

Emotion Review

<http://emr.sagepub.com/>

Language is Powerful

Kristen A. Lindquist

Emotion Review 2009 1: 16

DOI: 10.1177/1754073908097177

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://emr.sagepub.com/content/1/1/16>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International Society for Research on Emotion](http://www.isre.org)

Additional services and information for *Emotion Review* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://emr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://emr.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://emr.sagepub.com/content/1/1/16.refs.html>

Language is Powerful

Kristen A. Lindquist

Department of Psychology, Boston College, USA

Abstract

As Wierzbicka suggests in her recent review, language is powerful in emotion. Wierzbicka's solution is to remove the linguistically relative aspects of emotion concepts, like icing from a cake, to reveal the universal meanings below. In the present commentary, I suggest that language is a more fundamental ingredient in emotion than Wierzbicka's solution assumes; language can be no more removed from emotion, than flour can be removed from an already baked cake. As an alternate solution, I present a constructionist view of emotion, which not only recognizes the role of language in emotion, but also predicts and models its impact as language constitutes emotion experience.

Keywords

culture, emotion construction, emotion experience, linguistic relativity

Language is powerful—and as Wierzbicka suggests in her recent review, it is high time researchers heed its power in emotion. Language shapes (and misshapes) our understanding of others' mental states and determines (and constrains) which emotion categories scientists ascribe ontological standing to (Wierzbicka, 2009). Language also has a pervasive online effect in emotion. Learning new emotion words helps children identify emotion on other people's faces (Russell & Widen, 2002; Widen & Russell, 2008), and studies show that in adults, temporarily taking language away (Lindquist, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau, & Russell, 2006) or loading linguistic processing resources (Roberson & Davidoff, 2000) impedes the ability to see emotion on another's face (for a review, see Barrett, Lindquist & Gendron, 2007). No studies to date have explicitly tested the hypothesis that language shapes the experience of emotion in an online fashion, but evidence demonstrating substantial differences in emotion lexicons (e.g., Russell, 1991; Wierzbicka, 2009; Wierzbicka, 1992a; Wierzbicka, 1992b) and in emotion experience across cultures (Mesquita, 2003) is suggestive. Taken together, this burgeoning body of research suggests that Wierzbicka's basic call is indeed, on firm ground.

In the present commentary, I will suggest that Wierzbicka's solution for dealing with the power of language in emotion falls short, however. Wierzbicka's solution is to change how researchers *talk* about emotion. She suggests that via the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) methodology, researchers can take away the linguistically relative aspects of emotion concepts while still retaining each concept's underlying, universal

meaning. The result would be that scientists can talk about emotions as universal scientific concepts, yet this solution requires that some universal psychological state lies below the surface of each linguistically relative emotion concept, just as cake lies below a layer of icing. A constructionist view on emotion (e.g., Barrett, 2006a, 2006b; Barrett, Lindquist, Bliss-Moreau et al., 2007), on the other hand, suggests that language is not icing that can be removed from the top of a cake, but is in fact a fundamental ingredient in baking the cake itself. Language constitutes emotion; without it, a state is no more emotion than a cake minus flour or eggs is a cake. For better or worse, this means researchers cannot just change how we *talk* about emotion—but the upshot is that if we adopt a constructionist view of emotion and change how we *conceive* of emotions as mental phenomena in the first place, we will not only recognize but also predict and model the impact of language as it constitutes experience.

A Constructionist View on Emotion

A constructionist view on emotion stands in contrast to the predominate view that the English emotion concepts “anger,” “sadness,” “fear,” etc. are the basic building blocks of emotional experience.¹ Instead, it supposes that emotion is a phenomenon made of more fundamental ingredients: *core affect* and *conceptual knowledge of emotion* (Barrett, 2006a, 2006b; Barrett, Lindquist, Bliss-Moreau et al., 2007; Barrett, Mesquita, et al., 2007; Lindquist & Barrett, in press).

