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How Emotions are Made in Talk

edited by Jessica S. Robles and Ann Weatherall

John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 2021. 292 p.

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Overview

How Emotions are Made in Talk, edited by Jessica Robles and Ann Weatherall, presents cutting-edge contributions from conversation analysts on an understudied subject matter: the role played by ‘emotions’ in conversations and interactions. With ten methodologically coherent contributions organized into three thematic parts – on emotions and the social order, timing and strategies for revealing and negotiating emotions in conversations, and lastly the display of emotions across modalities – the volume is a model for how to produce meaningful knowledge in the context of a joint volume. In a remarkably clear and comprehensive introduction, Weatherall and Roble explain how the collection builds upon contributions from Peräkylä and Sorjonen (2012), to advance understanding of particular aspects of their topic. Given the extent and quality of this introduction, this review will remain brief on some of the points Weatherall and Roble already cover. I refer the reader to their text – and to Anssi Peräkylä’s preface to the volume – for concise summaries of each chapter, and for a synthetic account of the volume’s contribution on the role of emotions in human interactions.

The value of the volume in this respect is indisputable. Its ten articles cover impressive ground, drawing from no-less-impressive data in diverse naturalistic interactions. Given the thorough data-presentation style typical of the conversation-analysis tradition, the volume offers a wealth of exceptional material pertaining both to informal, ‘mundane’ contexts (conversations between friends, co-parents, parents and children) and institutional contexts. Table 1 presents an overview of the data, as well as the corresponding context, the languages used, and modalities in focus where applicable.

The presentation style is free of opaque technicalities, catering for linguists and linguistic anthropologists who study emotions and other interactions under different frameworks. As a descriptive linguist and typologist studying the encoding of emotions across languages, I found the attention given to formal features, and specifically prosodic features, particularly gratifying. I suspect many chapters will also be of interest to psychologists, as well as to non-scientists involved in the institutional contexts discussed throughout the volume. With respect to health and education, some of the observations point to evident applications (e.g. Merlino on haptic resources in language therapy, Strid and Cekaite on children’s shared laughter). Notwithstanding the value of the volume, I will now discuss where it could be improved – as expected in a book review.

Titles and authors	Varieties	Modalities in focus	Context	Range of emotions involved
Emotional intensity as a resource for moral assessments: The action of ‘incitement’ in sports settings – Reynolds	American English	Chanting	Training sessions in sports club and games	Involvement, effort, incitement, support, moral endorsement; <i>friendship, belonging</i>
Affect in interaction: Working out expectancies and responsibility in a phone call – Hebenstreit & Zemel	English (presumably American)		Phone call between co-parents	Conflict; <i>irritation</i>
Displaying emotional control by how crying and talking are managed – Weatherall	English (variety and location not found?)	Crying	Phone calls to victim support helpline	Distress, anxiety, and attempts to comfort/contain them
Using objects and technologies in the immediate environment as resources for managing affect displays in troubles talk – Robles, DiDomenico & Raclaw	American English	Face-to-face interactions with electronic devices	Gossip conversations and troubles talks between young adults ‘hanging out’	Critical stance, moral evaluation; <i>romantic frustration, possibly jealousy or envy</i>
Shared affective stance displays as preliminary to complaining – Ruusuvoori, Asmuß, Henttonen & Rav	Finnish and Danish	Bodily postures	Manager-employee yearly appraisal meetings	Complaint, affiliation to complaint; <i>distress, support</i>
Embodiment in reciprocal laughter: Sharing laughter, gaze, and embodied stance in children’s peer group – Strid & Cekaite	Swedish	Laughter, bodily postures, gaze	Pre-school education	Social affiliation and alliance mediated by laughter; <i>subversive attitude towards authority</i>
Responding empathically from shifting epistemic terrains – Ford & Hepburn	English (UK?)		Palliative care, emotion-focused therapy, child-protection helpline,	Empathy, distress
Socializing the emotions of joy and surprise in parent-child interaction – Waring	American English in a multilingual family	Prosody, facial expressions, gestures, bodily posture and gaze	Parent-child interaction in family dinner	Joy, surprise, laughter; <i>gratitude</i>
Haptics and emotions in speech and language therapy sessions for people with post-stroke aphasia – Merlino	French (France)	Haptic resources (hand contact)	Stroke rehabilitation unit (patients with aphasia)	Distress, sadness, despair, resilience, empathy, comforting
Affect and accountability: Pain displays as a resource for action – McArthur	American English (South California, 2003-2005)	Interjections	Health consultations	Pain

Table 1. Scope of contributions in the *How Emotions are Made in Talk*. The ‘Range of emotions involved’ column also lists emotions that are not explicitly discussed in the articles (in italics).

