

DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF LINGUISTS TO EMOTIONS

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the complex relationship between feelings and emotions, examining how these concepts are used and interpreted across different disciplines. The author critiques the common tendency to view emotions as more objective and therefore more amenable to scientific study than feelings, highlighting the “flight from subjectivity” that often characterizes this approach. The problematic nature of the term “emotion” itself is explored, emphasizing its multifaceted nature encompassing not only physiological changes but also feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The influence of language on our understanding of these concepts is also addressed, particularly how the English word “emotion” conflates feeling, thinking, and bodily experience.

Keywords: Emotion, feelings, behaviourism, objective, behaviouristic, body-related, thought-related, interdisciplinary, subjectivity, чувство, Gefühl.

Introduction

According to the biologist Charles Birch, “Feelings are what matter most in life”¹. While it is debatable whether they really matter “most”, they certainly matter a great deal; and it is good to see that after a long period of scholarly neglect, feelings are now at the forefront of interdisciplinary investigations, spanning the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences. Some would say: not “feelings”, but “emotions”—and the question “which of the two (feelings or emotions)?” plunges us straight into the heart of the central controversy concerning the relationship between human biology on the one hand and language and culture on the other. Many psychologists appear to be more comfortable with the term “emotion” than “feeling” because “emotions” seem to be somehow “objective”. It is often assumed that only the “objective” is real and amenable to rigorous study, and that “emotions” have a biological foundation and can therefore be studied objectively, whereas feelings cannot be studied at all. Birch calls this attitude the flight from subjectivity.

Seventy years ago the founder of behaviourism John Watson proposed the following definition: “An emotion is an hereditary pattern-reaction involving profound changes of the bodily mechanisms as a whole, but particularly of the visceral and glandular systems”. While such purely behaviouristic wordions of “emotions” have now been repudiated, “emotions” are still often seen as something that, for example, can be measured. Plutchik himself mentioned:

¹ Birch Ch. Feelings-Sydney.1995, p 67.



“Because emotions are complex states of the organism involving feelings, behaviour, impulses, physiological changes and efforts at control, the measurement of emotions is also a complex process”². Many anthropologists, too, prefer to talk about emotions rather than feelings - in their case not because of the former’s objective biological foundation but because of their interpersonal, social basis.

But the word emotion is not as unproblematic as it seems; and by taking the notion of emotion as our starting point we may be committing ourselves, at the outset, to a perspective which is shaped by our own native language, or by the language currently predominant in some academic disciplines rather than taking a maximally neutral and culture-independent point of view. The English word emotion combines in its meaning a reference to *feeling*, a reference to thinking, and a reference to a person’s body. For example, one can talk about a feeling of hunger, or a feeling of heartburn, but not about an emotion of hunger or an emotion of heartburn, because the feelings in question are not thought-related. One can also talk about a feeling of loneliness or a feeling of alienation, but not an emotion of loneliness or an emotion of alienation, because while these feelings are clearly related to thoughts (such as “I am all alone”, I don’t belong etc.), they do not suggest any associated bodily events or processes (such as rising blood pressure, a rush of blood to the head, tears, and so on). In the anthropological literature on emotions, feelings and body are often confused, and the word feeling is sometimes treated as interchangeable with the expression bodily feelings. In fact, some writers try to vindicate the importance of feelings for human emotions by arguing for the importance of the body. For example, Michelle Rosaldo in her ground-breaking work on emotions has written, inter alia: “Emotions are thoughts somehow felt in flushes, pulses, movements of our livers, minds, hearts, stomachs, skin. They are embodied thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that *I am involved*”³. Quoting this passage with approval, Leavitt comments: “This apprehension, then, is clearly not simply a cognition, judgement, or model, but is as bodily, as felt, as the stab of a pin or the stroke of a feather”⁴. We agree with Rosaldo and Leavitt that some thoughts are linked with feelings and with bodily events, and that in all cultures people are aware of such links and interested in them (to a varying degree). But we do not agree that feelings equals bodily feelings. For example, if one says that one feels *abandoned*, or *lost*, one is referring to a feeling without referring to anything that happens in the body. Precisely for this reason, one would normally not call such feelings *emotions*, because the English word emotion requires a combination of all three elements (thoughts, feelings, and bodily events/ processes).

