



Human Emotions: Universal or Culture-Specific?

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Human Emotions: Universal or Culture-Specific?

The search for "fundamental human emotions" has been seriously impeded by the absence of a culture-independent semantic metalanguage. The author proposes a metalanguage based on a postulated set of universal semantic primitives, and shows how language-specific meanings of emotion terms can be captured and how rigorous cross-cultural comparisons of emotion terms can be achieved.

AS POINTED OUT IN A RECENT ARTICLE by Ben Blount (1984:130), "The past decade has witnessed, in contrast to earlier periods, an efflorescence of interest in emotions." Some scholars proclaim the birth of a new science—a science of emotions (see, e.g., Izard's statements quoted in Trotter 1983). One of the most interesting and provocative ideas that have been put forward in the relevant literature is the possibility of identifying a set of fundamental human emotions, universal, discrete, and presumably innate; and that in fact a set of this kind has already been identified. According to Izard and Buechler (1980:168), the fundamental emotions are (1) interest, (2) joy, (3) surprise, (4) sadness, (5) anger, (6) disgust, (7) contempt, (8) fear, (9) shame/shyness, and (10) guilt.

I experience a certain unease when reading claims of this kind. If lists such as the one above are supposed to enumerate universal human emotions, how is it that these emotions are all so neatly identified by means of English words? For example, Polish does not have a word corresponding exactly to the English word *disgust*. What if the psychologists working on the "fundamental human emotions" happened to be native speakers of Polish rather than English? Would it still have occurred to them to include "disgust" on their list? And Australian Aboriginal language Gidjingali does not seem to distinguish lexically "fear" from "shame," subsuming feelings kindred to those identified by the English words *fear* and *shame* under one lexical item (Hiatt 1978:185). If the researchers happened to be native speakers of Gidjingali rather than English, would it still have occurred to them to claim that fear and shame are both fundamental human emotions, discrete and clearly separated from each other?

English terms of emotion constitute a folk taxonomy, not an objective, culture-free analytical framework, so obviously we cannot assume that English words such as *disgust*, *fear*, or *shame* are clues to universal human concepts, or to basic psychological realities.

It is not my purpose to argue against the "assumption of the innateness and universality of the fundamental emotions" (Izard 1969:260) or against the thesis that "the emotions [presumably, the "fundamental" ones—A.W.] have innately stored neural programs, universally understood expressions, and common experiential qualities" (Izard 1977:18). The search for fundamental emotions, innate and universal, is akin to the search for fundamental concepts ("semantic primitives"), similarly innate and universal, in which I have been engaged for nearly two decades (see, in particular, Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1985a). I want to stress, therefore, that while many scholars may question this undertaking from a position of relativism or narrow empiricism, my own strictures have a totally different basis. I am in sympathy with the attempts to capture what is fundamen-

tal, universal, and presumably innate. I am also in sympathy with attempts to discover discrete categories behind the apparent “fuzziness” of human cognition.

I would like, however, to draw attention to some aspects of the task at hand that so far have not received due attention, and that seem to me important. My suggestions can be outlined as follows: (1) If we want to posit universal human emotions we must identify them in terms of a language-independent semantic metalanguage, not in terms of English folk words for emotions (or in terms of English scientific expressions such as “a loss of situational self-esteem” for shame-like emotions). (2) Lexical discriminations in the area of emotions (as in other semantic fields) provide important clues to the speakers’ conceptualizations. (3) The study of the interplay between the universal and the culture-specific aspects of emotions must be seen as an interdisciplinary undertaking, requiring collaboration of psychology, anthropology, and linguistics. (4) A considerable amount of lexical data collection, and of serious semantic analysis, is needed before any tenable universals in the area of emotion concepts can be plausibly proposed.

Universal Emotions

Most psychologists investigating emotions write in English and conduct their research via English. This being so, can they reach any language-independent and culture-independent psychological realities at all?

