The relationship between emotions and communication is complex and multileveled. Emotions can themselves be the object of verbal or nonverbal communication – a speaker may wish to convey to the hearer something about his or her emotional state, for example by saying “I’m pleased” or by enthusiastically jumping up and down. In other cases, speakers may convey information about their emotions via their tone of voice and/or body language. Here it is hard to draw any clear-cut line between the involuntary showing of emotions on the one hand, and the actual communication of emotions on the other.

Emotions can also affect how an utterance is formulated and understood. This is consistent with the intuitive observation that a hearer may interpret the very same utterance in various ways, depending on why is it that people can end up interpreting what is being said to them in such different ways? A lot depends on whether they happen to be in a good or bad mood.

Dr. Agnieszka Piskorska
Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw
whether he or she happens to be in a bad or good mood. For example, let’s say Paul has been up in his attic office since the morning, having not even come down for the usual coffee break, when Anna calls up to him: “Are you busy?” If Paul has gotten angry at having to reboot his computer, thereby losing unsaved data, he may interpret Anna’s question as senseless and bark back unpleasantly: “What do you think?!” But if he is pleased to have just managed to overcome a challenging obstacle in his programming work, he may be happy to hear Anna reaching out to him and respond: “I’ll be right down.”

Betwixt Anger and Fulfillment

To understand such phenomena, we need to sort out how it is that emotions can affect the interpretation of utterances, and what makes an act of communication
A person’s mood affects how he or she will interpret a statement, and therefore how the conversation will play out. As such, it often pays for speakers to try to put their hearers into a better mood whilst trying to convey certain information.
substantive conversation (provided, of course, that social norms permit a jocular tone in the given situation).

Let us therefore imagine a scenario which differs from the previous one, in the sense that an utterance itself is intended by the speaker to provoke a particular affective reaction. Paul does ultimately come down for coffee, and notices Anna changing a lightbulb in the ceiling lamp, perched atop a rickety pile comprised of a stool, a box, plus five volumes of an encyclopedia. He considers this reckless and wants to persuade her to come down. To this end, he tells her a joke in the form of a riddle: “How many Poles does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Five: one to hold the bulb, the other four to turn the table he is standing on.” Here it is immaterial whether the butt of the joke is Polish people, police officers, or blondes. What is important is that this perhaps moderately funny joke should not be intended or interpreted as malicious ridicule. As long as it is not, then it will not only amuse Anna but it will above all convey to her Paul’s opinion about her chosen technique of screwing in the bulb. Crucial for the effectiveness of this is the form of a joke and the positive emotion of mirth it provokes, which contributes to a broadening of the hearer’s cognitive resources and makes it possible to attain an interpretation that could not be communicated otherwise. In other words, by telling a joke about a senseless way of replacing a lightbulb, Paul may manage, more effectively than by any other alternative form of utterance, to convey to Anna various implications concerning the ineffectiveness of her actions, the absurdity or even hilariousness of the whole scene, and thereby lead to a change in her behavior.

Speakers trying to attain an intended communicative objective by amusing the hearer do not necessarily have to use the formula of a joke. Paul could ask Anna, with a smile and with intonation clearly signaling his friendly intent: “Are you perhaps trying to win your-hearer’s broadened contextual resources allow her to reach an interpretation that could not be expressed otherwise. By opting for this route, the speaker can achieve his communicative and persuasive objectives.

Neither gratitude nor vengeance

The mechanism described here explains the widespread intuition that a person’s mood affects how he or she will interpret a statement, and therefore how the conversation will play out as a whole. Given this, it often pays for speakers to try to put their hearers into a better mood whilst trying to convey certain information. However, this mechanism is not as simple as it might seem. It does not involve the hearer actually wanting to repay the speaker for saying something pleasant or amusing. It is also not the case that a hearer experiencing negative emotions as a consequence of some stimulus (for instance, a personal failure) is actually trying to punish the speaker for that fact. Such gratitude-paying or revenge-seeking are not usually involved, because the interpretation of utterances is typically not a process that engages the consciousness. According to the approach proposed here, the influence of negative and positive emotions on communication can be explained by invoking the different kinds of effects they have on the mind, as is well-known in psychology, and the phenomenon of diffusion into processes of comprehension. It also seems that observations in the field of communication, especially those involving positive emotions, can lend further weight to the broadening-and-build theory.

Agnieszka Piskorska

Further reading: