

INTRODUCTION

Feelingful language

Last year I met an exchange student I'll call Hussein, a man with a laptop, and a heart, full of songs. These were not just any songs, not secular songs, but Shia Muslim **laments** – songs of mourning. These songs and their compelling lyrics, along with tears and other public signs of grief over a particular set of historic martyrs, help to define Shia Islam vis-à-vis other forms. In the process of interviewing Hussein it became clear that, for him, language and feeling – the subject of this book – came together in the context of Shia religious practices that pervade his life and in many ways define what anthropologists call culture (his, in this case). That is, this coming together, this fusion of language and feeling, is the very stuff of culture.

Hussein's laptop contains perhaps hundreds of mp3 files of these Shia laments. But that is not where they live; Hussein has made them a part of his life. When during the course of our interview there was a dull moment as we waited for a file to download, I found him humming. What was he humming? Another lament. *This book explores language and feeling: feelingful language, like Hussein's.*

Both Arabic and English versions of many Shia laments are available as downloads from Shia devotional websites. (This is a cultural story in itself but one that I will not pursue.) As Hussein played for me the English version of a lament by the popular Iraqi lamenter (composer, performer), Basem al-Karbalai, the **genre** ceased to be merely the object of study as its power began to move me. Throughout our meeting, Hussein's devotion – his quiet and steady affect centered on these recent productions combining word, melody, and a vocal quality intended to resemble weeping (Feld and Fox 1994) – disturbed my secular sensibilities, touched me, and reminded me that language and emotion, for the linguistic anthropologist, are not only linked together, nor are they ends in themselves. They are linked to cultural ends.

Shia laments aim to commemorate the death of another Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of Ali. Shia Islam embraces Ali, and Hussein ibn Ali, as Imams (the third and first, respectively, of a canonical list of

twelve divinely authorized leaders of faith). Language feelingfully harnessed in the task of honoring God, his Imams, and his martyrs – this makes sense to Shia Muslims. Lament cut off from these moorings does not. Hussein was providing for me the rich contextualization on which ethnography, the anthropologist's approach to studying social and cultural life, thrives. He was demonstrating that the link between language and affect passes through the *process of identification*, his identification with the suffering of the Imams (an identification that I fleetingly experienced).

Let's trace the backstory behind my meeting with Hussein. A friend had described him as someone who would be interested in helping me understand Shia Islam, and laments. And just before that, I had heard a feature story on National Public Radio (Tarabay 2006) that had highlighted the role newly composed laments were playing in Iraq's Shia community. The story compelled me to learn what I could about such laments from someone to whom they were personally meaningful. NPR's Jamie Tarabay presented the laments in her story as social or political commentary on the current scene in Iraq, and on Sunni–Shia tensions in particular. And thus I was primed to raise this sort of function with Hussein. Although he is not from Iraq, he is a Shia Arab, and I guessed he might have a lot to say about these moving songs. From the start, however, Hussein redirected my attention. The first sign that I was, in his view, off track, was when he did not quite understand what I meant by calling the laments political. Very soon I realized that for him and others who made the songs part of their lives, these songs served primarily to focus and inspire religious attention and practice.

Why this book? Why now?

Cultural stories of the hot-as-molten-metal fusion of language and emotion need telling, and this is my task here. World-class scholars such as Ochs, Schieffelin, Abu-Lughod, Lutz, and Besnier (to name but a few) have explored this territory, making my task immensely easier, shedding light on the social (and discursive) construction of emotion. They pioneered the study of the **pragmatic meaning** of emotion talk, i.e., what it *does*, not just what it is “about” (Lutz 1988: 8; compare Ochs 1986, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989). Yet the time is clearly right for such a book as this, and not only because of such historic events as the resurgence of Shia Islam, a religion of lament. As Woodward felicitously notes, it is a time of “academic warming” toward the subject of emotion, some emotions in particular, and affect (Woodward 1996). In describing postmodernity, Frederic Jameson has pronounced the death of the centered subject, and with it, the waning of affect – “The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego – what I have been calling the waning of affect” (Jameson 1991: 15). Such pronouncements notwithstanding, Brian Massumi (and others) have declared this

