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LANGUAGE AND EMOTIVE FACTORS: THE OUTLINE OF PROBLEMS INVOLVED

Introduction

The world of human emotions and its diversity have since the times immemorial challenged a number of disciplines that deal with interpersonal communication: psychology, neurology, evolutionary biology, cultural studies, anthropology, linguistics and even so distant branches as economics, criminology, political science or law. The complex nature of emotions makes it practically impossible to study this phenomenon exclusively from one angle – relying on one method of analysis (e.g. psychological or linguistic) may prove insufficient for giving a complete account of the numerous problems arising.

The present paper aims at presenting how emotions may be viewed from linguistic perspective, focusing especially on terminological and ontological difficulties linked to the subject of emotions, and on the specific areas of research undertaken by contemporary linguistics.

Towards the definition of emotions

The broad use of the notion of *emotions* in many scientific disciplines makes it difficult to define it both clearly and disambiguously. The problem with working out a common definition stems from the complexity of this phenomenon on the one hand, and the attempt to embrace it in a comprehensive way on the other. Moreover, different disciplines tend to focus their attention to different aspects of emotions, and the differences concerning the same issue evolve over decades and approaches to the problem.

Among different attempts to define the phenomenon of *emotion*, stretching back at least as far as ancient Greek stoics, Plato and Aristotle, the most mainstream definition may be phrased after Kleigninna and Kleigninna

(1981:355)¹ as *a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, motivated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behaviour that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive.* In short, emotion would be a set of changes including psychological arousal, affection, cognitive processes and an outward expression of behaviour, which occurs when an individual experiences a certain situation. The question of how these psychological, cognitive and behavioural phenomena coexist and influence each other in a human experience of emotions, has been subject to various theoretical treatments (see e.g. Kleigninna and Kleigninna 1981, Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002). Their detailed account, due to the psychological rather than linguistic nature, exceeds the scope of this paper; however, as hinted in the foregoing, one should be aware that much of those findings may prove to provide useful background for linguistic research.

Etymologically, the English word *emotion* is derived from the French word *émouvoir*, based on the Latin *emovere*, where *e-* (variant of *ex-*) means “out” and *movere* means “move” (see Skeat 1963:193). In common understanding, the term *emotion* is often identified with *feeling*. However, as Pettinelli (2009) notices, despite the fact that both can be described as *unconscious thoughts*, they pertain to different phenomena. *Feeling*, being immediate and easy to identify, would be close to *sensation*, whereas *emotion* is a more unconscious and deeper experience, which affects more of us, because it is mixed into the rest of our mental system. Moreover, *feelings can be described in more detail than emotions because you can have a specific feeling for anything, each feeling is unique and might not have a name* (see Pettinelli 2009). As a result, there are only a few defined emotions, but an infinite number of ways of feeling things.

The distinction between *feelings* and *emotions* has also been discussed by Wierzbicka (1992, 1995), who strongly opposes to using the term *emotion* as a universal and common measure of all languages, because *this leads to confusion, chaos, and distortion of reality* (see Wierzbicka 1995:17).² Born out of the distinction between *emotions* (mental phenomena) and *sensations* (bodily

¹ Kleigninna and Kleigninna (1981) analysed 92 definitions of *emotion* from a variety of sources in the literature of the subject, evaluated and classified them into different categories, and proposed their own model definition, which aims at emphasizing the many possible and traditionally significant aspects of emotion and, therefore, attempts to resolve the terminological confusion.

² Wierzbicka (1992:177-179) suggests that *a truly fundamental human concept is feeling* – a far more universal term that could be safely used in the investigation of human nature, as opposed to the more elaborated, culture-bound, and not fully reliable, *emotion*.

phenomena), emotion *seems to be one of those concepts which originate in the English language and in the ethnopsychology embodied in it and which have become taken over by the language of the scholarship as one of its basic concepts* (see Wierzbicka 1992:178). In fact, the term in question does not have exact (or even inexact) equivalents in many other natural languages of the world, so in practice it refers to the English-speaking culture only and presents the reality from this particular perspective, as the author claims. Further, Wierzbicka (1995:17) argues that *we are imprisoned in our respective languages and cultures*, and, hence, no neutral or culture independent perspective is possible. This dependence should be borne in mind when undertaking any research on this subject.