Data and contextualisation

Given the value of this unique interactional data, it may have been worth putting a bit more emphasis on the question of open data. Few articles mention if or where the data can be accessed. While it is easy to imagine that many of the interactions were ethically too sensitive to be shared, further information and discussion would have been very helpful to other researchers who may consider using this or similar data.

Contrasting with the care given to naturalistic data collection and thorough data presentation, most contributions contain surprisingly little discussion of the origin and context of the reported interactions. Information about language varieties and place of collection will become all the more crucial when conversation analysis develops comparable corpora in other linguistic and cultural settings, for comparison (Ameka 2020; Stirling, Gardner, et al. 2022). The ‘social frame’ of the interactions may have deserved further discussion as well. Some of the data considered in the volume is motivated solely by the participants’ desire to communicate with each other, like in Robles, DiDomenico and Raclaw’s study of groups of young-adult friends’ conversations. In other cases, the exchange is imposed, for instance when co-parents discuss expectations about picking up children (Hebenstreit and Zemel), in manager-employee yearly assessment meetings (Ruusuvuori, Asmuß, Henttonen and Ravaja), or in the many health-related situation discussed in the volume. In all these contexts, the course of communication is influenced by predetermined goals: co-parents need to avoid irreparable outbursts, a therapist’s mission is to sooth patients, etc. Often, this comes with imposed stances and courses of actions, for instance a manager *must* remain loyal to their companies and other supervisees, a helpline worker *must* abide a set of legal rules, and so on.

This contrast between ‘freer’ settings and more constrained ones is yet another strength of the data, because comparing behaviors under explicit, external norms with behaviors under implicit, self-imposed norms has enormous potential. Some of the chapters do exploit this potential (e.g. Ruusuvuori, Asmuß, Henttonen and Ravaja about manager-employee relations or Weatherall about crying during helpline interactions), however in several others, the scarcity of information on the background and implicit norms tends to blur the analyses, or make them less convincing. For instance, Ford and Hepburz flag that helpline workers pursue set goals, and they presumably also receive training; as the details of these norms were not discussed any further in the chapter, I felt I did not know enough to make sense of the analysis of reported interactions.

This shortcoming may be a consequence of an author’s strict adherence to the theoretical underpinnings of conversation analysis, namely the ethnomethodology framework (Garfinkel 1984; Heritage 1984). In this framework, social norms and order should be deduced from the observation of local interactions. This core principle inspires the thorough attention to details that makes conversation analysis so enlightening. At the same time, this principle may feed a reluctance to resort to norms and resulting motivations to interpret local actions – since these norms should on the contrary be derived from the observation of these interactions. As a matter of fact, many authors in the volume successfully combine attention to detail and the consideration of participants’ normative intentions. Yet, one may wonder whether the relatively low level of data contextualisation noted above could also reflect

ethnomethodology's preference for *in situ*, immediately observable matters. Further, the ethnomethodology framework has particularly interesting implications for the study of emotions, which I discuss below.

Emotions and the theoretical tenets of conversation analysis

Methodological mistrust

As pointed out in the first paragraph of Peräkylä's very useful preface to the volume, the methodological orientation highlighted above makes the very consideration of emotions under the conversation-analysis framework an interesting challenge, in and of itself:

"In a research tradition focusing on the organization of action in social encounters, emotion was felt like something too "psychological", so that a student of emotion would almost inevitably end up examining internal mental states as motivators of actions, instead of studying the organization of the actions themselves." (p XIII)

Indeed, in conversation analysis as well as in anthropological linguistics, authors express considerable reluctance to discuss people's internal states, a step described as "methodologically suspect" by Ford and Hepburn (with respect to empathy). However, Weatherall and Robles recognize that emotions are such an important part of life that they cannot be ignored (Goffman 1967), and one way to solve the problem is to approach them as social phenomena. In this spirit, the volume's introduction provides an excellent demonstration that "in the context of social interactions [...] emotions are displayed, managed and consequential for action".

As a student of the linguistic encoding of emotions, I fully agree with Weatherall and Robles's statement, and very much welcome conversation analysts' contribution to this field of research. I remain less convinced, however that the "psychological" nature of emotions stands in any opposition to their social dimension; and while a degree of caution is required when discussing others' internal states, I find the above-mentioned methodological mistrust somewhat perplexing. While dealing with this matter in full would require a whole monograph rather than a book review, below I discuss some of its origins and ramifications.

