

Semiotics around the World: Synthesis in Diversity

Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of the
International Association for Semiotic Studies,
Berkeley 1994

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Offprint

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1997

Emotion families

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Precise measurement of facial expression suggested a metaphor which may be useful in thinking about emotion. We found not one expression for each emotion, but a variety of related but visually different expressions. The sixty anger expressions, for example, that we have identified share certain common configurational properties, which distinguish them from the family of fear expressions, or disgust expressions, etc. Variations within a family of fear expressions likely reflect the intensity of the emotion, whether or not the emotion is controlled, whether it is deliberately made or spontaneous, as well as the specifics of the event which provoked the emotion.

Just as it is useful to think of expressions as constituting families I have proposed (Ekman 1992) that we consider each emotion as constituting a family of related affective states, which share commonalities in their expression, physiological activity, and in the types of appraisal which call them forth. These shared characteristics within an emotion family should distinguish one emotion family from another. The anger family, for example, would include variations in intensity stretching from annoyance to rage. It should also include different forms of anger such as resentment, which is the kind of anger in which there is a sense of grievance; indignation and outrage, which are anger about the mistreatment of someone; vengeance, the anger which retaliates against a misdeed by another; berserk, anger which appears to others to be an uncontrolled response inappropriate to any provocation, and so on.

The characteristics shared by all members of an emotion family constitute the *theme* for that emotion, and are most likely to represent the contribution of nature. The different members of the family are *variations* around that theme reflecting more the influence of nurture and the particulars of the occasion when the emotion occurs. Our common language of emotion words may include many or few descriptions relevant to any of the emotion families. In English we have many terms for anger, some specifying how the person is behaving (e.g., argumentative, testy huffy, sulky, spiteful, etc.); some of which are metaphors (fed up, pissed off); and some referring to changes in physiology (hot, bristling). (See Tomkins 1981 for a description of how language may incorporate different aspects of an emotion).

Those studying the lexicon of emotion (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson and O'Connor 1987) have proposed a similar framework, although not using the term family. I believe the definitive evidence on what constitutes a family, and in particular the delineation of the theme for each family, will come not from the study of emotion words, but from closer examination of appraisal processes, motor responses, and ultimately from what is revealed by studies of emotion-specific activity in the central nervous system.

What information is conveyed by a facial expression?

We know virtually nothing about the type of information people typically derive from a facial expression when they see the expression *in situ*, accompanied as it usually is by speech, gestural and postural behaviors, and when the person observing the face has the usual array of expectations about what may be most likely to occur in that situation. The studies which determined the information observers obtain from facial expressions when they are seen out of context — disembodied — answers the question of what the face *can* signal, not what information it typically *does* signal.

Consider the messages which might be conveyed by an expression in which the brows are lowered and drawn together, the upper lid is raised and the lower lid tightened, and the lips are pressed against each other. The message conveyed may be about an antecedent event which led to the expression, for example, "someone must have insulted her". Or the inference drawn may be about what the person is feeling or thinking at that moment, for example, "she must feel very tense", or "she must be planning how to get revenge". The observer may interpret the expression in terms of what the person is likely to do next, such as "she's going to hit me". Still another possible message would refer to an emotional state using a metaphor, such as "she is boiling". Or, the message could be an emotion word, either a specific one such as "she is mad" or a more general one such as "she doesn't feel good". (See Ekman 1977 for a more complete account of the different messages provided by an expression.)

I expect that we could find better than chance agreement within a cultural group about each of these emotion-related messages — antecedents, simultaneous behaviors, metaphors, and consequent events — just as we have found agreement about specific emotion terms. Lakoff and Kovecses (Lakoff 1987) found similar emotion metaphors in English and Hungarian, but they only examined anger. The question remains as to how much cross-cultural agreement there might be about each type of message for each emotion. It is also not known which type of message participants in a social interaction typically derive, and whether this varies with the social context in which the expression occurs, the demographic characteristics of the expresser and the observer, or the personality of these individuals.

If a language has no words for an emotion, as has been reported by some anthropologists (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), that does not mean that the emotion does not occur in that culture, only that it is not represented by single terms in the lexicon. Levy (1984) argued that although the Tahitians have no word for sadness, he saw sad expressions in people who had experienced a loss. Unfortunately, Levy did not determine whether the Tahitians would have selected a "sad" expression if he had asked them to identify which face was that of a person who had experienced some loss, such as their child dying. Such studies have not been done in any of the language groups which reportedly do not have single terms for some emotions.

We do not know how salient facial expressions are when they contradict what a person is saying and/or what the observers believe to be normative in a particular situation. One could equally well argue that expressions will be ignored, overwhelmed by other sources of information, or just the opposite, that expressions will stand out due to contrasts noteworthy in such circumstances. Probably both will be found to occur, depending on the emotion, the situation, and characteristics of the observer and the expresser.

Note

Paul Ekman's work is supported by a Research Scientist Award from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH06092). A fuller report on this appears in "Facial expression and emotion", *American Psychologist* 48: 1992, 384-392.

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