postmodern age to be one of affective intensity.¹ Today one can even read profoundly scholarly, articulate arguments for an emotion-based approach to law and international relations.² At the same time, however, I dare say there is often more warmth than light, at least in the areas I address. In particular, the time is right for an anthropological treatise on language and emotion that takes a strongly historical, processual, semiotically informed approach. (In order to communicate more clearly the complexities involved in such an analysis, I have provided a glossary of the terms you see in **bold**.)

All speaking and writing is inherently emotional to a greater or lesser extent; objective, distant coolness *is* an emotional stance. Emotion is not confined to the outskirts of linguistic civilization but pervades its core (we could say, *Extra adfectum nullam salus*),³ by which I mean that nearly every dimension of every language at least potentially encodes emotion, and that this language-emotion relationship is crucial to what we call “culture.” But encoding is an inadequate concept to capture the constant and significant shifts in the way we enact or perform emotion with words, in different contexts,⁴ across different historical eras – not to mention across cultural boundaries. These are the themes I explore in this book.

One can imagine a number of books on language and emotion. Mine takes a particular approach to the subject informed by my disciplinary home – anthropology – and my conviction that the method anthropologists use and offer to other disciplines, namely *ethnography*, is a way to grasp our topic in its full cross-cultural and cross-linguistic diversity, with a good sense of real people feeling in real situations. Ethnography offers the potential to collapse distances; it can give readers a sense of being present – alongside the writer. Granted, since I will often be summarizing the first-person accounts of other ethnographers, much of the white-hot, or red, heat (as in warm, blushing face) of intimacy will be lost.⁵ But I hope to retain some of it. For even an account of passions should itself move readers and not only appeal to their minds despite our Cartesian **ideologies**.

But I write, as well, as a critic of anthropology’s tendency, at least until the 1980s, to neglect history (a tendency that may have been particularly marked among linguistic anthropologists, with important exceptions).⁶ I am convinced that local and global histories of the culturally mediated relationship between language and emotion ought to be central to any analysis of emotion, as they are, for example, to Erik Mueggler (1998, 2005). And I am also critical of a sort of flat earth approach to semiotic processes that collapses complex layers or orders of signs or sign relations in which one co-occurring element points to another⁷ into simple notions of language pointing to identity – as though, for example, one points to one’s Apache identity by speaking Apache or engaging in traditional Apache speech acts when (as I explore in later chapters) identifying with, and emotionally performing, certain **genres** of apparently Anglo-American music turn out to be central to being Apache these days (Samuels

2004). There are significant advantages, as I hope to make clear, in focusing on **identification** processes rather than writing about identity as though it were a thing. In fact emotion, and emotional language, enters into the process of **identification** in complex ways, which I will explore in later chapters. Even when scholars recognize identity as dynamically constituted, I find that changing the subject – focusing on identification – is a very useful reminder of process. This historical, semiotically informed, processual perspective sets my approach off from previous approaches to language and emotion within linguistic anthropology.

Anthropologists sometimes analyze myths. Let me instead offer some at the outset of this book – myth-like narratives that help situate emotion and affect (defined for now as a term that encompasses not only emotion but identifications and sensibilities, for example) in relation to language, culture, and history. I use the myths as a means to clarify some possible meanings of a (linguistically mediated) relationship being defined by emotion. For one of the things that sets my account of language and emotion apart from earlier accounts is its attention to histories and stories of other kinds.

