

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Universal Emotions

Aseel Alfaisal

Lecturer, Department of Languages and Translation, Arar Community College,
Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia

Rose Aljanada

Lecturer, Department of Languages and Translation, Arar Community College,
Northern Border University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

Universal emotions was based on the work of Darwin who proposed that emotions were simply evolved traits, and that they were universal to all humans. In the 1960s, psychologists Tomkins, Ekman and Izard took the expressions of emotions to the lab. They came up with a set of photos that represented the six basic emotions that they defined as biological fingerprints. However, research in different cultures threw a shade of doubt on the idea of universality, because it neglects contextual clues. Research also proved that emotional meaning, classifying emotions and emotion work vary from culture to culture. Some cultures have no equivalent words for emotions in other cultures. To study the role of emotion in cultural patterns and the role of culture in the shaping and conceptualization of emotions, we need to pay close attention to language, in all its aspects: lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic.

Keywords: *Universal emotions, basic emotions, emotion work, emotion fingerprints*

1. Universal Emotions

Talking about emotions leads to two main angles, namely, what one feels and how one thinks of what they feel. Feelings and thoughts are inflections of people's way of living and the environment around, which are all products of their culture. People from different origins have different habits; however, there exist also common features in the way they react emotionally in certain situations. There is a cross-cultural similarity in the physiological responses to emotion when facial expressions are used as markers. This notion goes back in time to what is known as the "classic view of emotion". This term is based on the work and writings of Charles Darwin. In his 1872 book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin proposed that emotions, like other biological traits, were simply evolved traits, and that they were universal to all humans. In his discussion of fear, Darwin (1872) points out:

Men, during numberless generations, have endeavored to escape from their enemies or danger by headlong flight, or by violently struggling with them; and such great exertions will have caused the heart to beat rapidly, the breathing to be hurried, the chest to heave, and the nostrils to be dilated. And now, whenever the emotion of fear is strongly felt, though it may not lead to any exertion, the same results tend to reappear, through the force of inheritance and association. (p. 302) Darwin (1872) also stressed that the expressive actions which humans exhibit are not learned; they are innate. No learning or imitation is needed so as for humans to use them. For Darwin, expressive emotions are in fact reflexes to environmental triggers, and that they can be seen in all humans and some lower animals (p. 343).

Darwin's work set the stage for the belief that emotions are innate, they modify people's way of living and the environment around. Emotions, according to this view, are inherited built-in phenomena in all humans. All humans exhibit and recognize facial expressions of emotion without training. This is what Barrett (2017) called "the classic view of emotion" in her book *How Emotions Are Made*. Barrett explains that the classic view of emotion presumes that humans have "emotion circuits" in their brains, and each circuit is responsible for the changes that accompany a certain emotion. This means those changes are the same in all humans (since they are inherited), and that humans exhibit emotions on the face in a fixed pattern of movements called facial expressions. The fixed pattern gives both the movements of the face and the changes that accompany the movements the nature of subtlety; hence making them more of fingerprints, unique and identifying. Using this logic, scientists can use these emotion fingerprints to study emotions (p. X).

In the 1960s, psychologist Silvan Tomkins and his two students Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard took the expressions of emotions to the lab. They came up with a set of photos that represent the six basic emotions that they defined as biological fingerprints. These basic emotions, originally inspired by Darwin's work in emotion, were: anger, fear, disgust, surprise, sadness and happiness.



Figure 1: The Six Basic Emotions as Posed by Actors in Ekman-Friesen Studies of Facial Affect. Adapted from "Age, Gender and Puberty Influence the Development of Facial Emotion Recognition", by K. Lawrence, R. Campbell and D Skuse, 2015, *Frontiers on Psychology*, 6, P.6

Paul Ekman started his studies on facial expressions and emotion in 1965, very much convinced that emotions, expressions and gestures were socially learned and culturally variable. In his 1992 book *Emotions Revealed: Understanding Faces and feelings*, Ekman recounted his history of studies which he implemented in different cultures, and then points out to the question that changed the game:

"How could we have found that people from many different cultures agreed about what emotion was shown in an expression when so many smart people thought just the opposite?" (p. 3)
 Analyzing the findings of his experiments along with those of Carroll Izard, Ekman concluded that Darwin was right. Expressions of emotion are universal.

Using the photographs of posed-faces of the basic emotion, Tomkins, Ekman and Izard study how well people recognize expressions of emotion. In their studies, a subject is shown a photograph and then is asked to choose the emotion word that best describes it.