All human beings are endowed with *core affect*: an ever-present, ever-changing, basic feeling state with both hedonic and arousal-based properties (Barrett & Russell, 1999; Russell, 2003; Russell & Barrett, 1999). All human beings also possess the capacity for *conceptual knowledge*: what a person “knows” about emotion. Conceptual knowledge is thought to be grounded by language (for discussions see Barrett & Lindquist, 2008; Barrett, Lindquist, & Gendron, 2007; Barsalou, 2008) and so will be largely shaped by which emotion concepts a person's language encodes (Barrett, 2006b). In a constructionist view, a person “has” an emotion when core affect is conceptualized, in a split second, as one of any of the emotion concepts that a person's language encodes. The online effect of conceptualizing your affective state as “anger,” “fear,” “disgust” (or whatever linguistically-specific emotion concepts you know) is analogous to a Bible reader conceptualizing the meaning of Jesus' state as *smertnaja muka* v. *pilypos* v. *sorrowful* (Wierzbicka, 2009)—in

each case, conceptualizing the unpleasant state as having a particular meaning results in the experience (or the interpretation of an experience) of an entirely different emotion.

The Power of Language

Wierzbicka's body of work demonstrates minimal similarities (what she calls "semantic universals") and vast linguistic differences in the experience of emotion across cultures, and this is just what a constructionist view predicts. A constructionist view is different, however, because it assumes that variability in experience arises from the types and combinations of ingredients in emotion, not just the post-hoc effect of language on emotion. The result is tremendous cross-cultural and individual variability, even more than is predicted if one assumes language shapes emotion only after the fact.

Human beings all have the capacity for core affect, so some universality in emotion should stem from this common experience. Indeed all languages possess superordinate emotion categories that correspond to pleasant and unpleasant core affective feelings (e.g., Alonso-Aribol et al., 2006; Fehr & Russell, 1984; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson & O'Connor, 1987). The emotion concepts that languages encode vary substantially across cultures, however, to the extent that language constitutes emotion (and not just shapes emotion after the fact) there should be authentic and irreducible differences in emotion experience across cultures. Although we might assume that the experience of *perilyplos* is like that of *sadness* or *sorrow*, as Wierzbicka suggests, there is really no good emotional analogy.

On the other hand, similarities in emotional experience across cultures should exist when language overlaps. Language evolved in part to allow people to navigate a complex social world; so we would expect all languages, to the extent that their speakers live in a complex social group, to encode concepts related to this shared experience (see Barrett, 2006b). This could explain why some minimal universality exists in basic-level emotion terms (i.e., the most useful and commonly used categories) across languages (e.g., Alonso-Aribol et al., 2006; Shaver et al., 1987).

Finally, a constructionist model suggests that language will also influence the experience of emotion *within* cultures by constraining how affective states are conceptualized online during an instance of emotion (see Barrett, 2006a; Barrett, Lindquist, Bliss-Moreau et al., 2007; Barrett, Lindquist, & Gendron, 2007; Lindquist & Barrett, in press). What is felt (Lindquist & Barrett, in press) or what is seen on another person's face (Lindquist et al., 2006) is constrained by which emotion words are accessible at the time. Individual differences in conceptual knowledge might cause one person to experience a similar core affective state differently than another person: a person who knows several different words to describe how a person feels when cut off on the highway (e.g., "irritation," "outrage") might experience his affective state in this scenario differently than someone who only knows only the word "anger" (see Lindquist & Barrett, 2008).

In sum, a constructionist view of emotion takes seriously Wierzbicka's call to heed the role of language in emotion

because it views language as a fundamental ingredient in emotion (not just the icing on an already baked cake). In adopting such an approach, scientists will have to change how they conceive of emotions as mental phenomena in the first place—and this means that methods like the NSM alone are not sufficient to deal with language's role in emotion—but doing so will also give researchers power to ask and answer interesting and unprecedented questions about the role of language in people's mental lives, both within and across cultures. In conceiving of emotions as constructed mental phenomena constituted by language, researchers of emotion can have their cake and eat it too.

Note

- 1 In the history of psychology there have been a number of constructionist models of emotion (James, 1884; Wundt, 1897; Titchener, 1921; Duffy, 1941; Schachter & Singer, 1962; Mandler, 1975; Russell, 2003). A review of the differences between these models is beyond the scope of this paper but one common feature of all models is the idea that emotions are mental phenomena that derive from the combination of more basic psychological parts. In the present paper, I discuss the most recent and empirically supported constructionist model of emotion to date (Barrett, 2006b; Barrett, Lindquist, et al., 2007).