Evidently, they think they can, and I think so too. But in my view, to be able to do so, they must first recognize the limitations, and the specific character, of the medium that they are using (one particular ethnic language). The basic point, as I see it, is this: not all English words are equally language-specific and culture-specific. Generally speaking, the simpler a concept is the less culture-dependent it is going to be, and the wider the range of languages is going to be in which it has been lexicalized. For example, complex concepts such as “baptize,” “excommunicate,” or “vote” are highly culture-dependent, and the range of languages in which they have been lexicalized is relatively narrow. But simple concepts such as “say,” “want,” “good” and “bad” are relatively, if not absolutely, culture-free (of course not in the sense that, for example, the standards of what is good and what is bad are the same in all cultures, but in the sense that most, if not all, cultures, seem to rely on the concepts “good” and “bad”). Consequently, the range of languages that have separate words for concepts such as “say,” “want,” “good” and “bad” is very wide indeed.

If we could assume that concepts such as these have been lexicalized in all natural languages, then the answer to the methodological dilemma “How can one get at universal emotions through a particular language?” would be very simple: we can get at universal human experiences using English words such as *say*, *want*, *good* and *bad*, because these words stand for concepts that are not culture-specific. In other words, if the English lexicon includes a subset that has isomorphic subsets in the lexicons of all other human languages, then we can use this subset as a language-independent semantic metalanguage, suitable for a psychological and philosophical study of human emotions, as well as for cross-cultural comparisons of emotions (and indeed of any other semantic domain).

In a number of publications (see, e.g., Wierzbicka 1972 and 1980) I have argued that “say” and “want” are indeed universal human concepts and that they provide valid examples of lexical universals. However, even if one wanted to remain skeptical or agnostic on this particular point, I think that this is simply the best one can do to avoid the danger of ethnocentrism in research into emotions: if we can not rely on demonstrated lexical universals, then the next best solution is to rely on hypothetical universals, and near-universals. In other words, it is much safer to rely in our descriptions on concepts such as “want” and “say,” which find lexical expression in a huge range of unrelated languages, than to rely on concepts such as “disgust,” “fear,” and “shame,” which are known to be highly language-specific and culture-specific.

An important added bonus is that simple or relatively simple concepts such as “want” or “say” free the analyst from the web of vicious circles, which plague the conventional

analysis of emotion terms, as much as that of any other semantic domain. For example, Izard (1977:288) writes: "Even so common a feeling as that of distress is not altogether easy to describe. To feel distressed is to feel sad, downhearted, discouraged." If one attempts to define one emotion word via others one will never be able to elucidate the meaning of any of them. If one defines *distressed* via *sad*, or *downhearted*, the chances are that one is going to define *sad* and *downhearted* via *distressed*, and so on, ad infinitum. No real analysis is performed, only a semblance of analysis. But if emotion terms are decomposed into simpler concepts, such as "want," "feel," "think," "say," "good" or "bad," then there is no threat of overt or covert circularity, and both the similarities and the differences between different emotion concepts are made explicit. (For further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1984, 1985a, 1985b.)

Cross-Cultural Comparison of Emotions

Consider the Polish words *tesknota* (noun) and *tesknić* (verb). Although they have no simple, monolexic English equivalents, it is possible to explain in English what the relevant feeling is, if one decomposes the complex Polish concept into parts whose names do have simple English equivalents. I think this can be done as follows:

X *teskni* do Y ("X feels '*tesknota*' to Y") =
 X is far away from Y
 X thinks of Y
 X feels something good toward Y
 X wants to be together with Y
 X knows he or she cannot be together with Y
 X feels something bad because of that.

Several English words may come to mind as potential translation equivalents of the Polish word (*homesick*, *miss*, *pine*, *nostalgia*), but they all differ from one another and from the Polish term as well. For example, if a teenage daughter leaves the family home and goes to study in a distant city, her Polish parents would usually *tesknić*, but one could not say that they were *homesick* for the daughter, that they felt *nostalgia* for her, and one would hardly say that they were *pinning* after her. One could say that they *missed* her, but *miss* implies much less than *tesknić*. One could say to a friend, "We missed you at the meeting," without wishing to imply that anything remotely similar to pain or suffering was involved; and yet *tesknić* does imply something like pain or suffering (in fact, the best gloss I have come across is "the pain of distance"). The word *miss* implies neither pain nor distance. For example, one can *miss* someone who has died ("My grandmother died recently. You have no idea how much I miss her"). But one would not use *tesknić* in a case like this, because *tesknić* implies a real separation in space.

In this respect, *tesknić* is related to *homesick*. But of course *homesick* implies that the experiencer him- or herself has gone far away from the target of the emotion. The exact similarities and differences between *tesknić* and *homesick* can be seen if one compares the explication of the former concept, given earlier with the explication of the latter, given here:

X is homesick =
 X is far away from his or her home
 X thinks of his or her home
 X feels something good toward his or her home
 X wants to be there
 X knows he or she cannot be there at that time
 X feels something bad because of that.

Pining differs from *tesknić* in its single-mindedness and its, so to speak, debilitating effect.

X is pining after Y =
 X is away from Y
 X thinks of Y
 X feels something good toward Y
 X wants to be with Y
 X knows that he or she cannot be with Y
 X feels something bad because of that
 X can't think of anything else because of that.

Miss, as a form of emotion, can perhaps be explicated as follows:

X (Jane) misses Y (Sally) =
 Y is not with X
 X thinks of Y
 X would want to be with Y
 X thinks that being with Y would cause him or her to feel something good.

The fact that one can *miss* certain events, or state of affairs, as well as people, highlights the relatively mild nature of the emotion involved. If someone says, "I miss our walks in the forest. I miss bowling," he does not want to imply any particular love for the things mentioned. Rather, he wants to imply that he thinks of the things in question as pleasurable, that is, as things that have caused him to feel something good in the past, and presumably would cause him to feel something good now.

The absence of acute suffering is shown by the use of the conditional "X would want," rather than the declarative mood: "X wants. . . ." In the case of *teŝknić*, *pine*, and *homesick*, X wants something that X knows is impossible (to be at home "now"—hence the suffering).

No Word—No Feeling?

English has no word for the feeling encoded in the Polish word *teŝknić*. Does it mean that native speakers of English do not know (never experience) the feeling in question? Of course not. Individual speakers of English have no doubt experienced this feeling. But the Anglo-Saxon culture as a whole has not found this feeling worthy of a special name.

Nor does the fact that a language has not encoded a particular emotion in a separate word mean that the speakers of this language cannot perceive that emotion as a distinct, recognizable feeling, or that they cannot talk about it. Both everyday speech and psychologically sensitive literature are full of attempts (often, highly successful attempts) to convey feelings for which there is no simple word. An example or two may be in order (for more examples and discussion see Wierzbicka 1972; the examples given below come from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*): (1) Kitty Ŝčerbatskaja is awaiting the decisive visit of Levin and Vronskij: "From after dinner till early evening, Kitty felt as a young man does before a battle." (2) Hitherto, his wife's soul had been open to Karenin: "He felt now rather as a man might do on returning home and finding his own house locked up."

There are countless human emotions that can be perceived as distinct and recognizable. Presumably, all these 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. Are there any emotion concepts that have been lexically recognized as distinct and identifiable in all languages of the world? We simply do not know. Obviously, this is not a question that could be answered by psychologists or philosophers. It has to be answered by linguists.

Emotion Terms as Clues to Different Cultures

I believe that the emotion terms available in a given lexicon provide an important clue to the speakers' culture. Arguably, the Polish concept "*teşknota*" discussed above is a good case in point.

In older Polish, this word designated a kind of vague sadness, as the related Russian word *toska* does even now. Apparently, it was only after the partitions of Poland at the end of the 18th century and especially after the defeat of the Polish uprising of 1830 and the resulting "Great Emigration" that this word developed its present meaning of, roughly, "sadness caused by separation." When one considers that after that time the best and most influential Polish literature started to develop abroad, among the political exiles, and that it became dominated by the theme of nostalgia, it is hard not to think of the emergence of new meaning of the word *teşknota* as a reflection of Poland's history and the predominant national preoccupations.

An even clearer illustration, however, is provided by a whole series of words referring to emotions (and to bodily results of emotions) akin to both sadness and love in the Australian Aboriginal language Pintupi, which demonstrates a degree of love and concern for one's kin and one's land unparalleled in Western culture (cf. Morice 1977:105). This is entirely in line with what is otherwise known about the Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal society.

Disgust—Universal or Language-Specific?

Izard (1969) and others hypothesize that feelings such as fear, shame, and disgust are perceived universally as distinct feelings, recognizable by the way they are expressed. It seems to me that this claim would be much more credible if the feelings in question were lexically encoded in all natural languages.