Choose the word that best describes the man's face.		
	Happiness	Disgust
	Sadness	Anger
	Surprise	Fear

Figure 2: The Six Basic Emotions as Posed by Actors in Ekman-Friesen Studies of Facial Affect, Adapted from "Age, Gender and Puberty Influence the Development of Facial Emotion Recognition", by K. Lawrence, R. Campbell and D. Skuse, 2015, *Frontiers on Psychology*, 6, P.6 Layout by the Authors

In other experiments, subjects are shown two photographs and asked to pick the face that matches a story they are given.

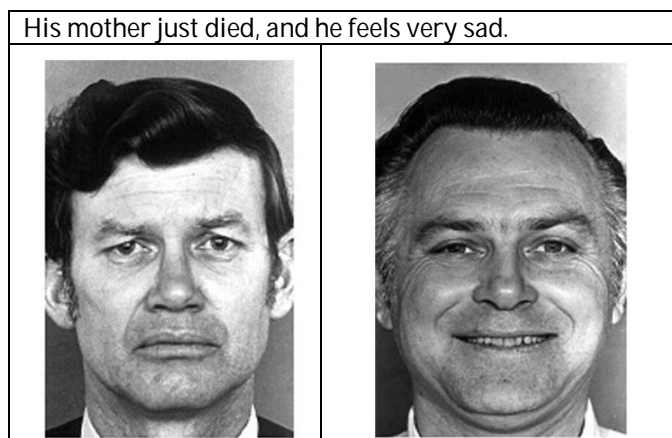


Figure 3: The Six Basic Emotions as Posed by Actors in Ekman-Friesen Studies of Facial Affect, Adapted From "Age, Gender and Puberty Influence the Development of Facial Emotion Recognition", by K. Lawrence, R. Campbell and D. Skuse, 2015, *Frontiers on Psychology*, 6, P.6 Layout by the Authors

Scientists conducted these experiments in different environments, ranging from western cultures to African tribes living in complete isolation. They used posed-faces and recorded voices that express different emotions (laughter, grunts, sobbing). Using this method, scientists proved that humans, regardless of where they are from, can match the same emotion words (of course, translated into their language) to the correct faces. Hence; interpretation of or even communication of emotional states seems to be invariant despite differences in languages and cultures. No matter where and how one lives, there are no barriers for the common aspects of basic emotion expressions. Relying on the universality of emotion expressions, it is possible to explain why people from different cultures can watch foreign movies and understand much of the original feeling of the character in spite of the absence of translation.

Scientists were enthusiastic about such findings. The idea of universal expression of emotion was so appealing that experiments were implemented over and over again using the set of basic emotions as a cornerstone. However, some interesting results came out to throw a shade of doubt on the idea of universality.

Subjects in many experiments couldn't decide if the posed-faces display fear or surprise. An example is Barrett's experiment where she asked different professional actors to portray different emotions based on a given scenario. Subjects couldn't agree on a single emotion word to describe the posed-face. For example, when the posed-face is supposed to be angry, subjects identify the face as displaying fear. Such findings lead us to understand that a single emotion expression takes no single physical pattern of changes in the body or movements in the face. Every emotion expression displays varying facial movements (Barrett, 2017, p. 10).

The classic view of emotion neglects a vital factor in the process of recognizing emotion expression; that is, contextual clues. You are capable of recognizing a certain emotion expression because you take into consideration not only the facial expression, but also a wide range of contextual clues: visible body changes, voice, smells, textures and so many other clues that your brain uses to analyze and identify a specific emotion.

The question is, what happens if such contextual clues are missing in a situation? Well, that is exactly what Widen, Christy, Hewett and Russell (2011) did. They re-conducted the classic basic emotion recognition study, with one new modification. The list of emotion words was simply removed, which meant subjects were "free" to label the posed-faces as they truly saw them. Widen and her colleagues proposed that the aforementioned list of emotion words was in fact a form of forced choice that only served to limit the available choices and to suggest correct answers to questions. What happened in that study is interesting? Subjects could name the posed-faces only half the time, and in subsequent studies the results were even lower.

If emotion recognition was innate, shouldn't subjects be capable of doing so in spite of the absence of the emotion word list? A series of studies were conducted where the lists of emotion words were removed, then using wordless pictures of posed-faces subjects were asked if the faces showed the same emotion or not. Other studies also tested patients with permanent brain lesions who suffer from semantic dementia. Those patients have trouble retrieving words and concepts, including emotion words. Semantic dementia patients could only categorize the posed-faces into two categories: positive and negative. What these patients needed was a context so as to be able to decide what the posed-face was referring to. These studies clarified that humans don't have an innate index of emotions, they need contextual clues to correctly identify an emotion (Linguist, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau and Russell, 2006, p. 134).