In the hypothetical set of universal human words, evolved by the author and colleagues over many years’ cross-linguistic investigations, “feel” is indeed one of the elements, but “emotion” is not. If words such as emotion (or, for that matter, sensation) are taken for granted as analytical tools, and if their English-based character is not kept in mind, they can reify (for

2 Plutchik, Robert The Psychology and Biology of Emotion-New York.1994,p 87.

3 Rosaldo M.Z. Toward an anthropology of self and feeling.//In Culture Theory: essays on mind, self, and emotion.- Cambridge, 1984, p. 143

4 Leavitt J .Meaning and feeling in the anthropology of emotions//American Ethnologist ,23(3)-New York,1996,p 524.



English speakers and English writers) inherently fluid phenomena which could be conceptualized

and categorized in many different ways. Phrases such as “the psychology of emotion”, or “psychobiological theory of emotion”, or “operational definition of emotion” create the impression that *emotion* is an objectively existing category, delimited from other categories by nature itself, and that the word of *emotion* carves nature at its joints. But even languages culturally (as well as genetically) closely related to English provide evidence of different ways of conceptualizing and categorizing human experience. For example, in ordinary German there is no word for *emotion* at all. The word usually used as the translation equivalent of the English emotion, Gefühl (from fühlen “to feel”) makes no distinction between mental and physical feelings, although contemporary scientific German uses increasingly the word Emotion, borrowed from scientific English, while in older academic German the compound Gemütsbewegung, roughly “movement of the mind”, was often used in a similar sense. (It is interesting to note, for example, that in the bilingual German-English editions of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s writings, the word emotion used in the English translation stands for Wittgenstein’s word Gemütsbewegung, not Emotion) At the same time, the plural form - Gefühle - is restricted to thought-related feelings, although - unlike the English emotion - it doesn’t imply any “bodily disturbances” or processes of any kind. The same is true of Russian, where there is no word corresponding to emotion, and where the noun чувство (from чувствовать “to feel”) corresponds to feeling whereas the plural form чувства suggests cognitively based feelings. To take a non-European example, Gerber notes that Samoan has no word corresponding to the English term emotion and relies, instead, on the notion of lagona “feeling”⁵. The French word sentiment (unlike the Russian чувство and the German Gefühl) includes only two of these elements (a feeling and a thought). This is why one can speak in Russian of both a чувство стыда “a feeling of shame” and a чувство голода “a feeling of hunger”, and in German of both a Schamgefühl and a Hungergefühl, whereas in French one can speak of a sentiment de honte (a “mental feeling” of shame) but not a sentiment de faim (a “mental feeling of hunger”); and also, why one can speak (in French) of le sentiment de sa valeur (a feeling of one’s own worth) but not (in English) of the “emotion of one’s own worth”: one does not expect a feeling of one’s own worth to be associated with any bodily events or processes. (As for the relations between the French word emotion, the Italian emozione, and the Spanish emotion) Thus, while the word of “feeling” is universal and can be safely used in the investigation of human experience and human nature, the word of “emotion” is culture-bound and cannot be similarly relied on. Of course scholars who debate the nature of “emotions” are interested in something other than just “feelings”. In fact, the notion that “emotions” must not be reduced to “feelings” is one of the few ideas that advocates of different approaches to “emotion” (biological, cognitive, and socio-cultural) tend to strongly agree on. Since, however, it is the word of “feel” (rather than the word of “emotion”) which is universal and untinted by our own culture, it is preferable to take it as the starting point for any exploration of the area under consideration. This need not preclude us from investigating other

⁵ Gerber E. R., Rage and obligation: Samoan emotions in conflict, in White and Kirkpatrick-New York.1985, pp. 121-67.