Imagine a baby, far too young for words. The baby cries, and is immediately soothed. This happens often, teaching the infant a lesson about the power – perhaps even the magical power – of certain expressive forms. At some point in the child's life, she or he has a very different experience, leading to different inferences. In one version of the myth I am telling, the disappointed crying child – always a boy in this version – has already become verbal, old enough to make repeated requests that his older sister share her food with him; when she refuses his final request, the little boy in the myth is transformed into a fruit dove and flies away into the forest, where the dove's plaintive cries remind the people, in perpetuity, of the fateful interaction. This version of the myth (negatively) reminds the Bosavi people in Papua New Guinea of the giving and the emotion that should structure this relationship between younger brothers and older sisters, the *ade* relationship, a relationship that is defined by affect – dependent feelings on the brother's part and pity on the sister's (Feld 1990, B. Schieffelin 1990; compare Doi 1973).

If in this version “relationships defined by affect” amount to dyadic kin relations, the next version should indicate the scope and global sociopolitical significance of such relationships. I present a fuller discussion of the real history that forms the basis of this mythic retelling elsewhere (Wilce 2009).

Imagine a population of children and adults in full, active, and unequal relationship to another such population living with them. Imagine yourself a woman of the *bhadralok*⁸ in Kolkata (the former Calcutta), Bengal, ca. 1850 – that is, a member of the *bhadra* ‘gentle/genteel’ classes, the “literary-minded sections of the **Bengali** middle classes” (Chakrabarty 2004: 654–655). You

have grown up in this complex society, immersed in its particular emotional atmosphere – the bhadralok’s “emotional regime” (its “normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and **emotives** that express and inculcate them,” Reddy 2001: 129). But this emotional regime has been shaped by the engagement of the British with Bengalis, particularly the bhadralok, in Kolkata. The British-bhadralok relationship was a close if problematic one, producing at least superficially similar public emotional habits.

Imagine yourself a bhadralok woman in Kolkata who happens upon the performance of a ‘folk’ song. This **genre** – which combines discourse (lyrics) and music – resonates yet offends. For generations, *viraha* ‘longing’ songs have been performed in the area. Among the themes the genre can take up is the love between the god *Kṛṣṇa* (Krishna) and his consort, Radha. This theme is sacred to you and others. The language of Krishna and Radha’s love has for centuries stirred sacred emotion in your native Bengal, and all of India. Yet you feel that today’s performers, these rustic women whose *viraha* songs are typically frankly and playfully erotic, should go back to the countryside whence they came! You feel “shame” over the song’s “uninhibited debunking of Hindu deities” (feeling that British Orientalists view the song, you, and contemporary Hinduism as degenerate). The voices of rustic women performing in Kolkata seem to you shockingly bold. They “rend the air like the cuckoo.” Yet you hear another voice speaking *to* and *of* you, the voice of the New Kolkata Woman. This inner voice laments the fact that your voice “has become ... the mew of a pussy.”⁹

There is a final act to this narrative. To some extent, you and your family have learned to see ‘Hindu’ history as the British do – to see that the Hindus (your ancestors, epitomized also in the corrupted version of Hinduism of which the bawdy *viraha* song is a representative example) lost their way some time long before the British arrived. Your **identification** with this Hinduism shifts in a subtle way since you may begin to perceive the form your generation inherited as a pale version of the original, full reality. This colors your sense of yourself at least as you relate to colonial officers – but also *as you speak*, and thus it colors *how you speak*. For the sense of a fall from the golden age touches off not only religious reform but linguistic reforms. These reforms – including ‘purifying’ **Bangla**¹⁰ of ‘foreign’ (Muslim) taint, in and of themselves – have strong affective overtones.

The point of this story is to provide an example of the complex processes we must examine in order to grasp language’s relation to emotion. This book invites you to look not only at the eons of evolution that led to the contemporary language-emotion nexus; not only at strictly cognitive-linguistic issues or universal emotional scripts (see Wierzbicka’s “Natural Semantic Metalanguage,” Wierzbicka and Harkins 2001) said to underlie “emotion labels”; but at the cultural-historical contexts in which even academic talk of emotion takes place

(Wilce 2009). The story also neatly illustrates the multilayered nature of the culturally and ideologically mediated relationship of language and emotion. Such relationships entail apparent sociolinguistic facts (e.g., that rural women's performances are embarrassing, or bawdy – such facts being themselves the product of **ideological** reflection, at whatever degree of consciousness) – that become the occasion for further stages of reflection. And those reflections in turn produce new facts (such as self-conscious shifts in what became 'gentle' or 'bhadrak speech'), in never-ending cycles.