Gendron, Roberson, van der Vyver and Barrett (2014) took the study of the basic emotions to the Himba, a tribe living in Namibia, Africa. The Himba is one of the very few tribes in the world still living in relative isolation and practices centuries-old life style, and so considered perfectly unaffected by western culture. This means if the basic emotions were really innate and universal, the Himba people would recognize them without trouble. Gendron and her colleagues used the face-sorting method. The Himba Subjects were asked to categorize thirty-six posed-faces the way they see them. The Himba subjects could successfully categorize the given posed-faces, but not the way expected by the researchers! The Himba subjects gathered all the smiling faces in one pile, the wide-eyed faces in another pile and made many piles for the rest of the faces. The Himba subjects referred to the smiling faces as "laughing" and to the wide-eyed faces as "looking".

They categorized the posed-faces as behaviors rather than emotions. The Himba subjects displayed no evidence of universal emotion recognition.

Barrett (2017) remarks that considering all the research done in the field of the so-called universal emotion, there seems to be one emotion that people are capable of identifying, regardless of their culture or origin, and that emotion is happiness. However, she comments that what we might perceive as the "closest thing we have to a universal emotion" can possibly be a product of stereotyping (p. 51).

Western media provided people for more than a century with ready-made images of what happiness should look like, how a sad face is supposed to look, what an angry man's face should look and so on to the point where it is so difficult today to pose other expressions of emotions. A century of posed-faces in media guaranteed a sense of universality when in fact it might not exist. This is the case with the shut-off tribes, where people who are uninfluenced by this media programming do exhibit a different approach towards emotion words.

Even when it comes to the meaning of a specific emotion, there is no universality. Shweder (1991) states that emotional meaning varies from culture to culture. What it means to feel angry is not the same in different cultures. For example, the Eskimo view anger as something that only children experience, while the Ilongot, a tribe inhabiting the east side of Luzon Island in the Philippines, believe that anger is so dangerous that it can destroy society. On the other hand, working-class Americans generally believe that anger helps to overcome fear and attain independence (p. 245). Stewart (1991) points that the American culture fosters and encourages cheerfulness and social smile to get rid of bad feelings, whereas the Japanese social smile might be used as cover for negative painful feelings. The authors of this paper remark that the Syrian and Egyptian cultures put a great emphasis on cheerfulness and friendliness as a representation of self-control and competence.

It also seems that classifying emotions varies across-culturally. Emotions don't fall into the same category in all cultures. Generally speaking, all cultures have two major emotion categories: pleasant and unpleasant. Let us examine love, for instance. Love is a purely positive emotion in western cultures; however, in China it is seen as closer to sadness and a sense of loss. Pride is seen as a positive emotion in western cultures; but in India it is considered a negative emotion. Wierzbicka (1992) points out that some cultures have no equivalent words for emotions in other cultures. For example, the Ifaluk don't have a word for anger; instead, they have the word *song* which means justified anger. The Polish word *gniew* roughly means a dignified kind of anger. Tahitians don't have a word for sadness. Germans have the word *schadenfreude*, translated as joy at someone else's misfortune, which has no equivalent in English.

Moreover, different cultures consider different emotions to be primary. Shame, for instance, is considered a key emotion in eastern cultures. There is shame because of social or sexual wrong deeds in Arabic *عار*, there is shame and regret because of defeat in Japanese *悔し* *kuyashi*, but it is less likely to be considered a primary emotion in many western cultures.

Scollon, Diener, Oishi and Biswas-Diener (2004) list a few words that have no equivalent in English. The Indian word *aviman* is best described as a feeling of prideful loving anger. *Sukh* is another Indian word which means both peace and happiness. *ふれあい* *Fureai* is a Japanese term that means feeling a sense of connectedness to someone else. *劣等感* *Retsotkan*, Japanese also, means to feel inferior. Mesquita and Frijda (1992) mention that the Kipsigis, a tribe living in Kenya and speaking a Nilotic language, have got a word similar to happiness but has as a quiet clam meaning and can be translated to nothing is bothering you.

The absence of universality in emotions and emotion expressions doesn't stop at the vocabulary level. It is further manifested in emotion work and nonverbal expressions of emotion. Cultural norms determine how and when to show emotions which are not actually felt. Acting out an emotion that is not felt is called emotion work. Its western cultures, it is appropriate to appear stoic when attending funerals. In Jordan, one is required to look grave, while it is considered appropriate in Egypt to show extreme grief.

Nonverbal expressions of emotions differ across-culturally because different cultures have different display rules which steer people's emotions. For example, as a form of greeting, male friends usually don't embrace and kiss each other in the United States where such behavior would make most American men angry. However, in many Arab and European cultures, acquaintances normally embrace and kiss each other on both cheeks, and avoiding this greeting is considered unfriendly.

