

## The Pragmatics of Emotion Language

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*Embodying the emotions* also involves theoretically situating them in the *social body* such that one can examine how emotional discourses are formed by the shapes of the ecologies and political economies in which they arise. (Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990, p. 13; italics added)

Sabini and Silver (this issue) present a model of emotion language in which the link between emotional experience and emotion word is determined by the social context of communication. According to their view, emotion words do not necessarily map onto specific emotional experiences—on one hand, the same experiential state can be described by different words, as in the case of embarrassment and shame, but on the other hand, different experiential states might be described by the same word, as in the case of regret. Such a mismatch of emotion and lexicon is hypothesized to exist because emotion words are descriptions produced by an observer who infers certain psychological characteristics of a person, in a given context. Following appraisal theories (e.g., Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Roseman & Smith, 2001; Scherer, 2001), Sabini and Silver propose that emotions are often the result of subjective interpretation. However, Sabini and Silver’s model goes beyond standard appraisal models because they argue that the interpretation of the affective experience occurs relative to an (actual or implied) audience, and constitutes a communicative act. Emotion terms thus implicitly convey the knowledge that both speaker and audience bring to the communicative table.

Because the manner in which experiential states map onto lexical terms is constrained by the communicative context, Sabini and Silver’s (this issue) model concerns the pragmatics of emotion language. Such a pragmatic account is a novel proposal in the social psychology of emotion terms; however, theories in both pragmatics (e.g., Sperber & Wilson, 1995), and cognitive linguistics (e.g., Gibbs, Leggitt, & Turner, 2002; Gibbs & Van Orden, 2003; Kövecses, 2000) have dealt with contextual aspects of emotion language. Two consequences resulting from those accounts are especially worth considering in the context of Sabini and Silver’s target article: First, the pragmatic aspect of emotion language that involves a communicative intention, and second, how emotion language is embodied in the social context.

### **Pragmatic Aspects of Emotion Language: Communicative Intention**

In recent years, one of the most influential models of communication has been relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2003). Developed out of Grice’s conversational theory (1957), this model of communication proposes that comprehension requires a common base of a cognitive environment that is shared by speaker and audience. A cognitive environment consists of the set of manifest facts that speaker and audience are willing to entertain as true, or at least as probably true. Such manifest facts are the result of either being directly perceived, or of being inferred. Much of communication actually has to be inferred: According to relevance theory, the speaker demonstrates the intention to convey a certain thought, and the audience needs to infer the communicative intention from the provided evidence. The important point, then, is that both speaker and audience entertain a common reality, of which a lot of information is not actually given, but has to be inferred. This view sharply contrasts with standard models of communication that assume that a “sender” packages, or encodes, a “message,” which is then decoded by a “receiver” (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1949). According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), it is not the coding or decoding of message content that is involved in successful communication, but the making of inferences about the communicative intention of the speaker. Communication thus goes well beyond what is actually being said; however, deriving these inferences requires effort on the part of the audience.

The goal of communication is thus to accomplish the greatest possible cognitive outcome while expending the smallest possible processing effort—namely, to communicate only what is relevant. Relevance is defined by the relationship of cognitive outcome relative to processing effort. The greater the cognitive effect of a communicative act, the greater the relevance of the communication. Because all cognitive processing is effortful, less processing effort is most desirable, and thus, the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance. Based on this notion, two communicative principles follow (Sperber & Wilson, 1995): First, communication aims at maximizing relevance; and second, speakers presume that their communicative acts are indeed relevant. In other words, people only say what is necessary, and do not say too much, nor too little. For example, if I was to tell you that you are right

now reading a commentary, my statement would not provide any new information to you, and thus, would not be relevant. Indeed, people who cannot make the elusive yet profound distinction between relevant and irrelevant are considered (at best) socially inept, or (at worst) autistic (Happé, 1993).