How to give emotion a name

Challenging as it is, defining the concept of *emotion* cannot even compare to the extremely difficult task of putting particular types of emotions into words. Any attempt to do it must reconcile with the fact that emotions are actually undefinable and not fully possible to be expressed in words, just as experiences and emotional cognition (cf. Scheler 1916:62, Wierzbicka 1971:30, Nowakowska-Kempna 2000:75). What is more, since emotions refer to very subtle states of human mind and consciousness, their semantic structure is much more difficult to be formalized and expressed by means of words than other mental states. Another difficulty is posed by the fact that emotions may arise from subjective interpretation, which results in different emotions being named with the same word, or the same emotion – with different words. Bearing all these difficulties in mind, one may be tempted to try applying the method of explaining particular emotions through other words. However, this may hardly prove successful, as *if one attempts to define one emotion word via others, one will never be able to elucidate the meaning of any of them* (see Wierzbicka 1992:121).

Even more serious problems arise when attempting to translate emotion words from one language into another. In this context, a solution suggested by Wierzbicka (1992) is to decompose emotion terms into simpler concepts, such as ‘want’, ‘feel’, ‘think’, ‘say’, or ‘do’, which are held to be elementary values into which the sense of words may be decomposed. In this way emotion terms from a particular language may become meaningful to speakers of other languages. One of the examples given by the author is expressing the Polish words *tęsknota* and *tęsknić*, which do not have exact counterparts in English, by their decomposition into elementary parts which have simple English equivalents, i.e.:

X tęskni do Y →

X feels something like this:

I am away from Y.

When I was with Y I felt something good.

I want to be with Y now.

If I were with Y now I would feel something good.

I cannot be with Y now.

*Because of this, X feels something bad.*³

In this way, the meaning of any emotion word, often unique to a particular language and with no exact equivalents in other languages, could be presented much more effectively, retaining all subtle nuances of meaning content.

Typology of emotions

The range of emotion types is vast and heterogenous, as proved for example by the study of Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989), who gathered emotion words listed in different dictionaries and arrived at total number of 590 items. To take any odd example, the collection of words related to the concept of FEAR includes nearly 20 lexical items, i.e.: *fear, afraid, scared, fright, frightened, terrified, petrified, horrified, dread, alarmed, panic, anguish, anxiety, worried, concerned, apprehension, shame, embarrassment* (cf. Wierzbicka 1986, 1988). In an attempt to get to grips with this mass of words and underlying emotions, a number of taxonomies have been proposed, e.g.:

1. cognitive versus non-cognitive emotions,
2. instinctual versus cognitive emotions,
3. short-lasting versus long-lasting emotions,
4. positive versus negative emotions.⁴

Both philosophers and psychologists have long been trying to distinguish between essential and more marginal emotion terms, and thus to set up a system of basic emotions. "Basic" would mean these emotions which *occupy a middle level in a vertical hierarchy of concepts* (see Kövecses 2000:3), or appear to be more "prototypical" than others. For example, Ribot (1912) distinguished the following types: (1) fear, (2) anger, (3) love, (4) sexual feelings, (5) egoistic feelings; Watson (1924) – three inborn emotions: (1) fear, (2) anger, (3) love; Ekman (1982) – six core emotions: (1) anger, (2) disgust, (3) fear, (4) joy, (5) sadness, (6) surprise. Moreover, quite influential has been Plutchik's (1980) *wheel of emotions*, where eight primary bipolar emotions are suggested: (1) joy versus (2) sadness; (3) anger versus (4) fear; (5) trust versus (6) disgust; and (7) surprise

³ Taken from Wierzbicka (1992:121).

⁴ The last division is rejected by some psychologists (see e.g. Izard 1977), who claim that emotion as such cannot be positively or negatively loaded, but it is "shaped" by its experiencer. A crucial factor here may also be cultural differences.

versus (8) anticipation; and Parrot's (2001) categorized, tree-structured list divided into primary, secondary and tertiary emotions. Among those and a number of other classifications, the most frequently held core emotions are HAPPINESS, SURPRISE, SADNESS, ANGER, DISGUST, CONTEMPT, and FEAR (see Izard and Malatesta 1987), and the thousands of other related emotion words are seen as their synonyms. All in all, the core emotions are believed to be *biologically determined emotional responses whose expression and recognition is the same for all individuals, regardless of ethnic or cultural differences* (see Beck 2004).

