

ACADEMIA Communication

# TO COMPREHEND, JUST SMILE

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.

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**T**he 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



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## EMOTIONS AND PROCESSES OF INTERPRETATION

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



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susceptible to such different interpretations. Classical approaches to emotions define them in terms of an organism's relation to its environment and stress their function in adapting to environmental conditions. In fulfilling that function, emotions may affect what kind of information is recalled from memory and how the organism's cognitive resources are engaged. This information evoked and resources engaged, in turn, will form the context within which a stimulus will be processed, and are therefore crucial for how it will be understood. This phenomenon whereby emotions affect the interpretation of a stimulus that is not directly related to them, as a kind of "side-effect," is sometimes called *affective diffusion*.

In the field of linguistic pragmatics, the current view is that contextual information plays an extremely important role in every stage of an utterance's interpretation – from identifying the meaning of individual words, to ascertaining the objective of the entire utterance. The word "spring" can mean a season in one context, or a source of water in another. The phrase "I'll show you!" can be intended as a promise or a threat. Understanding the content of an utterance therefore does not involve simply decoding its meaning, but rather requires the engagement of com-

meaning something more specific: engaged in an urgent or essential activity. In this case, he may conclude that if he answers "no," Anna will likely have a proposal for him.

The most important difference between the two situations is the valence of the emotions being experienced by the hearer: anger is a negative state, joy a positive one. This fundamental criterion of valence is the basis on which classical models classified emotions, defining negative emotions as those triggered by a stimulus viewed as inconsistent with what the organism wants, and positive emotions as those triggered by a stimulus consistent with the organism's objectives (such as in Richard Lazarus' model).

Most early research pertained to negative emotions, which were often observed to provoke concrete and immediate reactions, such as a readiness to defend, attack, flee, etc. These reactions can be described as mobilizing the organism to perform certain functions. In a certain sense, Paul's communicative behavior in the first situation above, when he is angry, can be described in precisely that way: because of the diffusion of his emotional state into the contextual resources brought to bear in understanding Anna's question, he interprets her question as an attack, and therefore counterattacks.

The way positive emotions are experienced is not merely opposite to negative ones. A person experiencing joy, pride, or mirth does not generally tend to react suddenly. This observation is fundamental to the "broaden-and-build theory" of positive emotions, proposed in the early 2000s by Barbara Fredrickson. Under this theory, positive emotions facilitate the broadening and building of various types of human resources, including cognitive, interpersonal, and societal opportunities. Experiencing positive emotions is therefore not necessarily the ultimate goal of the human endeavor to attain a good mood, but it may also lead to the attainment of other objectives of various sorts, contributing to a sense of happiness and fulfillment.

Such an approach to positive emotions adequately explains Paul's response in the second situation above, when he is in a good mood. His positive attitude enables him to interpret Anna's question in a way that opens up an opportunity to reinforce his relationship with her and also to feel joy by so doing.

## Jokes good for everything

The phenomenon of broadening resources and strengthening the positive effects of communication can be illustrated in terms of the emotion of mirth. It has long been known that humor serves numerous interpersonal functions, and it is also widely thought that by joking with someone one can attain certain objectives that would be unattainable through serious,

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plex inferential processes that make it possible to build an interpretation that is appropriate in the light of the accessible contextual information. As a result of this, various factors, such as emotions, can affect inferential processes by altering what content will be accessible and used by the hearer as part of the context for the interpretation of the utterance.

On this view, the two wildly different interpretations of the question "Are you busy?" above might therefore come about as follows: When Paul is furious, he interprets the adjective "busy" as meaning engaged in some activity, of any kind. Anna's question comes across as trivial because it is obvious that he must be doing something, given that he is sitting in his office. In the second context, the adjective is interpreted as

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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 yourself a Darwin Award?” In this case, if he manages to amuse her, she would be encouraged to interpret her own behavior in the context of this infamous anti-award given to individuals who have brought about (or nearly brought about) their own self-destruction, which would again lead to implications concerning the sensibility and safety of her behavior.

The broadening of the hearer’s contextual resources through amusement may not only lead her to a distinct interpretation of the utterance, it may also give the utterance greater persuasive power. We can presume that if Paul had said outright: “What are you doing? Get down from there!”, he very well may have provoked a contrary desire on her part, to show him that he is wrong in his assessment. A humorous statement, on the other hand, guides the inferential processes of comprehension onto a path where the hearer’s broadened contextual resources allow her to



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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 broaden-and-build theory.

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Positive emotions facilitate the broadening and building of various types of resources, including cognitive, interpersonal, and societal opportunities. Above, the main characters in Rob Reiner’s movie “When Harry Met Sally” from 1989 are shown deeply engaged in a witty and tense conversation.

### Further reading:

Fredrickson B.L. (2001). The Role of Positive Emotions in Positive Psychology: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions. *American Psychologist* 56 (3) 218–226. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.n>

Piskorska A. (2016). *Po co rozmawiamy? O funkcjach komunikacji w ujęciu teorii relewancji* [Why Do We Converse? A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to the Functions of Communication]. Kraków: Tertium.

Wilson D., Sperber D. (2012). *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [http://www.dan.sperber.fr/wpcontent/uploads/WilsonSperber\\_Preface\\_Meaning\\_and\\_Relevance\\_2012.pdf](http://www.dan.sperber.fr/wpcontent/uploads/WilsonSperber_Preface_Meaning_and_Relevance_2012.pdf)