As mentioned earlier, however, I do not wish to rule out the possibility that psychologists may find some universal human emotions, distinct and clearly identifiable, among emotions that have not been widely lexicalized in different languages. I am merely suggesting that emotions proposed as universal, in the sense under discussion, must be identified in terms of a maximally language-independent semantic metalanguage, not in terms of the English folk taxonomy. For example, if someone wants to claim that something such as "disgust" is indeed a universal human emotion, then he or she should identify this emotion in terms of lexical universals or near-universals such as *say, want, feel* or *bad* rather than in terms of the English-specific lexical item *disgust*. The fact that the same scholar can sometimes say *disgust* and sometimes *disgust/revulsion* (cf. Izard 1969), wishing to identify the same "fundamental" emotion, shows the inadequacy of English-specific emotion terms as analytical tools. After all, the words *disgust* and *revulsion* do not mean the same thing; the feelings they identify are different from each other (though not widely different). Which feeling, then, is really claimed to be universal, that designated by the word *disgust* or that designated by the word *revulsion*? Izard writes: "Theorists since Darwin have suggested that the emotion of disgust may have its origin in biological phenomena associated with the hunger drive and the eating process. The expression of disgust can be simulated by a person posing as though he is refusing or rejecting from the mouth something which tastes bad" (1969:337).

I think that the image of a person "rejecting from the mouth something which tastes bad" may indeed provide a useful reference point for the feeling identified in English by means of the word *disgust*. But *revulsion* evokes a different image: that of a person who wants to withdraw his or her body from contact with something unwanted, more than that—something that the person cannot bear to be in contact with. *Repugnance* is associated with a different image again: that of a person who is near (rather than in contact with) something that he or she does not want to be near to and who experiences an impulse to move away from it. (It is similar in this respect to *repulsion*.) *Distaste* evokes the image of a person who has had something in his or her mouth that tasted bad, but it lacks

the idea of rejecting anything from the mouth. Accordingly, it suggests a “milder” dislike and a “milder” disapproval than *disgust*. Thus, the feelings identified in English by means of the words *disgust*, *distaste*, *revulsion*, and *repulsion* are different feelings and they cannot all correspond to the same “discrete fundamental human emotion.”

Trying to explicate the concepts in question we cannot always rely on the prototypical image evoked by them. For example, the meaning of the word *fear* cannot be explicated in terms of an impulse to run away. Similarly, the synchronic meaning of *disgust* cannot be explicated in terms of spitting out and bad taste. (At a dinner table, one would be more likely to experience disgust watching other people’s behavior than concentrating on one’s food, no matter how unsatisfactory. One might also experience disgust when thinking of the cook’s incompetence or of his or her dirty habits rather than when focusing on the food as such.)

Generally speaking, I would suggest that *disgust* is caused by perceiving something that we do not want to perceive; but not just anything (for example, blood or pus); we are disgusted by the sight of human acts (or their results); and again, not by the sight of any acts that we do not want to perceive (such as other people’s sexual intercourse or defecation): we are disgusted by the sight of a human action that we regard as “bad” (or by the results of such an action). But the person who feels disgusted with somebody else’s behavior does not think of the “bad” act in terms of its consequences (for example, in terms of the harm it may cause for other people). Nor does he or she think of it in terms of a need to interfere to stop the “bad” behavior. Rather, he or she focuses on the unpleasantness of witnessing such behavior (or the results of such behavior). The feeling has an esthetic, as well as a moral or “praxeological” dimension. It is “passive,” in the sense that unlike, for example, anger, it does not involve an impulse to do something to the offender. All the disgusted person wants is to be spared such “ugly” perceptions.

Revulsion does not seem to involve a judgment concerning human acts: it can be triggered by another person regardless of this person’s act. It can also be triggered by things rather than people. For example, one can feel revulsion toward mice or frogs without thinking anything bad about them. The noun *revulsion* may differ in this respect from the adjective *revolting*: *revolting food* must be “bad” food, and if someone says that mice are revolting creatures he does want to imply something bad about mice. But the “badness” of something *revolting* seems to consist in the “badness” (unpleasantness) of the feeling that the contact with this thing causes, rather than in some “badness” of the thing itself. The noun *revulsion* does not seem to imply anything bad about the object that causes the feeling: the *revulsion* can be purely instinctive, not based on a negative judgment.