After examining all the cases mentioned above, one can see the immense effect the classic view of emotion has left on the study of emotions. It has simply shaped the scientific research and influenced the public understanding of emotions. Countless studies assert that emotions are universal, which produced thousands of books, articles, TV shows, radio broadcasts, YouTube videos, lectures, courses, games and even national security programs, all claiming the universal ability of humans to recognize the same emotion expressions. Computer games and smart-phone applications introduced a new universal language that is completely based on the almost 150-year-old work of Charles Darwin's in emotions. Take the now-considered outdated emoticons you can find on your computer keyboard, Facebook's emojis or WhatsAppemojis and stickers, they are all products of the same view of emotions; a single facial expression that is supposed to be universal, though it helps create the universality it claims.

Researches such as Wierzbicka (1999), Shweder (1991), Mesquita&Frijda (1992), Scollon (2004), Ekman (1972), and Izard (2009) have made significant work; yet, they have not answered clearly these questions: what is the difference between language and actual feelings? And what is the problem of the relationship between language and actual feelings? How can emotions be graded or scaled? Are emotions measured equally by raising questions and giving answers to those questions? How can we make a stable structure to define our emotions? Emotions, which vary from high to normal to low, can hardly be measured; how X feels differs from how Y feels, even if they both feel the same thing lexically; for example,

upset or sad. Yet, there are some common features when one feels upset or sad but different levels or “types” of that feeling. These emotion concepts actually should be categorized instead of defined in order to be precise.

Although many emotions and expressions of emotions are universal, people around the world express emotion differently, so that some differences exist among cultures. To study the role of emotion in cultural patterns and the role of culture in the shaping and conceptualization of emotions, we need to pay close attention to language, in all its aspects: lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic.

2. References

- i. Barrett, L.F. (2018). *How emotions are made: the secret life of the brain*. Pan Macmillan.
- ii. Darwin, C. (1998). *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (3rd ed.). New York, New York: Oxford University.
- iii. Ekman, P. (1992). *Emotions revealed: recognizing faces and feelings*. Retrieved from https://books.google.com.sa/books?id=glZy_WThLf8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=paul+ekman+1992+emotions+r+evealed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiu9_Xnmq7fAhXEMI8KHVIHAIUQ6AEIMzAC#v=onepage&q=paul%20ekman%201992%20emotions%20revealed&f=false
- iv. Ekman, P. (2007). *Emotions revealed: recognizing faces and feelings to improve communication and emotional life* (2nd ed.). New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- v. Gendron, M., Roberson, D., van der Vyver, J. & Barrett, L. (2014). Cultural relativity in perceiving emotion from vocalizations. *Psychological Science*, 25(4), 911-920.
- vi. Izard, C.E. (2009). Emotions theory and research: highlights, unanswered questions, and emerging issues. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 1-25.
- vii. Lawrence, K., Campbell, R., & Skuse, D. (2015). Age, gender, and puberty influence the development of facial emotion recognition. *Frontiers in psychology*, 6, 761. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00761
- viii. Lindquist, K., Barrett, L., Bliss-Moreau, E. & Russell, J. (2006). Language and the perception of emotions. *Emotion*, 6(1), 125-138.
- ix. Mesquita, B. & Frijda, N. (1992). Cultural variations in emotions: A review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(2), 179-204.
- x. Scollon, C., Diener, E., Oishi, S. & Biswas-Diener, R. (2004). Emotions across cultures and methods. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35(3), 304-326.
- xi. Shweder, R.A. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: expeditions in cultural psychology*. London: Harvard University.
- xii. Stewart, E. & Bennett M. (1991). *American Cultural Patterns* (Rev. ed.). Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.
- xiii. Widen, S., Christy, A., Hewett, K. & Russell, J. (2011). Do proposed facial expressions of contempt, shame, embarrassment and compassion communicate the predicted emotion? *Cognition and Emotion*, 25(5), 898-906.
- xiv. Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Emotions across languages and cultures: diversity and universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- xv. K. L., R. C., & D. S. (2015, June 16). Examples of the Ekman-Friesen Pictures of Facial Affect used in the computerized task. [Digital image]. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00761/full>
- xvi. K. L., R. C., & D. S. (2015, June 16). Examples of the Ekman-Friesen Pictures of Facial Affect used in the computerized task. [Digital image]. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00761/full> Layout by the authors.
- xvii. K. L., R. C., & D. S. (2015, June 16). Examples of the Ekman-Friesen Pictures of Facial Affect used in the computerized task. [Digital image]. Retrieved December 19, 2018, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00761/full> Layout by the authors.