References

- Alonso-Aribol, I., Shaver, P. R., Frayley, R. C., Oronoz, B., Unzurrunzaga, E., & Urizar, R. (2006). Structure of the Basque emotion lexicon. *Cognition and Emotion, 20*, 836–865.
- Barrett, L. F. (2006a). Emotions as natural kinds? *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1*, 28–58.
- Barrett, L. F. (2006b). Solving the emotion paradox: Categorization and the experience of emotion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*, 20–46.
- Barrett, L. F., & Lindquist, K. A. (2008). The embodiment of emotion. In G. R. Semin & E. R. Smith (Eds.), *Embodied grounding: Social, cognitive, affective, and neuroscientific approaches*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Barrett, L. F., Lindquist, K. A., Bliss-Moreau, E., Duncan, S., Gendron, M., Mize, J., & Brennan, L. (2007). Of mice and men: Natural kinds of emotion in the mammalian brain? *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 2*, 297–312.
- Barrett, L. F., Lindquist, K. A., & Gendron, M. (2007). Language as a context for emotion perception. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 11*, 327–332.
- Barrett, L. F., Mesquita, B., Ochsner, K. N., & Gross, J. J. (2007). The experience of emotion. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58*, 373–403.
- Barrett, L. F., & Russell, J. A. (1999). Structure of current affect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 8*, 10–14.
- Barsalou, L. W. (2008). Grounded cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology, 59*, 617–645.
- Duffy, E. (1941). The conceptual categories of psychology: A suggestion for revision. *Psychological Review, 48*, 177–203.
- Fehr, B., & Russell, J. A. (1984). Concept of emotion viewed from a prototype perspective. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 113*, 464–486.
- James, W. (1884). What is an emotion? *Mind, 9*, 188–205.
- Lindquist, K., & Barrett, L. F. (2008). Emotional complexity. In M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, & L. F. Barrett (Eds.), *The handbook of emotion*, 3rd ed. (pp. 513–530). New York: Guilford.
- Lindquist, K. A., & Barrett, L. F. (in press). Constructing emotion: The experience of fear as a conceptual act. *Psychological Science*.

- Lindquist, K. A., Barrett, L. F., Bliss-Moreau, E., & Russell, J. A. (2006). Language and the perception of emotion. *Emotion*, 6, 125–138.
- Mandler, G. (1975). *Mind and emotion*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Mesquita B. (2003). Emotions as dynamic cultural phenomena. In H. Goldsmith, R. Davidson, K. Scherer, (Eds.) *Handbook of the affective sciences*, (pp. 871–890). New York: Oxford.
- Roberson, D., & Davidoff, J. (2000). The categorical perception of color and facial expressions: The effect of verbal interference. *Memory & Cognition*, 28, 977–986.
- Russell, J. A. (1991). Culture and the categorization of emotions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110, 426–450.
- Russell, J. A. (2003). Core affect and the psychological construction of emotion. *Psychological Review*, 110, 145–172.
- Russell, J. A., & Barrett, L. F. (1999). Core affect, prototypical emotional episodes, and other things called emotion: Dissecting the elephant. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 805–819.
- Russell, J. A., & Widen, S. C. (2002). A label superiority effect in children's categorization of facial expressions. *Social Development*, 11, 30–52.
- Schachter, S., & Singer, J. E. (1962). Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state. *Psychological Review*, 69, 379–399.
- Shaver, P. R., Schwartz, J., Kirson, D., & O'Connor, C. (1987). Emotion knowledge: Further exploration of a prototype approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 1061–1086.
- Titchener, E. B. (1921). *A textbook of psychology*. New York: Macmillan.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1992a). *Semantics, culture and cognition: Universal human concepts in culture-specific configurations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1992b). Talking about emotions: Semantics, culture and cognition [Special issue on basic emotions]. *Cognition and Emotion*, 6, 285–319.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2009). Language and metalanguage: Key issues in emotion research. *Emotion Review*, 1 (1), 3–14.
- Widen, S. C. & Russell, J. A. (2008). Children acquire emotion categories gradually. *Cognitive Development*, 23, 291–312.
- Wundt, W. M. (1897). *Outlines of psychology*. Leipzig: Engelmann.