The adjective *repulsive* seems to suggest a feeling stronger than that suggested by the adjective *revolting*. But in fact, here as elsewhere, the apparent difference in “strength” is a manifestation of an underlying qualitative difference (cf. Apresjan 1972:53). For example, why is it that while rats can be called either “repulsive creatures” or “revolting creatures,” food is more likely to be called “revolting” than “repulsive”? I think the reason is that bad food may cause one to want to avoid any contact with it (especially, contact through the mouth), but it can hardly cause people to want to avoid being anywhere near it (the presence of bad food behind our back can hardly matter to us). But living creatures, such as rats or people, can have a different effect upon people: if they are particularly unpleasant, then even being in close proximity to them can be hard to bear. Being able to move, to look, to breathe, to spit, and so on, they create around themselves a sphere of potential influence, which people may feel like avoiding.

To account for both the similarities and the differences in the use of the terms under discussion, the following rough explications can perhaps be proposed:

X was disgusted (with what Y did):

- X perceived that Y did something that X thought was bad
- X thought something bad about Y because of that
- X did not want to have to perceive such things

X felt something bad because of that similar to what one feels when one has something in one's mouth that tastes bad and when one wants to cause it to come to be out of one's mouth.

X found Y revolting =

when X perceived that a part of his or her body was in contact with Y he or she felt something bad because of that
he or she wanted to cease at once to be in contact with Y.

X found Y repulsive =

being near Y, X felt something bad because of that
he or she wanted to cease to be near Y
he or she could not cause him- or herself not to want to cease to be near Y.

X found what Y did distasteful =

X perceived that Y did something that X thought was bad
thinking of what Y did, X felt something bad because of that, similar to what one feels when one has something in one's mouth that tastes bad.

What I want to stress here is that the exact boundaries drawn between the related feelings of *disgust*, *distaste*, *revulsion*, and *repulsion* (not to mention *aversion*) are language-specific. For example, Polish has several words that can be used as translation equivalents of the words in question: *niesmak* (roughly, "distaste"), *wstręt* (roughly, "revulsion"), *obrzydzenie* (roughly, "disgust"), *odraza* (roughly, "repulsion"), *brzydzić się* (roughly, "feel revulsion for"). But the emigré Polish writer Jan Lechoń, writing his diaries in America, repeatedly uses in his diaries the word *dyzgust*, a loan from English, despite his otherwise puristic attitude to his own Polish (Lechoń 1973). Clearly, Lechoń feels that the Anglo-Saxon concept of "disgust" has no equivalent in Polish (and I agree). Having developed, under the influence of Anglo-Saxon culture, a need to use the Anglo-Saxon concept "disgust," he also feels compelled to borrow the word, to convey this concept in Polish.

It is particularly worth noting that the English word *disgust* does not mean the same as the related French word *dégoût*. Izard (1969) reports that French and American children show very similar patterns of growth of recognition of individual emotions with age. He notes, however, that with respect to disgust there is an unexpected difference: the French slightly exceed the Americans at most age levels. Izard tries to explain this puzzling fact in terms of greater emphasis placed on the culinary art in French culture (1971:338).

All this is very well, but one crucial point is clearly being missed: that the French word *dégoût* and the English word *disgust* do not mean the same thing. When the French children learn to use the word *dégoût* they are not learning to recognize and to label the same feeling which American children associate with the word *disgust*. The feeling designated by the word *dégoût* is associated much more closely and much more directly with eating than is that designated by the word *disgust*. Thus, one can say in French "*avoir du dégoût pour le lait*" (the first example for the use of *dégoût* offered in Harrap's *Standard French and English Dictionary* [Mansion 1961]). But one cannot say in English that someone "had disgust for milk." This does not mean that *dégoût* cannot be used in situations in which *disgust* can; but there are situations where *dégoût* can be used and *disgust* cannot. As I have suggested earlier, the English word *disgust* encodes a feeling caused by "bad and ugly" human actions (or their results), not by food as such. This is not to deny that the English concept "disgust" contains a reference to "something LIKE bad taste and an impulse to get something out of one's mouth," but in "disgust" this reference serves merely as a simile. By contrast, in the concept of "*dégoût*" the reference to the same sensation ("oral avertive reflex") constitutes the core of the meaning:

Il éprouvait du dégoût pour Y ("he felt '*dégoût*' for Y") =

thinking of Y he or she felt as one does when one has had something in one's mouth that tastes bad and when one wants to cause it to come to be out of one's mouth.

