CHAPTER 1

Introduction: feelings, languages, and cultures

1 Emotions or feelings?

According to the biologist Charles Birch (1995: ix), ''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 (1995: v) calls this attitude ''the flight from subjectivity''; see also Gaylin 1979).

Seventy years ago the founder of behaviourism John Watson proposed the following definition (quoted in Plutchik 1994: 3): ''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 conceptions of ''emotions'' have now been repudiated, ''emotions'' are still often seen as something that, for example, can be measured. Plutchik (1994: 139) himself writes: ''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''.

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. (See e.g. Lutz 1988; White 1993.)

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. (Some will say, no doubt: ''nothing is neutral, nothing is culture-independent''. To avoid getting bogged down in this particular controversy at the outset, I repeat: *maximally* neutral, *maximally* culture-independent.)

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 *feelings* 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 (1984: 143) 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'''. Quoting this passage with approval, Leavitt (1996: 524) comments: ''This apprehension, then, is clearly not simply a cognition, judgment, or model, but is as bodily, as felt, as the stab of a pin or the stroke of a feather''. I 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 I 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 concepts, evolved by the

author and colleagues over many years' cross-linguistic investigations (see below, section 8), ''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 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'' (such as galvanic skin response, GSR) create the impression that ''emotion'' is an objectively existing category, delimited from other categories by nature itself, and that the concept 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*; see e.g. Wittgenstein 1967: 86.) 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 *čuvstvo* (from *čuvstvovat'* ''to feel'') corresponds to *feeling* whereas the plural form *čuvstva* suggests cognitively based feelings. To take a non-European example, Gerber (1985) notes that Samoan has no word corresponding to the English term *emotion* and relies, instead, on the notion of *lagona* ''feeling'' (see also Ochs 1986: 258). The French word *sentiment* (unlike the Russian *čuvstvo* 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 *čuvstvo styda* ''a feeling of shame'' and a *čuvstvo goloda* ''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 *émotion*, the Italian *emozione*, and the Spanish *emoción*, see Wierzbicka 1995c.)

Thus, while the concept of ''feeling'' is universal and can be safely used in the investigation of human experience and human nature[2] (see below, section 8; see also chapter 7), the concept 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 (cf. e.g. Schachter and Singer 1962; Solomon 1984: 248; Lutz 1986: 295). Since, however, it is the concept of ''feel'' (rather than the concept 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 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 society, 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 (1984: 24) explicitly states that ''emotion has no cognitive component. I maintain 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 (1995: 3) 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'' (1976: 185). 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'' (p. 5).

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 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 (see Mandler 1975), has recently expressed surprise at the fact that ''something as vague and intellectually slippery as emotion'' could have been used for so long, by so many scholars, as a seemingly unproblematic notion (Mandler 1997: vii). Speaking specifically of what is often referred to as the ''facial expression of emotions'', Mandler (1997: xii) asks rhetorically: ''Are *expression* and *emotion* even the right concepts, or has our everyday language frozen in place ideas that were only half-baked and prescientific?''

In a similar vein, Russell (1997: 19) writes: ''‘Emotion’ is an ordinary, everyday word understood by all, rather than a precise concept honed through scientific analysis. Perhaps ‘emotion’ is a concept that could be dispensed with in scientific discourse (except as a folk concept requiring rather than providing explanation)''. Referring, in particular, to the ''facial expression of emotion'', Russell (ibid.) concludes: ''we have probably reached the point where further usefulness of thinking of facial expressions in terms of emotion requires a clarification of the concept of emotion itself''. (Cf. also Ginsburg 1997.) As many writers on ''emotion'' have begun to agree, the point can be generalized: progress of research into ''human emotions'' requires clarification of the concept of ''emotion'' itself. For example, Lisa Feldman-Barrett (1998: v) in her recent article entitled ''The future of emotion research'' notes that ''there is still little consensus on what emotion is or is not'', and states: ''The future of affective science will be determined by our ability to establish the fundamental nature of what we are studying''.

But calls for clarification and explanation of the concept of ''emotion'' raise some crucial methodological questions. To explain the concept of ''emotion'' (or any other concept) we have to render it in terms of some other concepts, and our proposed explanations will only be clear if those other concepts are themselves clear; if they are not, they, in turn, will also need to be explained, and this can involve us in infinite regress. It is essential, therefore, that our explanation of ''emotion'' be couched in terms which are not equally problematic and obscure. If we do not anchor our explanations in something that is self-explanatory, or at least more self-explanatory than the concept we are trying to explain, they can only be pseudo-explanations (as ''explanations'' in scholarly literature often are). To quote Leibniz:

> If nothing could be understood in itself nothing at all could ever be understood. Because what can only be understood via something else can be understood only to the extent to which that other thing can be understood, and so on; accordingly, we can say that we have understood something only when we have broken it down into parts which can be understood in themselves. (Couturat 1903: 430; my translation)