In linguistics, a similar approach was pursued by Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989), whose hypothesis was that certain emotion terms are basic and unanalysable in the sense that they cannot be broken down into other, more basic emotions or attributes (a view also supported by Langacker 1987:149). This means that basic emotion categories like JOY or ANGER will normally be used as points of reference to describe non-basic ones like EUPHORIA, FURY, EXUBERANCE or RAGE, and not vice versa. For the English language, extensive research on this subject has been carried out by, among others, Fehr and Russell (1984) or Shaver *et al.* (1987); a growing number of studies have also been conducted in the area of other natural languages (e.g. Frijda *et al.* 1995; Smith and Tkel-Sbal 1995; Smith and Smith 1995).

The idea of core emotions is opposed by Wierzbicka (1992:119), who pointed to the fact that the emotions which have been called 'universal' can only be treated so by the speakers of English. Speakers of other languages may not be able to find equivalents for them in their own languages, so they probably would not identify some of them as 'basic' emotion terms. The author again emphasizes that *English terms of emotions constitute a folk taxonomy, not an objective, culture-free analytical framework* (see Wierzbicka 1992:119), so it must not be assumed that English emotion terms (e.g. *disgust, fear* or *shame*) may be clues to universal human concepts or to basic psychological realities. And again, along the lines of her research, Wierzbicka suggests using *language-independent semantic metalanguage* to talk about human emotion types, as well as taking into consideration the findings of other branches of science to any linguistic research on emotions. The discussion may be concluded by the claim made by Solomon (1984:249-250) who says that while *it is possible that some emotions may be specific to all languages, this should remain an open question for cross-cultural inquiry, not an a priori supposition*.⁵ The question of whether any universal, "pan-human" or "prototype" emotions exist remains open to further research of psychology, anthropology and linguistics.

⁵ Quoted after Wierzbicka (1992:175).

Different cultures – different emotions?

The reservations to the accuracy of using certain emotion terms in different cultures, as already illustrated with the example of the Polish emotion term *tesknić*, claimed to have no exact counterparts in English⁶, may lead to the following, general question: *If an emotion term available in L1 does not have an exact equivalent in L2, does it mean that the speakers of L2 do not experience the emotion in question?* Wierzbicka (1992:124) gives the following answer:

Possibly, all emotions can be, better or worse, expressed and described in words – in any human language. But each language has its own set of ready-made emotion words, designating those emotions that the members of a given culture recognize as particularly salient. Presumably, these language-specific sets overlap and, presumably, the closer two cultures are, the greater the overlap between their respective sets of emotion words.

This proves how close language is linked to cultural models of emotions, that is how different cultures take different attitudes to emotions, which, in turn, influences the people's use of language. For example, the Polish culture values *uninhibited emotional expression* (see Wierzbicka 1991:121), which may be illustrated by numerous hypocoristic forms of personal names and terms of endearment. In the Jewish culture good and bad feelings are expressed by means of good and bad wishes, whereas the Japanese language reflects the culture based on indebtedness, empathy and anticipating what other people might feel. All of these conditionings are visible in linguistic expressions of emotions in particular cultures.⁷

Emotions in linguistic study today

The linguistic interest in emotions came along with the development of cognitive linguistics. Before that, for traditional semantics framed within structuralism, emotional meaning was of minor importance and, as a phenomenon of connotative rather than denotative nature, achieved a somewhat peripheral status (see Lyons 1995:44). However, the linguistic discussions on the language of emotions acquired a new shape due to the development of the cognitive theory, the central claim of which is that human conceptualization of reality mirrors our physical experience with all its bodily and physiological limitations, which, in

⁶ Wierzbicka (1992:121) claims that none of the related English words (i.e. *homesick*, *nostalgia*, *to long*, *to miss*, *to pine*) conveys the meaning of Polish *tesknić* sufficiently.

⁷ On this issue, see Kövecses (2000).

turn, is reflected in language (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Johnson 1987).⁸ Another impulse to more intensive research on emotions came from the area of pragmatics, especially from the idea of *sociocognition* (see Fiske and Taylor 1991, van Dijk 1995), and the emphasis put on the dependence of cognitive processes on affective and motivational factors and on social experience (see Daneš 1994).