How is all this relevant to Sabini and Silver's target article? Consider the example of anger versus envy as discussed: A person is feeling angry, and does not realize that everybody around him interprets his feeling as envy, rather than as righteous anger. In this case, the speaker describing the event has information that is at the moment unavailable to the person actually experiencing the emotion; this information, namely the causal history on which the feeling of envy is based (becoming aware of another person's accomplishment) can be brought to bear to describe a complex situation to an audience—it is a relevant piece of communication. One emotion word—envy—can thus succinctly describe, with minimum processing effort, a rather complex state of affairs that consists of a person's desire to achieve a particular outcome, that person's inability to achieve that outcome, while witnessing another person's success at achieving that very outcome. Similarly, consider Sabini and Silver's example of shame versus embarrassment. Shame is said to be the emotion that one feels when one's actual shortcoming is revealed, whereas embarrassment is said to be the emotion that one feels when one's apparent shortcoming is revealed. The main difference between those two emotions lies in whether the existence of the shortcoming is real or not. Regardless, however, as long as both speaker and audience share, to use Sperber and Wilson's (1995) terms, the same cognitive environment, and hold manifest the same kinds of facts (whether true or not), the communication of a given situation is successful. Once again, a single word has the potential to succinctly summarize a highly complex condition. One need not say more.

According to relevance theory, one would expect that communicating some emotions might be more important than others. Among the more critical ones should be the ones that are most relevant to maintaining social relationships. For example, detecting the violation of social contracts is considered especially critical from an evolutionary perspective (Cosmides, 1989; but see also Cheng & Holyoak, 1985), and emotions associated with "cheater detection" should be especially relevant. Hupka, Lenton, and Hutchinson (1999) report data that speaks to this issue. They investigated how emotion terms were added to the vocabulary in 64 different language communities. Hupka and colleagues' methodology was modeled after the classic work by Berlin and Kay (1969), who looked at what color terms were central to the vocabulary. Berlin and Kay (1969) found that *black* and *white* were always present if only two color terms existed in a language,

red was added if there was an additional term, and so on. Hupka and colleagues (1999) analyzed languages regarding their most basic emotion terms, and found that all languages first developed expressions for anger and guilt. In other words, anger and guilt are for emotion terms what black and white are for color terms. This sequence in development of the emotion terms may have followed from the need to enforce certain rules of social conduct: Social contracts need to be obeyed; in the case of a transgression, anger indicates that a social rule has been broken. Guilt, on the other hand, indicates that the wrongdoer is acknowledging the wrongdoing. In this way, certain emotions are central for restoring social order. Thus, emotion talk has the potential to enforce a moral order, for example, by taking or denying responsibility for one's actions, or by assigning responsibility to others, and so on (see also, Bamberg, 1997). Some emotions appear to be especially relevant in doing so.

In summary, Sabini and Silver's (this issue) model of emotion terms is consistent with the notion of communicative intention in relevance theory: Speaker and audience share manifest assumptions, whether factually true or not. When speakers have additional knowledge that they consider relevant (e.g., insights into whether a person indeed consumes pornographic material or not), these insights are communicated to the audience in the most efficient way: A person is described as either experiencing shame, or embarrassment. Thus, one single word can contain all the underlying manifest assumptions of a given speaker-audience relationship, and thus can accomplish maximal relevance. What happens, however, when a single word is not enough, when experiences are more nuanced than can be communicated using standard emotion terms? These are the situations in which emotion metaphors enter the picture (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Gibbs et al., 2002; Ortony, 1975).

### Embodied Metaphors in Emotion Language

People talk about feeling *on top of the world*, *down in the dumps*, they might be *getting hot under the collar*, or be *shaking in their shoes*. These figurative expressions describing emotional experiences are very prevalent in everyday talk (Kövecses, 1990, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and can be processed effortlessly (for a review, see Gibbs, 1994). People are in fact especially likely to use metaphors when describing emotion, and use more metaphors for intense emotions than for mild emotions (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987). Thus, metaphors are particularly useful in conveying subtle nuances of emotional experience (Gibbs et al., 2002). For example, Gibbs and colleagues (2002) noted that figurative expressions such as *I totally ex-*