This basic point, which in modern times has often been lost sight of, was made repeatedly in the writings on language by the great French thinkers of the seventeenth century such as Descartes, Pascal, and Arnauld. For example, Descartes wrote:

> I declare that there are certain things which we render more obscure by trying to define them, because, since they are very simple and clear, we cannot know and perceive them better than by themselves. Nay, we must place in the number of those chief errors that can be commit-

> ted in the sciences, the mistakes committed by those who would try to define what ought only to be conceived, and who cannot distinguish the clear from the obscure, nor discriminate between what, in order to be known, requires and deserves to be defined, from what can be best known by itself. (1931[1701]: 324)

In my 1996 book *Semantics: Primes and Universals* I illustrated this point with a recent discussion of the concept IF by two prominent researchers into child language who start by saying that ''it is difficult to provide a precise definition of the word *if*'', and at the end conclude that ''The fundamental meaning of *if*, in both logic and ordinary language, is one of implication'' (French and Nelson 1985: 38). These statements reflect two common assumptions: first, that it is possible to define all words – including *if*; and second, that if a word seems difficult to define, one can always reach for a scientific-sounding word of Latin origin (such as *implication)* to ''define'' it with. These assumptions are not merely false; jointly, they constitute a major stumbling block for the semantic analysis of any domain. One cannot define all words, because the very idea of ''defining'' implies that there is not only something to be defined but also something to define it with.

What applies to *if* and *implication*, applies also to *feel* and *emotion*: one can define *implication* via *if*, and *emotion* via *feel*, but not the other way around, as was attempted, for example, in the following explanation: '''feeling' is our subjective awareness of our own emotional state'' (Gaylin 1979: 2). If someone doesn't know what *feel* means then they wouldn't know what an *emotional state* means either.

2 Breaking the ''hermeneutical circle''

There are of course many scholars who claim that nothing is truly self-explanatory and who appear to accept and even to rejoice in the idea that there is no way out of ''the hermeneutic circle''. Charles Taylor (1979[1971]: 34) applied this idea specifically to emotions when he wrote:

> The vocabulary defining meaning – words like ''terrifying'', ''attractive'' – is linked with that describing feeling – ''fear'', ''desire'' – and that describing goals – ''safety'', ''possession''.
>
> Moreover, our understanding of these terms moves inescapably in a hermeneutical circle. An emotion term like ''shame'', for instance, essentially refers us to a certain kind of situation, the ''shameful'', or ''humiliating'' . . . But this situation in its turn can only be identified in relation to the feelings which it provokes . . . We have to be within the circle.
>
> An emotion term like ''shame'' can only be explained by reference to other concepts which in turn cannot be understood without

> reference to shame. To understand these concepts we have to be in on a certain experience, we have to understand a certain language, not just of words, but also a certain language of mutual action and communication, by which we blame, exhort, admire, esteem each other. In the end we are in on this because we grow up in the ambit of certain common meanings. But we can often experience what it is like to be on the outside when we encounter the feeling, action and experiential meaning language of another civilization. Here there is no translation, no way of explaining in other, more accessible concepts. We can only catch on by getting somehow into their way of life, if only in imagination.

There is an important truth in what Taylor is saying here, but it is a partial truth, and it is distorted by being presented as the whole truth. It is true that there are ''communities of meaning'' sharing the familiarity with certain common meanings, such as, for example, the meaning of the Russian words *toska* (roughly, ''melancholy-cum-yearning'') or *žalet'* (roughly, ''to lovingly pity someone''; for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka 1992a), or the Ifaluk concept *fago* (roughly, ''sadness / compassion / love'', cf. Lutz 1995). It is also true that verbal explanations of such concepts cannot replace experiential familiarity with them and with their functioning within the local ''stream of life'' (to use Wittgenstein's phrase; cf. Malcolm 1966: 93). But it is not true that no verbal explanations illuminating to outsiders are possible at all.

The crucial point is that while most concepts (including *toska*, *žalet'*, *fago*, *shame*, *emotion*, *implication*) are complex (decomposable) and culture-specific, others are simple (non-decomposable) and universal (e.g. FEEL, WANT, KNOW, THINK, SAY, DO, HAPPEN, IF); and that the former can be explained in terms of the latter. For example, while there is no word in English matching the Russian word *toska*, one can still explain to a native speaker of English what *toska* means, relying on concepts shared by these two languages (as well as all other languages of the world): it is how one feels when one wants some things to happen and knows that they cannot happen (for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka 1992a).[3] Crucially, this (simplified) definition can be translated word for word into Russian, and tested with ''ordinary'' native speakers.

