

The role of grammar and culture in shaping emotion metaphors. A case study on two Australian languages

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Most languages in the world can represent emotions by means of analogies with more concrete things – that is, they use emotion “metaphors” (Lakoff, 1987). English, for instance, depicts fear as an enemy (“fight one’s fears”), and anger as a liquid (“overwhelming anger”) – among other comparisons (Kövecses, 2000). Metaphors normally rely historically on shared conceptual analogies – e.g. a comparison between fear and enemies culturally shared by English speakers. Therefore, shared cultural representations of emotions contribute to determine which emotion metaphors are found in each language (Kövecses, 2005).

However, other factors may contribute to shape up metaphors: in some languages, some grammatical properties seem to block certain metaphors, so that the language itself may influence the range of emotion metaphors available (Whorf, 1956). For instance, the fear and anger metaphors above are possible because English has emotion nouns. By contrast, Dalabon, a severely endangered language of northern Australia, has remarkably few emotion nouns. At the same time, unlike most languages in the world, it never depicts emotions metaphorically as things or persons, but only as states (Ponsonnet, 2014). In Dalabon, one can only say things comparable to “he loves”, never “he is in love”. Therefore, emotions can never be the subjects or objects of sentences, and this seems to block many metaphors. Should we conclude that there is a cause-to-effect relationship between the absence of nouns and the absence of certain metaphors?

Data from Barunga Kriol, the English-based creole that replaces Dalabon in the post-colonial era, suggests that this cause-to-effect relationship is not strict. Barunga Kriol has more emotion nouns than Dalabon, yet its range of emotion metaphors presents comparable restrictions. Given that the two languages are spoken by the same communities, hence in a similar cultural context, this restriction must result from cultural constraints.

Based on first-hand data collected between 2007 and 2014, this presentation will analyze the emotion metaphors found in Dalabon and Barunga Kriol, so as to highlight the respective impact of cultural and grammatical factors on these metaphors.