*ploded* are understood differently than literal expressions such as *I was really angry*. One reason why metaphors are so powerful in emotion language is because they have the potential to evoke vivid accounts that tap into actual physical experience, such as the experience of emotion (Ortony, 1975). Figurative expressions of specific emotions reflect aspects of the bodily experience of those emotions (Kövecses, 1990). Consider the examples of *anger* and *fear*, two emotions that vary greatly in their physical experience, as well as their conceptual structure. When angry, for example, people talk about *letting off steam*, *losing their cool*, *being ready to explode*, and so on. For those expressions, HEAT OF FLUID IN A CONTAINER is the source domain of the metaphor for which various “entailments” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) follow. For example, when a container explodes, what is inside of it comes out. Similarly, when a person cannot “contain” the feeling any longer and explodes with anger, all the feelings are set free (Kövecses, 1990, p. 55). Similar to anger, the metonomies used to talk about fear correspond to physiological and behavioral aspects of fear. FEAR IS FLUID IN A CONTAINER, but in contrast to anger, the fluid is not hot, but cold. Whereas anger is experienced as hot, and is characterized by an increase in skin temperature (Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983), this is not the case for fear. Thus, common expressions reflect feeling cold, such as *getting cold feet*, or *having a cold sweat break out*.

In addition to physical sensations, people also use spatial terms to describe emotions. For instance, the basic orientation of the human body in space (certain things are *up* or *down*, relative to the body) is used when metaphorically talking about *feeling up* or *down*. These expressions are correlated with what goes on with the human body when one feels a certain emotion: An upright, relaxed posture when happy, versus a slumped, drooping posture when depressed. Even when the spatial location of a stimulus is incidental, people appear to have an implicit understanding that good things tend to be *up*, whereas bad things tend to be *down* (Meier & Robinson, 2004; Schnall & Clore, 2004).

Could it be, however, that metaphors are specific to certain languages and cultures? In fact, similar metaphoric systems have been found across different, unrelated languages (Emanatian, 1995; Yu, 1995). For instance, some evidence suggests that the source domains that are used to describe anger, for example, HEAT and FIRE, are universal across languages like Hungarian, Chinese, and Japanese (Kövecses, 2000), suggesting that the shared nature of physiological processes associated with emotional experiences indeed results in shared conceptual structure. Thus, the figurative language involving emotions is not arbitrarily constructed, but reflects the specific physiological and behavioral as-

pects of emotional experiences. Because metaphors tap into those universal physical experiences of emotion, they are especially relevant for communicating feelings (Gibbs et al., 2002; Gibbs & Van Orden, 2003).

Studies of figurative language have been situated in the more general framework of *embodied cognition*. Investigators of embodied cognition assume that cognitive processes are influenced and constrained by the way we function in the world with our bodies (e.g., Barsalou, 1999; Clark, 1997; Glenberg, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). More recently, the value of an embodied perspective has also been recognized in social psychology (e.g., Barsalou, Niedenthal, Barbey, & Ruppert, 2003; Schnall, 2004; Semin & Smith, 2002; Smith & Semin, 2004). For example, the same assumptions that underlie the idea of embodied cognition are also applicable to embodied affect (Schnall, 2004). Central to the embodied cognition position is the assumption that cognition ultimately serves action, and a similar assumption can be made about affect and emotion, because affect provides information about the liking or disliking of objects and situations, and about the value of pursuing or avoiding particular actions (Clore et al., 2001). Similarly, attitudes serve not merely as mental structures of preference, but also as a compass for action (Clore & Schnall, 2005). A further assumption, which is especially important with regard to Sabini and Silver’s target article, is that cognitive and affective processes are constrained not only by the social context, but also by the nature of the human body. When it comes to communication, embodied language, such as emotion metaphors, has the potential to evoke emotional responses, more so than literal language (Gibbs et al., 2002). Thus, embodied metaphors make it possible to communicate with a high degree of precision the various subtleties of emotional experience, and thus, make communication optimally relevant.

In summary, as noted by Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) in the introductory paragraph, emotion language emerges from the complex interactions of cognitive activity that is contextually constrained on multiple levels. Communication is constrained by the social context, and the communicative intentions that have to be inferred in a speaker-audience situation. In addition, communication is also constrained by the nature of the human body, because emotion can be conveyed so well when using embodied metaphors. At the end, one need not, as Sabini and Silver fear, “trade ontological simplicity for theoretical complexity,” because what looks from the outside like a complicated set of rules is in fact evidence for how efficiently the “leaky mind” (Clark, 1997) works when cognitive activity is distributed across people, situations, and contexts.

## Notes

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