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0521641632 - Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling

Zoltan Kövecses

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Metaphor and Emotion

Are human emotions best characterized as biological, psychological, or cultural entities? Many researchers claim that emotions arise either from human biology (i.e., biological reductionism) or as products of culture (i.e., social constructionism). This book challenges this simplistic division between the body and culture by showing how human emotions are to a large extent “constructed” from individuals’ embodied experiences in different cultural settings. Zoltán Kövecses illustrates through detailed cross-linguistic analyses how many emotion concepts reflect widespread metaphorical patterns of thought. These emotion metaphors arise from recurring embodied experiences, one reason why human emotions across many cultures conform to certain basic biological-physiological processes in the human body and of the body interacting with the external world. Moreover, there are different cultural models for emotions that arise from unique patterns of both metaphorical and metonymic thinking in varying cultural contexts. The view proposed here demonstrates how cultural aspects of emotions, metaphorical language about the emotions, and human physiology in emotion are all part of an integrated system. Kövecses convincingly shows how this integrated system points to the reconciliation of the seemingly contradictory views of biological reductionism and social constructionism in contemporary debates about human emotion.

Zoltán Kövecses is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University.

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Preface

In a widely read and influential book on the neurobiology of the emotions, Joseph LeDoux (1996) draws the following conclusion:

Emotions evolved not as conscious feelings, linguistically differentiated or otherwise, but as brain states and bodily responses. The brain states and bodily responses are the fundamental facts of an emotion, and the conscious feelings are the frills that have added icing to the emotional cake. (p. 302)

In a way, the present book can be seen as a response to these conclusions. While I am convinced by many of LeDoux's claims, including the idea that emotions did not evolve as conscious feelings, I cannot accept the second part of his conclusion. This is not only because I come to the emotions from a more humanistic perspective than he does, but also because the evidence I will present in the chapters to follow tells me that "conscious feelings" play a much more important role in human emotions than LeDoux appears to attach to them.

Conscious feelings are often expressed in or, indeed, are shaped by language, and thus the study of language can reveal a great deal about them. Of course, one must have the appropriate kind of linguistics to say anything interesting about emotions and emotional feelings. LeDoux bases his claims on an unsatisfactory kind of linguistics, in which emotion language consists only in literal emotion words, such as *fear*, *anxiety*, *terror*, *apprehension*, that classify and refer to a preexisting emotional reality (the brain states and bodily responses). This can only lead to an oversimplification of the many subtle ways in which emotion and language interact. Obviously, LeDoux, a neurobiologist, cannot be expected to provide us with a linguistics that provides further insight into the nature of the relationship between emotion and

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emotion language. In this book I regard providing what I take to be the appropriate kind of linguistics for the job at hand as the main methodological contribution to the study of emotion.

Once we give up simplistic views of emotional language, a whole new “world” of emotional feelings unfolds before us. Emotion language will not be seen as a collection of literal words that categorize and refer to a preexisting emotional reality, but as language that can be figurative and that can define and even create emotional experiences for us. Does this new approach mean that I want to discard the body from a study of emotions? I do not intend to do anything of the sort. On the contrary, I want to bring together three threads of emotion research into a coherent whole that avoids the weaknesses of each pursued separately. The three threads include the research done on how the human body behaves in an emotional state, the research on how cultural and social factors influence and shape emotional experiences, and the research on emotional language from a cognitive linguistic perspective. In other words, my major goal is to provide a new synthesis in the study of emotion, that is, to bring together language, culture, and body in such a way that we get a relatively complete and integrated account of emotional phenomena in human beings.

In the process of creating this synthesis, several issues in the study of emotion and emotion language will have to be clarified. These include, but are not limited to, the following: What is the relationship between the objectively measurable responses of the body in emotion and the subjectively felt emotional experiences of people as described by language? In a way, this is perhaps the major issue pursued in this book and can be seen as a rephrasing of the “body-language” issue just mentioned. Second, what is the relationship between culture and the conceptualization of emotion through language? In other words, does the conceptualization of emotions vary with radically different cultures? Or, is it universal? Or, is it both at the same time? If it varies, as we can reasonably expect to be the case, is the variation without constraint? Third, how are the emotions organized in our conceptual system? Are they organized as an overarching unitary system or as separate systems? This is a highly interesting question, because, as we will see, there is a certain incongruence here between what some neurobiologists (such as LeDoux) suggest for the emotions and what our linguistic analysis tells us about the conceptualization of emotions. We can further ask in this regard whether this incongruence is a predictable and systematic difference between emotions as pertaining to

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the brain and body, on the one hand, and emotional feelings as conceptualized by organisms having consciousness and language, on the other. Fourth, how can we place in the mind emotions as described on the basis of language? How is emotion related to rational thought and morality in our conceptual system? Do they form separate systems in our naive view of the mind, or are they somehow unified, as can be determined from linguistic evidence?