Writing about emotion: who does it, and how?

For an academic, or perhaps a linguistic anthropologist in particular, to write of emotion has, at least in the recent past, been to take some amount of risk. Over the years it has been a labor some consider the concern of a few. The few, at first – Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict – were women at a time when women were rare in anthropology. Oddly, later work on emotion (by Lutz, White, Ochs, and Schieffelin) was often associated with Oceania (Abu-Lughod's important work being an exception). Some (e.g., Lutz and White) who did this work were practitioners of a subdiscipline – psychological anthropology – that some find problematic. Since linguistic anthropology is another subdiscipline within the tribe of anthropologists, the area of overlap of these two circles of interest – psychological and linguistic anthropology – might appear small. These facts in themselves may **index** male dominance, and the dominance of concerns associated with men as analysts and actors (power), despite some strong evidence to the contrary. Whatever risk was attached to writing about emotion or affect in the past has apparently receded of late as the subject has attracted more and more debate (reflected in this book) and interest.

The cool and distant emotional stance in most academic writing is striking, and this may be particularly true of those who write about language. There are examples of ethnographic writing that contrast sharply. Renato Rosaldo began to think, and write, about grief very differently when his wife and ethnographic field partner, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, died in an accident during fieldwork in the Philippines with the Ilongot people. Without claiming to have become Ilongot, the widowed Renato Rosaldo could reasonably claim to have understood things that Ilongot individuals had been telling him about grief. The comparative absence of any writing like Rosaldo's (in the passage below) from linguistic anthropology was forming itself as a problem in my mind as I set about writing this book:

I experienced the deep cutting pain of sorrow almost beyond endurance, the cadaverous cold of realizing the finality of death, the trembling beginning in my abdomen and spreading through my body, the mournful keening that started without my willing, and frequent tearful sobbing (Rosaldo 1996: 488).

I know of no passage in linguistic anthropology that packs the same emotional punch.

The turning away from feeling in academic writing at times becomes an explicit theoretical statement. Consider the work of Lauren Berlant (1999), whose jaundiced analyses of the invocation of emotion in public discourse have inspired other feminist critiques of the role of emotion in the public sphere (Povinelli 1998). Others note the absence of feelings even from some feminist accounts of affect. For example, Sedgwick and Frank (1995b) critique Cvetkovich (1992) on the grounds that her constructionist approach is blind to large domains of affect, but also because distinctions among particular affects are lost in her account. “Affect is treated as a unitary category, with a unitary history and unitary politics. There is no theoretical room for any difference between, say, being amused, being disgusted, being ashamed, and being enraged” (Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 17). Recently, **cultural studies** scholar Elspeth Probyn sounded the same note: “So let Affect rest (in peace), so we can put our energies into motivated analyses of the constitution, the experience, the political, cultural and individual import of many affects” (2005b).

I have been troubled by the popularity of a certain emotion-distant style in linguistic anthropology, and by the dominance of arguments that derive from a certain reading of Wittgenstein, famously skeptical of “private languages,” and of Merleau-Ponty, who once wrote, “Truth does not ‘inhabit’ the ‘inner man,’ or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xii). Skepticism about private languages has spilled over into skepticism about language’s expressive function (Jakobson 1985 [1960]). These issues were brought to a head for me several years ago when I was asked to provide a published commentary (Wilce 2003) on an article disputing the classical view that interjections either manifest emotions or (at least) mental states. In many ways, I owe this book to the brilliant linguistic anthropologist who wrote the original article, Paul Kockelman. In another sense, my commentary – asserting that there is a late-modern cultural influence behind the skepticism this paragraph describes – was only incidentally targeting Kockelman’s argument. It was intended far more generally.

