Emotion in Language: Conceptualization and Expression

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Emotion is, like snow, colors and all the other phenomena in the world, conceptualized in language. But, unlike snow and colors, emotion is also expressed in language. In my talk, I will give an overview of recent research on these two ways in which emotion is present in language.

Conceptualization of emotion (cf. Wierzbicka 1999) takes places at different structural linguistic levels: The word, the sentence and discourse. Emotions have causes, effects and experiencers, and the syntactic arrangement of these roles is not straightforward (cf. Jackendoff 2007, ch. 7). Prepositions (in love, hope for, etc.), also play a role in the conceptualization of emotional events (cf. Radden 1998). On the discourse level, the research question is how people talk about emotions, cf. Bednarek (2008). Emotions are abstract, in the sense that they can not be observed directly but only via symptoms and verbalizations, which explains why metaphor and metonymy are abundantly used in the conceptualization of emotion (cf. Kövecses 1990).

In the second part of my talk, I will focus on the expression of emotion in language (cf. Langacker 2008: 475-477). Cognitive linguistic theorizing about the special status of emotional expressivity is still scarce (cf. Foolen 1997). I will discuss emotional expressivity on different structural levels: Intonation, lexicon (cf. Pavlenko 2008), derivational morphology (cf. Steriopolo 2008), compounds and phraseological units (cf. Wilemsse 2000), syntax (cf. Evans 2007) and discourse. Besides giving examples, I will go into the question whether emotions are expressed in a different way on these different levels. It seems that there is a ‘division of work’ between the different structural levels. Whereas interjections can express a broad spectrum of emotions, morphological and syntactic constructions (for example exclamative sentence types) seem to be expressive in a more general way: they express positive or negative feeling, or surprise, but not, for example, anger or love. Thus, as in regular objective construal, a difference in specificity (or schematicity, cf. Langacker 2008: 3) seems to exist in the expressive domain as well. An other question pertains to the formal properties of the expressive devices on the different linguistic levels. Is it possible to generalize across levels, for example in terms of ‘markedness’? Can we say that expressive devices are systematically marked in relation to forms that are used for ‘normal’ cognitive conceptualization? A first inspection of some syntactic devices does indeed lend support to the markedness hypothesis: the ‘Incredulity response construction’ (John and study, cf. Lambrecht 1990), insubordination (To think that I once was a millionaire, cf. Evans 2007) and the ‘angel of a child’ construction (cf. Foolen 2004). I will discuss the markedness hypothesis for the other linguistic levels as well.

References