phenomena at the same time. We can ask, for example: When people feel something, what happens in their bodies? What do they do? What do they think? What do they say? Do they think they know what they feel? Can they identify their feelings for themselves and others? Does their interpretation of what they feel depend on what they think they should feel, or on what they think people around them think they should feel? How are people's reported or presumed feelings related to what is thought of, in a given so cite, as "good" or "bad"? How are they related to social interaction? And so on. Nothing illustrates the confusion surrounding the term emotion better than the combination of claims that emotions are not cognitively based with the practice of including in the category of "emotions" only those feelings which in fact are related to thoughts (and excluding those which are not). For example, Izard explicitly states that "emotion has no cognitive component. Wierzbicka maintains, that the emotion process is bounded by the feeling that derives directly from the activity of the neurochemical substrates". Yet as examples of "emotions" Izard mentions "shame", "anger", "sadness", and so on - not, for example, "pain", "hunger", "thirst", "itch", or "heartburn". In practice, then, Izard, too, distinguishes cognitively based (i.e. thought-related) feelings (such as "shame" or "sadness") from purely bodily feelings (such as "hunger" or "itch") and calls only the former "emotions". While denying that "emotions" are cognitively based he doesn't go so far as to include among them "hunger" or "thirst". On what basis, then, does he distinguish his "emotions" from hunger, thirst, or pain? The very meanings of words such as shame, anger, or sadness on the one hand, and hunger or thirst on the other draw a distinction between feelings based on thoughts and purely bodily feelings; and the word emotion, too, is in practice only used with respect to thought-related feelings, never with respect to bodily feelings such as hunger or thirst. Thus, in drawing a line between feelings such as "shame" or "sadness" on the one hand and "hunger" or "thirst" on the other, even "anti-cognitivist" scholars like Izard accept in practice the distinction drawn in everyday conceptions. Yet, at the same time, they reject this distinction at a theoretical level.

A hundred years after the publication of William James' famous paper "What is an emotion?" some scholars still argue about the "right" answer to James' question, instead of rephrasing the question itself. For example, Marks writes: "What, then, is (an) emotion? The most obvious answer is A feeling", and then he goes on to discuss "the apparent inadequacy of the feeling view of emotion", citing, among others, the philosopher Robert Solomon's celebrated statement that "an emotion is a judgement" At the end, Marks rejects both the "feeling view of emotions" and what he calls "the New View of Emotions [as Judgement]" in favour of what he calls "an even Newer View... that emotions are not just things in the head but essentially involve culture" 6.

But there is absolutely no reason why we should have to make such choices, linking "emotion" either with bodily processes, or with feelings, or with thoughts, or with culture. The very meaning of the English word emotion includes both a reference to feelings and a reference to thoughts (as well as a reference to the body), and culture often shapes both ways of thinking and ways of feeling. All these things can be and need to be studied: ways of thinking, ways of

6 Marks J, Roger T. Ames, and Robert Solomon (eds.), Emotions in Asian Thought: A dialogue in comparative philosophy-New York,1995 ,p 3



feeling, ways of living, the links between ways of living and ways of thinking, the links between thoughts and feelings, the links between what people feel and what happens inside their bodies, and so on. But to study all these, we need a clear and reliable conceptual framework, and the English word emotion cannot serve as the cornerstone of such a framework. It is good to see, therefore, that even within psychology the practice of taking the word emotion for granted is now increasingly being questioned. George Mandler, who first tried to draw attention to the problem more than twenty years ago, has recently expressed surprise at the fact that “something as vague and intellectually slippery as emotion”⁷ could have been used for so long, by so many scholars, as a seemingly unproblematic notion. Speaking specifically of what is often referred to as the “facial expression of emotions”, Mandler asks rhetorically: “Are expression and emotion even the right words, or has our everyday language frozen in place ideas that were only half-baked and prescientific?”⁸

In conclusion, the exploration of feelings and emotions within a linguistic framework reveals the profound influence of language on how we conceptualize and experience our inner worlds. The very act of labeling internal states with words like “feeling” or “emotion” shapes our understanding of these experiences, highlighting the performative nature of language. The debate surrounding the preference for “emotion” over “feeling” underscores the ongoing negotiation within language itself about how to categorize and express subjective experiences. The inherent ambiguity of these terms, evident in the English word “emotion” which blends feeling, thought, and bodily sensation, reflects the challenges of capturing the fluidity and complexity of inner life within the confines of language. Furthermore, the cross-linguistic variations in the lexicons of emotion and feeling demonstrate how different languages carve up the emotional landscape, highlighting the culturally constructed nature of these experiences. This linguistic relativity necessitates a shift away from universalizing models of emotion towards a more nuanced, culturally sensitive approach. Ultimately, by analyzing the diverse ways languages encode and articulate feelings and emotions, we can gain valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and subjective experience, enriching our understanding of how language itself shapes what it means to feel.

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⁷ Mandler G. Mind and Emotion- New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975

⁸ Mandler, G. Foreword, in Russell and Fernandez-Dols 1997-New York,1997, pp. vii-x



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