

Travelling emotions

Language as a window onto human emotions

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Human culture could be defined as the product of *minds* interacting with their environment. Since antiquity, the uniqueness of mankind in the animal kingdom has been defined in terms of capacity for thought. Humans are *rational animals*. The modern biological classification of the species as *homo sapiens* perpetuates this view of rational thought as the key to understanding what is human. Historians, social scientists and economists study events and cultural phenomena as products of rational human agents, albeit in complex constellations in sometimes chaotic environments.

Attempts to define emotions, and to understand their nature and significance for behaviour, have a long and fruitful history in the biological sciences, at least since Darwin's book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). But emotions also play a seminal role in human culture – they are praised and ridiculed in literature and discussed and defined in philosophy. Most significantly perhaps, emotions have a long tradition of being understood as antithetical to clear rational thought. One can be either emotional or rational, but not both at the same time. This view has been challenged by recent work in biology and neuroscience, and the importance of emotions even for rational behaviour is becoming increasingly clear (cf., e.g., the neurological evidence presented in A. Damasio's 1994 book *Descartes' Error*).

We know only very little about which emotions humans share with other animals, for one simple reason: other animals do not have language. The perceived complexity of human emotions must be a result of the still poorly understood interplay of evolutionary "emotional" responses and linguistic thought. A wide range of human emotions are available for scientific study precisely because they are encoded in language. *Homo sapiens* can be studied in a variety of ways, but language plays a key role both in our understanding of what it means to be human and as a tool to tap into what is unique about the species. Language "is perhaps the single most remarkable thing about our modern selves", to quote the paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall (in his recent book *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins*, 2012:3).

While language is a capacity shared by all humans, its expression differs widely across time and space. There are thousands of languages in the world. The cultural differences among the societies which speak these languages are perhaps as comprehensive as the linguistic diversity, while the physiological and cognitive capacities are shared by the entire species. Biology can account for these shared properties, but a complete understanding of cultural diversity is not possible without the contribution of the humanities.

The linguistic expression of emotions is indeed different from expositions of rational thought, although both are generated by mental activities or states. One crucial difference, which has consequences for the study of human cultures, seems to be that rational thought represents mental activities that are well known and well understood in all or most human cultures, while emotions give expression to cultural differences that sometimes seem unsurmountable. We can easily understand each other's mathematics, but the thoughts and feelings that define the religion, literature and art – in short the *life* – of another society can often be very hard to comprehend.

The very nature of language and its role as a mediator between the mental world of an individual and the physical and cultural environment, entails – almost by definition – that the linguistic manifestations of mental responses to life experience must be a major source for any study of the species.¹ In this realisation lies a hitherto unexplored scientific potential of the humanities. The language sciences (in a broad sense) are uniquely positioned – at this stage of our scientific understanding of the world – to make significant contributions to problems discussed in both the natural sciences and in the humanities. The study of emotions in this framework will prove to be a fruitful exploration of the potential of the humanities to transcend disciplinary boundaries in the study of human nature.

Culture can be defined in many ways, perhaps most uncontroversially as the collective behaviour of a given society. What makes different cultures different? How can we define and study these differences? It seems to me that this is the basic question of the humanities. Understanding culture means understanding differences. And understanding a culture different from one's own means understanding how people in that culture perceive the world. Cultural differences in

1. For a basic understanding of this problem, see Noam Chomsky's essay "Notes on denotation and denoting" in a volume edited by Caponigro and Cecchetto, *From Grammar to Meaning: The Spontaneous Logicality of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 38-46.

the expression of emotions is arguably not only one source but perhaps a key source for understanding cultural differences as such. At the very least we must agree with the premise of David Konstan's 2006 book *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, "that the emotions of the ancient Greeks were in some significant respects different from our own, and that recognizing these differences is important to our understanding of Greek literature and culture generally" (Konstan 2006:ix).

So how does one go about studying emotions and the differences between expressions of emotions in different societies?

This project proposes a comparative study of linguistic expressions of emotions, from a number of different perspectives. The common denominator is *bilingualism* (in the technical sense of Uriel Weinreich's 1953 classic *Languages in Contact*, i.e. including what is sometimes called multilingualism). The project is geographically global and temporally panchronic, i.e. it investigates linguistic data from historical and contemporary cultures in China, India, the Near East and Europe (including the latter's offshoot in the New World). Fields of inquiry include translation of expressions of emotions in various cultures, analyses of linguistically relevant cultural expressions of emotions in L2 ("second language") text composition, language based problems of values and emotions in cultural interactions, relations between emotions and other semantic domains, etc. In short, the aim of this endeavour is to define emotions linguistically and explore the implications of emotions in language for an informed scientific discussion of cultural diversity. The main objective of all subsumed research projects will be to prove the relevance of language as a window onto human emotions.

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