My question is: Is it likely that the language-specific concept encoded in the English word *disgust* corresponds to a discrete, fundamental human emotion? Why the concept encoded in *disgust* rather than that encoded in the Polish word *obrzydzenie* or *odraza* or in the French word *dégoût*? And if what is meant is not “disgust” but a kind of feeling that corresponds equally well to *odraza*, *obrzydzenie*, or *dégoût* as it does to *disgust*, then what exactly is being postulated here as a discrete universal human feeling?

I am not saying that this cannot be spelled out. I am saying that this has to be spelled out if the claim that “disgust” is a fundamental human emotion is to have a precise meaning.

Shame, Embarrassment, and Fear

As was noted already by Darwin, the concept of “shame” (obviously, in the English sense of the word) is associated with a desire not to be seen. Izard (1969:275) writes: “When subjects are asked how they feel or what they do when they experience shame, they very frequently indicate that they want to disappear; they want very badly not to be seen.”

But the closest equivalent of the English word *shame* in the Australian language Gidjingali does not seem to associate the feeling it designates with a desire not to be seen. Rather (as Hiatt 1978 plausibly suggests) it seems to associate this feeling with a desire to retreat, to run away. Consequently, the word in question can be used not only in situations in which the English word *shame* might be appropriate but also in a situation in which the English word *fear* rather than *shame* would be used. From an English speaker’s point of view, shame and fear are two different emotions. But from the point of view of the speakers of Gidjingali, apparently they are not, because both are seen in terms of the same impulse to retreat or to avoid.

It is worth noting that in some non-Western cultures a concept related to “shame,” but by no means identical with it, plays an important social role. In particular, this point has often been made with respect to the Aboriginal Australia (cf., e.g., Myers 1976:151). According to Myers, “the Pintupi concept of ‘kunta’ includes within its range the English concepts of ‘shame’, ‘embarrassment’, ‘shyness’ and ‘respect’ ” (1976:171). The feeling of “*kunta*” is crucially linked with rules of avoidance, which play an important role in regulating conduct in Aboriginal society.

The difference between the Australian Aboriginal concept or concepts encoded in words such as *kunta* and the concept encoded in the English word *shame*, comes across very clearly in the following account, referring to another Aboriginal language, Nhaalaya.

The general attitude towards anything to do with white people, whether initially mysterious or not, was avoidance wherever possible. After cars had become commonplace: ‘If we was walking along the road and heard a motorcar, we still scooted into the scrub’.

This attitude was partly dictated by fear: ‘If we saw anybody with a camera we’d reckon, “They going to shoot us” and run off away and hide. That was a gun, we thought’. But it was also partly the result of *kuyan*, an expression of respectful behaviour usually talked of in English as ‘shame’ or ‘shyness’. [Kennedy and Donaldson 1982:7]

This account makes it clear that the Aboriginal concept is more closely related to avoidance and therefore to fear, than the English concept of shame. In a prototypical situation of “shame” something “wrong” has already taken place, and has been witnessed by someone else (as when one gets caught while doing something improper). The Aboriginal concepts such as “*kunta*” or “*kuyan*” seem to evoke a situation when nothing “wrong” has taken place but might happen and is to be avoided.

The future orientation of these concepts makes them closer to “fear” than the English concept of “shame,” which is focused on something real, not on something potential. The fact that in a prototypical situation of “*kunta*” or “*kuyan*” nothing wrong has happened (yet) makes this feeling closer to “embarrassment” or “shyness” than is English “shame.” The fact that in a prototypical situation of “*kunta*” or “*kuyan*” the experiencer

desires to avoid doing anything “wrong” makes this feeling closer to “respect” than is English “shame.” It is understandable why a feeling such as “*kunta*” or “*kuyan*” can be used in regulating social conduct in Aboriginal society—in a positive way, in contrast to the negative way, in which “shame” or “guilt” are used in Western societies.

