never treat orientated and would go on the wheel, but when she decided she liked treats three years ago I was amazed that she knew most commands. Moses was (I thought) my rather intellectually challenged cat who was still only doing 'sit' after 6 years!

On their 6th birthdays I bought Sammie and Solomon a set of voice activated switches thinking that they would love it and we'd be having conversations before long. I started **(thinking they'd be YouTube stars using sentences in a few months)** with two switches, placed underneath the cupboards where we kept, 'biscuit' and 'treats'. I helped them put their paws on each and rewarded them immediately but nothing ever came of it and 18 months passed.

## **Some background info:**

I used to carry the cats down to my tortoise enclosure where there were two full height pens with a shed in between. One day during the first lockdown a strange cat went across the garden, and long story short, Moses has had misdirected aggression towards Sammie ever since, but only when something in his body is out of sync. He and Maisie also developed huge separation anxiety and had to go on Fluoxetine for inappropriate (to us) weeing. Unfortunately this has had a paradoxical side effect in Moses of increased aggression but only towards Sammie. It was getting serious.

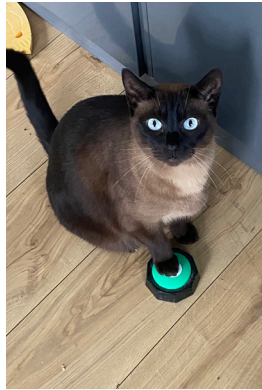
## **Exciting moment**

Then one day, Moses fell accidentally onto the switch saying 'biscuit'. This has happened many times with all of them but none appear to have seen the link. I shut all the others out as a look went across his face as if to say 'I think I made that happen'. I put his paw on it with a little pot of biscuits and gave him one each time I pressed the button using his paw. I only did it twice and waited. He looked around, looked at the biscuits, looked up and down, looked at the switch, studied it for ages as if it were an alien and then intentionally pressed it! It was such an exciting moment! I held the little pot and gave him one at a time. It was such a novelty I thought he would be sick!

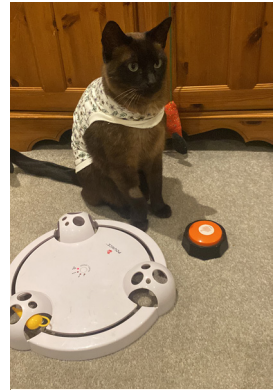
So, I thought back to school, put a few more in the pot, waited, showed him only a few left, then said 'last one' and then said and signed 'biscuits are finished for now' and shut the cupboard. He didn't do it for a couple of days after this and I wondered if it had been a one off. Three days later I put down his breakfast (a flavour I forgot he doesn't like) he went to sniff it, walked away and pressed 'biscuits'. I just had to give into him!

As time has gone on (he must have been doing it for about 8 months now) I make sure I use set phrases, like 'breakfast time / biscuits later/ biscuits have finished for now' and occasionally 'Moses stop talking!' Some people ask 'why don't you take the switches away?' but I won't. I think back to my non-verbal pupils and being furious when they went to respite and kept asking for things they couldn't have to the point where staff removed symbols. This is where we got the 'it's finished for now, we're not talking about it' as in, 'this item still exists but it's (literally) off the menu right now'.

Moses rarely asks now unless he's hungry, rather than for fun. Although sometimes he's like a child in a candy store and wants it instead of breakfast but he knows if he eats his breakfast he can have one or two after. If I know he's had too many and I tell him they've finished for now he sits right next to it for up to 15 minutes but won't press it and eventually walks off.



*Treats!*



*Play!*

He then started asking for treats. I tested him early on by having treats and biscuits (green is treats and yellow is biscuits) and swapping the switches and items around to see if he was intentionally asking for the one he wanted and he really was. He also asks for 'play' (this means any form of interaction, play, cuddle, stroke) and finally, one that I recorded several years ago for when you went away 'wee wee on tray' (he would only use a tray when I, or newly, a trusted person, is in the same room as him). Interestingly he just sits by the tray switch (white button), but has sometimes meowed to get me in from the garden and has run and sat by it so that I say it too and he will go!

Even more interestingly, his now ingrained triggers for going for Sammie were hunger, need for interaction and to use the tray and since he's been using these switches there has been nothing worse than a paw whack towards Sammie. **Proof that animals sometimes need support to communicate and even more proof that he's actually very bright!** He's also now the most popular cat, cos the others, especially Sammie, go and get him to press the switch! (even though he can open the cupboard himself!)

He's also showing us his cat sense of humour! One of his favourite biscuit feeders is a dog spinning one that they can all operate themselves. One day cat dad spun it for them and they flew everywhere causing much fun! The next time we had that feeder, they all sat under it. Moses, making very clear eye contact to cat dad, walked over pressed 'biscuit' looked at him again and just sat there until he spun it really fast!

I'm now deciding what to introduce next, whether to make sentences or to label more things. He may only have 4 switches at the moment, but he knows what he's doing, is a great communicator and arguer - and it has transformed the household! If anyone would like to see him, I have rather a lot of videos; I also have one showing him using two and picking out biscuits and treats! Never assume you have a cat who's not as bright as the others! And no, he still can't do clicker, but then the others can't use switches! He's my unique boy!

**Written by Steph Newington**

To watch Steph's video's go to our website:

[www.tonkinesecatclub.co.uk](http://www.tonkinesecatclub.co.uk)  
press "Articles" - you will find her videos under Catmunication

## How do talking buttons work?

### Three Simple Steps to Teaching Buttons

Getting started with cat talking buttons is easy and requires only a few basic steps. Choose the words, teach your cat the words, and practice regularly with rewards.

#### Record a Word or Phrase

Record a word or phrase that is motivating to your cat and easy to "model" or show what it means, like "Play".

#### Show Your Cat How to Use the Button

"Model" how to use the button by pressing it, saying the word aloud and then doing the thing associated with the button.

#### Reinforce Learning

When your cat presses a button, respond appropriately to let them know you understand. This helps your cat learn which button means which word or action.

#### How long will it take to teach my cat?

Teach Them to Use Buttons in Less Than 15 Minutes a Day. Buttons are meant to be incorporated into your daily routine so it's more about forming new habits in your interactions with your learner than outlining rigorous teaching schedules.

For more info check out:

<https://fluent.pet/pages/talking-cat-buttons>