Shared, universal concepts such as FEEL, WANT, KNOW, THINK, SAY, DO, HAPPEN, and IF (in Russian ČUVSTVOVAT', XOTET', ZNAT', DUMAT', SKAZAT', SDELAT', SLUČIT'SJA, ESLI) constitute the bedrock of intercultural understanding. These concepts are the stepping stones by which we can escape the ''hermeneutical circle''.

Needless to say, not everything worth knowing can be explained in words. But as Wittgenstein (1988[1922]: 27) put it, ''what can be said at all can be said clearly''. And even if someone wished to insist that concepts such as FEEL, WANT, SAY, THINK, DO, or IF are not entirely clear

to them either, they would have to admit that they are clearer and more intelligible than *emotion*, *sensation*, *volition*, *locution*, *cognition*, *agency*, or *implication*. And it is indisputably more intelligible to say, for example, that ''I want to do something and can't do it'' than to say that I experience ''a lack of goal conductiveness'' (cf. chapter 4).

This doesn't mean that complex and technical words should always be *replaced* by simple and easily comprehensible ones. For example, Izard (1977, 1991) may have good reasons for describing ''emotions'' as ''consisting of neuro-physiological, behavioural, and subjective components'' (cf. Russell and Fernández-Dols 1997a: 19) rather than in terms of ''feeling something, doing something, and having something happen inside one's body''. But complex and technical concepts such as ''neuro-physiological'', ''behavioural'', and ''subjective'' have to be introduced and explained, at some stage, via intuitively intelligible concepts such as ''body'', ''happen'', ''do'', and ''feel'', rather than the other way around.

Generally speaking, scientific discourse – and in particular scientific discourse about ''human emotions'', ''human subjectivity'', ''human emotional experience'', or ''human communication'' – has to build on ordinary discourse, and on words intelligible to those ordinary mortals whose ''subjectivity'' it seeks to investigate and explain.

Emotion shouldn't be taken for granted in scientific discourse, not so much because it is ''an ordinary, everyday word understood by all'' (and not ''a precise concept honed through scientific analysis'') but rather because it is a fairly complex and culture-specific word which does require explanation. It is not ''understood by all'' because, as mentioned earlier, it doesn't have exact equivalents in other languages (not even in other European languages such as German, Russian, or French); and it is not ''understood by all'' because children have to learn it on the basis of a prior understanding of words such as *feel*, *think*, *know*, *want*, and *body*.

One can imagine a child asking an adult: ''What does the word *emotion* mean?'' or ''What does the word *sensation* mean?'' but not ''What does the word *feel* mean?'' or ''What does the word *want* mean?'' And the answer to the questions about the meanings of *emotion* and *sensation* would have to be based on the concept ''feel''. For example, one might say to the child: ''*Sensation* means that you feel something in some part of your body, e.g. you feel cold or itchy, and *emotion* means that you feel sad, or happy, or angry – something to do with what you think''.

''Precise concepts honed through scientific analysis'' are of course necessary, too; but to have any explanatory power they have to build on simple and intuitively clear concepts such as FEEL and WANT, which a child picks up in social interaction *before* any verbal explanations can be offered and understood.

Scientific discourse about ''humans'' can have an explanatory value only if it can address questions which arise on the basis of people's fundamental conceptual models, models which cannot be reduced to anything else. Semantic investigations into English and a great many other languages suggest that ''ordinary people'' conceive of a human individual as someone who can think, feel, want, and know something; and who can also say things and do things. The universal availability of words expressing precisely these concepts (e.g., not ''believe'' but ''think''; not ''intention'' or ''volition'' but ''want''; not ''emotion'', ''sensation'', or ''experience'', but ''feel'') allows us to say that these particular concepts (THINK, KNOW, FEEL, WANT, SAY, and DO) represent different and irreducible aspects of a universal ''folk model of a person'' (cf. Bruner 1990; D'Andrade 1987).

Complex and language-specific notions such as, for example, *belief*, *intention*, *emotion*, *sensation*, or *mood* have to be defined on the basis of those fundamental, universal, and presumably innate ''indefinables''. Even concepts as central to the traditional scientific pursuits carried out through the medium of the English language as ''mind'' have to be acknowledged for what they are – cultural artifacts of one particular language and tradition, no more scientifically valid than the German *Geist*, the Russian *duša*, or the Samoan *loto* (cf. Wierzbicka 1992a and 1993a; Mandler 1975). All such concepts can of course be retained in scientific discourse if they are found to be useful – but they can only be truly useful if they are previously anchored in something more fundamental and more self-explanatory (also to children, and to speakers of other languages).

3 ''Experience-near'' and ''experience-distant'' concepts

The distinction between ''experience-near'' and ''experience-distant'' concepts was introduced into human sciences by Clifford Geertz (1984[1976]: 227–8) (who credited it to the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut). To quote:

> An experience-near concept is, roughly, one which an individual – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he and his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialist – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. ''Love'' is an experience-near concept; ''object cathesis'' is an experience-distant one.