

‘EMOTION LANGUAGE’: WHY METAPHOR?

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Introduction

Studying emotions is a focal research question in modern cultural psychology. Exploring different dimensions and constituent components of an emotional experience reveals that compartmentalized thinking about socio-cultural, cognitive and affective components of emotions, would yield incomplete data, as the experience of an emotion is holistic, where different components act together rather than independently. Kovecses (2000) discusses the content of an emotional experience as *scenarios*, which includes, in addition to the psychological, the social, cognitive (especially linguistic configurations), and biophysiological dimensions. Understanding emotional experiences as ‘scenarios’ allows the researcher a way to break through the constraints imposed by the debate between ‘universals’ and ‘social /cultural /individual constructionistic specificity’ of emotional experiences, as the focus is not limited to different components of an emotional experience as much as to the holistic picture of the total experience.

Metaphor is one of the most effective ways to understand emotional experience as scenarios, as a metaphor captures and conveys the larger picture much better than

literal emotion labels. It carries many possibilities of interpretation, which facilitates the communication of descriptive and subjective meanings. Moreover, even though only few people could clearly articulate abstract emotional experiences using literal words, a great deal of ordinary people could think, and understand emotions expressed through figurative language or ‘conventional metaphor’ (White, 1990).

Objectives

The current study specifically aims to explore and develop a functional analysis of the role of metaphor in the construction and expression of emotional experiences. It aims to look into the dimensions of an emotional experience that is captured through a metaphor, and the reasons behind people’s choice of metaphor in place of technical emotional labels for expression of emotions. The specific research questions are,

- Why do people use metaphor?
- What is captured in the metaphor of an emotion?

Methodology

The current study is a pilot study of a research project that will focus on the role of metaphor in human emotional experiences from a broader and more comprehensive perspective. The data for the current

pilot study was selected from purely literature-based resources. 'Karumakkarayo' by Gunadasa Amarasekara, 'Iti Pahan' by Sumithra Rahubadda, and 'Hathuru Hithak' by Karunasena Jayalath were selected as the sources of data for the current study, after consultation with academics in Sinhala literature. Data analysis was done in a qualitative manner, according to the primary principles of the 'Cultural Domain Analysis' (Bernard, 1995).

Results

The study shows that metaphors connect a sensation and feeling state with a material reality. The use of metaphor often referred to an emotion as a process, rather than a *thing* indicated by a static label. A third factor is how emotions are conceptualized as something that happens to the experiencing subject; the metaphor indicates that the emotion is inside the person, a process that happens *to* the person.

Discussion

It is important to recognize the facilitative role played by metaphor in emotion language; metaphor serves the expression of emotional experiences by providing an accepted and effective set of linguistic tools. With emotions that lack expressive words, descriptive emotion expressions face the challenge of describing an abstract reality consisted of feelings. Metaphors connect the feeling state of the emotional experience with a sensation-based, material reality that is easily understood by any average person. The narrative depicted by

the metaphor creates a process-oriented scenario of a given emotion; such contextualizing serves in developing a narrative around the emotional experience, which ground the emotion in both subjective and objective contexts. Moreover, emotion narratives significantly facilitate the decomposing and comprehension of the psychological experience of emotion.

Conclusion

The paper explores the role of metaphor in the cognition and expression of emotional experiences; the study is grounded in a framework of social and cultural domains. As Edwards (1997) puts it, "(emotion categories) are discursive phenomena and need to be studied as such, as part of how talk performs social actions" (p.187). However, it is important to recognize that cultural differences in emotion language do not represent a 'radical otherness' of cultural forms of language. On the contrary, the differences and similarities between cultural forms of emotion language often stem from common schematic frameworks that are shared by different cultures. Further research is compulsory for a better comprehension of the socio-cultural dimension of emotion language.

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