In a nutshell, here is the argument I objected to, but which felicitously provided the impetus for this book: “When we focus on internal states ... the situational, discursive, and social regularities of interjections are all too easily elided” (Kockelman 2003: 479). I have no objection to recognizing the social significance of interjections or any other forms commonly analyzed as emotive, and welcome what fellow commentator John Haviland calls Kockelman’s “**indexicality**-based account.” The problem Haviland and I have is with Kockelman contrasting that account with, as Haviland writes, “one focusing on ‘subjective emotional states.’ But there is no contrast if ‘emotion’ is

intersubjectively and interactively constructed” (Haviland 2003: 481). Indeed, Haviland raises the proper question: Why construe emotions as purely personal and subjective, problematize them, and then feel compelled to divorce them from language, even those linguistic forms that have been most closely associated with emotions? Why not view emotions as shared **intersubjective** states, performed in complex multimodal contexts involving, yes, interjections, and nearly every dimension of language *and* visible **semiosis**,¹¹ etc.?

I thank Kockelman, Haviland, and others for starting such a compelling discussion. It is to offer a more nuanced, comprehensive, and theoretically rich version of the argument I offered in 2003 that I write this book.

Overview of the argument and chapters

My argument shares much with other anthropologists’ work on emotion, and it is worthwhile stating some of that common ground before distinguishing this work from theirs. Forms of human emotion are not, and never have been, purely personal or biological. Always social in context, emotions and the semiotic forms that help bear and reproduce them are responsive to the forms of our shared life. More than straightforwardly revealing psychological processes, forms of discourse – and more specifically, genres of so-called emotional expression – help constitute social understandings and apparently internal processes. To be a person is to belong to a group; participation in all human communities entails sharing genres of performance and cultural sensibilities guiding reflections on them. Through history, altering emotion, semiotic forms (genres), or social life has meant altering the others, too.

Although you will easily perceive this book’s debt to a wide range of other work, it differs from previous treatments of language and emotion in many ways. As I touch on all of the particular arguments that distinguish this work from its predecessors, the perceptive reader will realize that many if not most of them pertain to reflexivity. This book not only calls for greater critical reflection across a number of issues; it also insists that local actors constantly engage in reflection, and that the function of many signs is also reflexive. In fact, all humanly produced signs (from tears, to languages [objectified], to arguments, e.g., that the speech style of some class of persons is naturally more emotional than some standard of comparison) fall under the influence of reflexive (or meta-) signs. **Identification** (Fuss 1995) is an inherently reflexive process. **Language ideologies** (Kroskrity 2000) – culturally particular ideas about language and its relations to the world, ideas always significantly linked to forms of power – are inherently reflexive. The study of linguistic ideologies – “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979: 193), or “shared bodies of commonsense notions of the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey 1990: 346) – has proven to be one of the most productive areas of linguistic

anthropological research since the early 1990s, not least because language ideologies are always about more than language.

Scholarly approaches to the study of culture or language, my own included, exemplify reflexivity (being cultural reflections on culture) as well as its limits; i.e., our reflections may well be just as ideologically driven as any local model of culture, etc. Anthropologists and anthropologies are cultural products, and deserve critical reflection (Wilce 2009). Starting with the next chapter, this book devotes such reflexive attention to the emergence and cultural/historical particularity of the category, emotion. Although some linguistically sensitive anthropologists have debated what to call the first element in their work on the pair emotion and language (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1985 preferring “sentiment”),¹² few have subjected the integrity of the category emotion itself to radical questioning (for an exception, see Beatty 2005). It is an odd oversight – and perhaps indicates the grip the category has on us all, as folks and academics.