As can be seen from the way I have stated some of the major concerns of this book, my basic interest in the emotions is threefold: (1) How do we talk about the emotions in English and other languages? (2) What folk theories of the emotions do these ways of talking reveal about particular emotions and emotion in general? And (3) how do these folk theories relate to other “neighboring” folk theories (such as that associated with human relationships) and scientific theories of emotions? In other words, I have to state up front that, strictly speaking, I do not have a theory of emotions myself. The theory of emotion I arrive at is not mine in the sense that it was not my intention to construct, and so have not constructed, another expert or scientific model of emotion that can be claimed to be “true” of emotions and that can be falsified by others. What I attempt to present here is what I take English and other languages to reveal about the emotions and to offer these folk conceptualizations of emotions based on language. On the one hand, this is accomplishing very little, compared to the many large-scale and comprehensive scientific models that supposedly reflect the “true” nature of emotion; on the other, it is accomplishing quite a lot, considering that emotion language deals with many important facets of emotion and thus provides a complex picture of emotion, as well as considering that it is this rich picture unfolding from language that corresponds to what human beings consciously feel when they experience an emotion. If we want to see what our “conscious feelings” involve, we have to take our language and our folk theories about the emotions seriously.

Although I believe that this book raises many important issues concerning the nature and role of human feelings in the emotions, I do not claim that it raises all of them (or even that it can always satisfactorily deal with the ones that it does raise). One such issue is the causal and functional aspects of emotion in the larger context of human action and cognitive functioning. The approach that I am advocating here can say little about this aspect of emotion, and I do not feel it is necessary or worthwhile for my purposes to go into it at all. Others

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have done this job and I accept and respect their work (see, e.g., Frijda, 1986; Leventhal and Scherer, 1987; Oatley and Johnson-Laird, 1987). I will only discuss this line of work when it bears directly on issues having to do with emotion language.

Some of the questions raised here will get answered only toward the end of the book; some others will be answered as we go along. The first chapter offers an overview of recent theories of emotion language and raises some further issues in connection with the study of emotion from a linguistic point of view. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 introduce the key findings of cognitive linguistics as they relate to the emotions. In particular, they emphasize the figurative nature of emotion language and, more important, the metaphorical character of our folk models of emotion. Chapter 5 offers the key theme in our folk theoretical thinking about emotions, the idea that we view emotions as forces that turn a "rational" self into an "irrational" one. We will find a single master metaphor (namely, the metaphor *EMOTIONS ARE FORCES*) that organizes much of our thinking about emotion. Chapter 6 contrasts this finding with the case of human relationships, such as love, marriage, and friendship. I will show that there are major systematic differences between the metaphorical conceptualization of emotions and that of human relationships.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the nature of folk models that structure emotion concepts and argues that they are inherently metaphorical, not literal as currently claimed by Naomi Quinn. Another issue the same chapter deals with is how the folk models of emotion are related to expert or scientific theories of emotion. This leads us to the question whether all scientific theorizing can be regarded as a version of folk psychology. Chapters 8 and 9 attempt to answer the question whether the conceptualization of emotions as revealed through language is universal or culture-specific. The answer is based on a detailed investigation of several unrelated languages (English, Chinese, Japanese, Hungarian, Wolof, Zulu, etc.). Finally, chapter 10 pulls together the various threads in the discussion of the several issues and offers a synthesis in which language (conceptualization), body, and culture naturally come together in a unified account of human emotion.

What is the relationship between this book and my previous work on emotion? The short answer is that the present work is *not* a summary of what I have done before (e.g., Kövecses, 1986, 1988, 1990). On the contrary, this book throws a different light on several issues that I

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have dealt with in earlier publications and it raises several new issues that perhaps I should have dealt with before but have not. Overall, the main difference between my previous work and this study is that in this book the emphasis is on emotions in general and the larger issues connected with them, and not on particular emotion concepts. There have been many new developments in both cognitive linguistics and emotion research in recent years, and I have attempted to make use of these developments here. For example, Leonard Talmy's work on the role of "force dynamics" in language and conceptualization led me to the new idea that much of the language and conceptualization of emotions can be described in force dynamic terms (hence the master metaphor EMOTION IS FORCE), rather than in terms of individual and independent conceptual metaphors. As will be seen, this new approach has important implications for the study of emotional feelings. I have also learned a great deal from critiques of my earlier work. In this book, I respond to challenges by Naomi Quinn, Anna Wierzbicka, and others. Hopefully, the result is a new, more refined, and more convincing view of human emotion and the way we talk about it.

In bringing this book to its final form, I have received a great deal of encouragement, help, and constructive criticism from Keith Oatley, Ray Gibbs, and Csaba Pléh. Their comments on a previous version were extremely helpful. Encouragement for the project also came from Julia Hough of Cambridge University Press. In addition, she provided me with all the moral, emotional, and material assistance that an author could wish for.

George Lakoff gave me his generous support throughout this project, and long before it. I am also indebted to his 1996 Metaphor class at UC Berkeley for reading the manuscript and providing many valuable suggestions concerning both examples and content. I also had some of the best students one can have at home in Budapest, who discussed many aspects of this book with me in several courses. Especially valuable suggestions came from Szilvia Csábi, Zsuzsanna Bokor, Orsolya Lazányi, Judit Szirmay, and Mónika Pacziga. Szilvia Csábi also gave me invaluable assistance in producing the final typescript.

Several Americans have helped me collect linguistic material for this book. Cheryl Chris, Lars Moestue, Joseph Vargo, and Ted Sablay conducted dozens of interviews for me with other native speakers of American English. The students in my 1996 Language of Emotion

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seminar at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas gave me many good ideas and patiently helped me clarify thoughts that were just being worked out at the time.

Gary Palmer was the first reader of an early manuscript. I have learned a great deal from our discussions of each chapter. His ideas are present in several parts of this book. Len Talmy gave me valuable feedback on the chapter dealing with force dynamics and John Taylor provided helpful comments on my discussion of Zulu emotion language.

Needless to say, I am grateful to all these people.

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