The contemporary investigation into the reciprocal relationships between language and emotive factor comes down to two basic areas of research: the first pertains to the ways people talk about emotions and the information language can give us about human experience and conceptualization of emotions, and, secondly, it addresses the question of the ways people express emotions in language in a variety of situational, social and cultural contexts.

The area of linguistic investigation labelled *emotional language* or *language of emotions* is by all means very broad and embraces the following groups⁹:

Expressive emotion words – used in order to *express* emotions (exclamations, insulting words, etc.);

Descriptive emotion words – used in order to *talk about* emotions, that is: lexical items used for naming emotions and psychological states (e.g. *love, hate, anger, depressed, sad*);

lexical items used for expressing emotional assessment (e.g. *beautiful, evil*)

lexical items which have emotional tinge by linguistic means (e.g. *Johnny, sweetheart*);

lexical items in which the emotive factor dominates over meaning, either permanently, regardless of the context and situation, or becoming “emotional” only in particular contexts (e.g. animal terms used negatively with regard to people, such as *pig, donkey, bitch*);

1. Figurative expressions – used in order to denote various aspects of emotion concepts, such as their intensity, cause, control, etc.

The latter group deserves special attention because of its internal complexity. Here, one may count **metaphorical expressions**, based on conceptual metaphors with physical or physiological source domains (e.g. *boiling with anger* – a linguistic example of the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS A HOT FLUID, *burning with love* – an example of LOVE IS FIRE, *to be*

⁸ This idea was investigated in a number of further studies, see e.g. Taylor and MacLaury (1995), Niemeier and Dirven (1997), Athanasiadou and Tabakowska (1998), Wierzbicka (1999), etc.

⁹ The following division into three main groups of emotive language is taken from Kövecses (1995a:3), whereas the subdivision of the *descriptive emotion words* group follows Spagińska-Pruszek (1994:10-11).

on cloud nine – an example of HAPPINESS IS UP (Kövecses 2002:4-5, see also Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Kövecses 1987, Kövecses 1986, 1990, 1991), and **metonymical expressions**, which involve a single domain or concept and are based on pragmatic functions from term to target, with the purpose of providing mental access to a domain through a part of the same domain (or vice versa) or to one part of a domain through another part within the same domain (see Kövecses and Radden 1998).

Comparative studies on emotion

It is claimed that people are likely to use metaphors when describing emotion of different sorts, as *they have the potential to evoke vivid accounts that tap into actual physical experience, such as the experience of emotion* (see Ortony *et al.* 1988). In fact, a lot of metaphors are built on physical experience (*to explode, to let off steam, to get cold feet, to have a cold sweat break out*) or spatial terms (*feeling up or down*)¹⁰.

The contemporary cognitive theory of metaphor regards metaphors as playing an important role in the folk and scientific conceptualization of emotions. The conventionalized language used for talking about emotions is viewed as an important tool in discovering the structure of emotion concepts (see Kövecses 1990). The primary question that arises is the one of whether emotions are conceptualized in a similar way in different languages and whether it would be justified to claim that human conceptualization of emotions is universal. In recent years, more and more researchers have been dealing with this problem, and a growing number of comparative studies have appeared for different languages in which English is contrasted with Chinese (King 1989), Japanese (Matsuki 1995), Hungarian (Kövecses 1995b), Polish (Mikolajczuk 2003), Wolof language (1991), etc. Apart from looking for similarities and differences in the language of emotions and underlying emotion concepts, an important question these studies target is whether conceptual metaphors shape, or just reflect cultural models associated with emotions.

Conclusion

The cognitive framework seems to comply with the need of interdisciplinary outlook on the issue of emotions, as it itself draws upon findings of psychological, anthropological and philosophical research. Along with undertaking further studies on the conceptualization of

¹⁰ See e.g. Kövecses (1986, 1988, 1990, 1991), Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Kövecses (1987).

emotions in different languages, from the detailed analysis of the repertoire of linguistic means used for talking about emotions to investigation into tendencies to use metaphors or metonymies to talk about emotions, some broader conclusions could be drawn. The greatest challenge seems to be establishing whether there are any cultural (social, economical, conventional, political, religious) conditions that may influence the relevant changes in conceptualizing emotions in different languages and whether it is possible to point to any laws or regularities that would govern these changes.

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