Perhaps the explanation for the oversight is that previous approaches to emotion by linguistic and psychological anthropologists have tended to be ahistorical on the one hand or, on the other, to ignore the microtemporal order of interaction, manifest in the close coordination of turns at talk. Indeed, the larger argument into which my questioning of the category emotion falls is a call to historicize our treatment of the language-culture-emotion nexus. On the microlevel, linguists (in contrast with linguistic anthropologists) who have worked on linguistic affect or stance have not consistently located it within the flow of **naturalistic** (inter)action.¹³ On the other hand, historians of emotion have quite exclusively focused on macroforces – those, for example, that shaped French emotion-talk around the time of the Revolution (Reddy 2001) – to the neglect of fine-grained analyses of language deployed in real-time interaction.¹⁴

The tendency (until quite recently) to neglect history does not mean emotion scholarship has neglected time. Some of those concerned with cognition (including emotion) and language focus on their evolution. In fact, anthropological treatments of emotion typically break down according to apparently creedal loyalties to either a universalizing approach that takes biology and evolution seriously (and downplays cultural variability), or a cultural-relativist approach that is apparently allergic to arguments based on evolution, biology, and neuroscience. Nor am I a neutral player on that field of conflict. But this book does represent some of the ‘hard science’ findings, in part because I share the concern of many anthropologists (who are not so biologically oriented) with embodiment (Csordas 1990). Embodiment, as a paradigm for the study of culture, is typically defined as the development and manifestation of embodied sensibilities, tastes, postures, and practices that are *historically particular*, and specific to some society or social class, i.e., some *habitus*, rather than a reflection of eons of evolutionary development. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977a, 1977b) notion of the *habitus* represents an attempt to capture the

implicit presence of the social and historical in the embodied dispositions of a sociological fraction, be it one of the contemporary French social classes, or a Berber village in Algeria, or *Homo academicus*.

Directly related to the argument for history is a second argument distinctive to this book, and it pertains to a third element bearing a relation to language and emotion: I problematize the **indexical** relationship that is said to exist between language and (a reified vision of) **identity**, and between emotion-talk and emotion – the latter being the relationship Kockelman also problematized. The relevance to this book of the relationship between language and identity becomes clear when identity is replaced with *identification*, a dynamic process that has, since Freud, been connected with affect. The process of identification, and its many objects, are social and not merely personal.

In order to understand the argument over **indexicality** in particular, it is best to clarify what's meant by calling a sign (more accurately, a sign relation) 'indexical.' This discussion reflects the influence of American philosopher Charles S. Peirce and his theory of *semiotic* (more commonly referred to as semiotics.) Peirce was by no means a linguist; he understood his theory of signs to be applicable in every academic discipline, and indeed every corner of the universe. By **indexicality** we mean – following Peirce – a kind of pointing, as when a weathervane indexes the wind's direction (Peirce 1931–1958: 2.276, π 286, p. 161). An index involves a sign (or sign-vehicle, i.e., the material entity that carries the significance) – e.g., the weathervane – that somehow co-occurs with its object. Its meaning radically depends on that co-occurrence-in-context. The weathervane becomes an index *only because it is attached*, grounded in a visible context that someone can share, i.e., looking at the weathervane during a moment when the wind is blowing. Smoke points to a fire, but is an effective index only if you are relatively nearby, and only because it always occurs near the fire. Speakers use words like 'here' and 'now' to point, figuratively, to the spatio-temporal context of speaking. A novelist uses them to point to the time he or she is creating at a particular point in a narrative. An effect also indexes its cause; however, all scientific history can be characterized as an attempt to clarify such relationships.

So, what is wrong with speaking of language straightforwardly indexing identity or emotion? I do not claim that any representation of talk as emotional erases our insight into its indexicality. I object, instead, to common representations of indexical relationships. Many anthropologists question what the linguistic sign (specifically, *emotion-talk*) actually points to, debating whether or not we can assume there is any 'there there,' whether the talk can be presumed to point to any actual emotion underlying it. Though that is one problem bearing some relation to debate over interjections discussed earlier, this book takes the problem of indexicality further.

It turns out that, unlike weathervanes responding to natural causes, i.e., moved by a natural force that is immune to what we call it (the wind), indexicality in the