The Nhaalya concept of “*kuyan*” can perhaps be explicated along the following lines:

X felt *kuyan* = X felt as one does

when one perceives that one is near to a kind of person that one thinks one should not be near to or talk to

when one thinks that something bad could happen because of that and that people would think something bad about one because of that and when one wants to cease to be near that person.

A particularly interesting case of a language-specific conceptualization of “shamelike” emotions is provided by the Australian language Kayardild (Nicholas Evans, personal communication). In this language there are at least two words that the speakers themselves translate into English as *shame* (although they use also the word *shy*, as an alternative translation of both words). One of these words, *ngankiyaj*, is derived from the word for “side,” and it designates a kind of emotion that men are expected to feel in the presence of their mothers-in-law, or their sisters, whom they are supposed to avoid. The significance of the morphological clue is obvious, in the light of the strong taboo against facing one’s mother-in-law, or one’s sister, and against interacting with them directly. Evans reports that he has also heard the same word applied to small children’s reaction to strangers (turning their head away in shyness). The other word, *bulwij*, is derived from the word for eyelashes, and it designates a kind of emotion that men and women are expected to exhibit in the presence of potential sexual partners. There, too (as Evans suggests), the meaning of the morphological clue is rather transparent: the lowering of the eyelashes can be expected to prevent the eyes of the two parties from meeting and from sending provocative gazes.

The present-day English concepts of shame, embarrassment, and fear can, I think, be explicated as follows.

X was ashamed = X felt as one does

when one thinks that other people see that one has done something one should not do
when one thinks that other people may think something bad of one because of that
and when one wants to cease to be seen by other people because of that.

X was embarrassed = X felt as one does

when one thinks that other people are thinking of one
when one thinks one should do something because of that, and does not know what one should do
and when one would want to cease to be in that place because of that.

X was afraid = X felt as one does

when one thinks that something bad can happen to one
when one wants to do something to cause it not to happen
and when one thinks that one cannot cause it not to happen.

The concepts explicated above are perfectly discrete, because they can be represented by means of discrete semantic components (for a defense of discreteness in semantic analysis see Wierzbicka 1985a).

But are the feelings corresponding to concepts such as “shame,” “fear,” and “embarrassment” discrete? Are they universally perceived and conceptualized as discrete, even in those languages in which they are not lexically distinguished from one another? And if not, then in what sense are they “discrete, fundamental emotions common to all mankind” (Izard 1969:265)?

Conclusion

In recent psychological literature, the thesis that emotions are "innate, universal" (Izard 1977:17) goes hand in hand with the claim that "each of these emotions has a characteristic expression or pattern which conveys particular meaning or information for the expresser and the perceiver" (Izard 1969:265).

Nonetheless, the "analyses of Emotion Recognition tasks" based on these two assumptions "showed some differences between cultures and emotions." For example, some tests showed that preliterate subjects in New Guinea failed to distinguish between fear and surprise (1969:263). Trying to explain this discrepancy between prediction and empirical results, Izard does acknowledge that "it is quite possible that concepts like shame and contempt, and a fine distinction such as that between surprise and fear, will be extremely hard to translate into the spoken languages of preliterate cultures" (1969:264). But he does not see the linguistic problem as one of fundamental importance: "When we manage to surmount the language and communication barriers, it is entirely conceivable that the other emotions which I have termed fundamental can be validated in the pre-literate cultures" (1969:264).

It seems to me that to say this is to underestimate the real conceptual differences between cultures. If a language does not discriminate lexically between, say, shame and fear, then an investigator may be unable to make its speakers perceive fear and shame as two different feelings by somehow simply "surmounting the language and communication barriers."

Different systems of emotion terms are likely to reflect different ways of conceptualizing emotions (cf. Geertz 1973, Levy 1983, Rosaldo 1980, and Lutz 1983) and conversely, any possible universals in the way different societies conceptualize emotions are likely to be reflected in the ways those different societies converge in the labeling of emotions. But whether emotion terms available in different languages truly converge in different languages is a problem that cannot be resolved without rigorous semantic analysis, and without a language-independent semantic metalanguage.

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