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Language has a heart

ELINOR OCHS / BAMBI SCHIEFFELIN

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Language has a heart

ELINOR OCHS and BAMBI SCHIEFFELIN

Abstract

In the past several years, the social sciences have been articulating how emotion impacts cognition and social action. Linguists have underestimated the extent to which grammatical and discourse structures serve affective ends. A cross-linguistic analysis indicates that languages dedicate phonological, morpho-syntactic and discourse features to intensify and specify attitudes, moods, feelings and dispositions. These features provide an affective frame for propositions encoded. Such frames can be considered as part of the information expressed, as affective comments on the expressed propositions they address. These comments interface with gestural cues to provide interlocutors with critical information on which to base subsequent social actions.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present a general framework for understanding affect in language. While the emphasis is on the grammatical and discourse organization of expressed affect, our framework draws on hypotheses put forward in theories of development and evolution. Our intention is to indicate processes that motivate verbal communication of affect and relate these processes to the pragmatics of affect across languages and speech communities.

We take affect to be a broader term than emotion, to include feelings, moods, dispositions, and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations. Our particular concern is with the conventional displaying of affect through linguistic means. We are not concerned with issues of speakers' actual feeling states or the extent to which their affective expression is sincere. Such relations between inner states and outward expression are culturally variable and have been considered in the ethnographic literature

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