1.1 How 'emotions as internal states' got a bad name

Echoing the adjective "psychological" in Peräkylä's preface, the second paragraph of Weatherall and Robles's introduction affirms their distance from the "lay understanding of emotions as personal" (p. 1.). In one sense of the word, 'personal' means 'intimate', and applies to emotions as they cannot be shared with strangers, mere acquaintances etc., but only with a smaller circle. This sense does not entail any incompatibility with emotions playing a role in social interactions (but simply qualifies these interactions). In another sense, emotions are 'personal' to the extent that they are internal, psychological phenomena. Indeed, on p. 2, Weatherall and Robles present their social perspective on emotions as a "a far cry from the idea that they are internal to individuals". Yet, emotions being "internal" does not imply that they cannot play a role in social interactions. Many internal states –

~ 4 ~

thoughts, beliefs, doubts, etc. – unfold as actions in social settings, and are routinely invoked (sometimes implicitly) in conversation analysis to make sense of interactions. Analysts may exert caution when discussing them, yet they do not, to my knowledge, express the same degree of suspicion as they do with emotions.

This methodological mistrust probably has a number of roots, including the entrenched ‘modern’ perception that emotions, standing in opposition to reason, escape prediction and explanation (Lutz 1986). Another plausible root relates to a historical antagonism between representations of emotions in psychology vs cultural anthropology. From the 1970s, psychologists following Paul Ekman developed theories of ‘basic emotions’, according to which humans’ emotional experience is universally organised into a small set of types – anger, sadness, disgust etc. – resulting from adaptive evolution (Ekman 1992). While this framework soon became popular in psychology, anthropologists firmly rejected it on the ground that it left no room for cultural variation. Around the same time, anthropologists began to unveil cross-cultural variation in emotional experience (e.g. Rosaldo 1980; Lutz 1988), with a view to demonstrating – against the tenants of universal, adaptive emotions – that emotions were cultural and therefore variable phenomena. To do so, they thoroughly documented the embedding of emotions in social interactions that produce them (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990); and particularly, in linguistic interactions (Wilce 2009).

Via the foundational work presented in Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990), among others, the study of emotions in linguistic anthropology was born out of this opposition to psychological conceptions, with the injunction to demonstrate the social nature of emotions. In line with this anchorage, linguistic anthropology remains strongly attached to defining emotions as “[...] shared intersubjective states, performed in complex multimodal contexts [...]” (Wilce (2009, 8), following Haviland (2003, 481) and Kockelman (2003)). Naturally, conversation analysis and anthropological linguistics are two different subfields – and I am less familiar with the former. Yet, they share a number of theoretical and methodological premises, applied outcomes, as well as some practitioners. It is tempting to speculate that their common reluctance to consider emotions as psychological events share comparable origins – reinforced, in the case of conversation analysis, by ethnomethodology’s focus on unfolding interactions.

1.2 Embracing the social role of internal emotional states

Now, is this projected opposition between the “psychological” (or internal) and the social dimensions of emotions a problem? After all, Weatherall and Robles acknowledge the “interiority of emotional experiences” (p. 4), and they refer to more recent psychological conceptions of emotions (Feldman Barrett 2017). Many contributions in the volume do take participants’ internal states into account for their analyses. For instance, when Waring interprets a parent-child interaction as an “enactment of joy and surprise”, they cautiously and reasonably assigns an observable display to a type of internal state – and this is just one example among many.

At the same time, some of the articles in the volume may have developed even more valuable insights had the authors considered the social role of emotions *as internal states*. Several contributions could be called upon to illustrate this, and there is always a degree of unfairness in ‘picking’ examples to illustrate

a critical point. The articles I discuss have sound value besides the limitations I am about to propose. Here I focus on how they instantiate a difficulty to include certain internal emotional states into conversation analysis, and how they instead ‘deflect’ their interpretation to more directly observable matters.

The first example illustrates a tendency to ‘deflect’ to the ‘social order’ even in cases where diving into personal experience may have had more explanatory power. One example is Reynold’s article on incitements in sports contexts. The author offers unique data and descriptions of a fascinating practice, namely chanted encouragements addressed to athletes. When it comes to the interactional role of these encouragements, moral order and training ethics are invoked – namely, that moral validation concerns effort rather than successful performance. However, the grounds for this interpretation mostly lie in the dialogues that follow effort sequences. As a former recipient of chanted incitements during sports performance, I could not relate this moral interpretation to the complex range of interpersonal emotions resulting from a peer’s or a coach’s public display of support during intense effort, with ramifications for friendships and team building. Reynold’s interpretation of the moral framework of training is convincing, but somewhat unrelated to chanted incitements. Obviously, the *in situ* interactional data around these incitements is thin, and for this reason they may indeed escape traditional conversation-analysis methods – although they do pertain to the interactional realm. Recognizing this limitation requires embracing the notion that emotional experience can be internal and largely ‘silent’, yet at the same time as real and socially impactful as the moral order.

Another case of ‘deflection’ operates within the realm of emotional experience, where the analysis shifts towards emotional categories with more interactional manifestations, which are therefore more accessible to the conversation analyst. This can be illustrated with Robles, DiDomenico and Raclaw’s article on the role of technological devices in exchanges between young adults. The article reports on a conversation qualified as “troubles talk”, and involving complaint about an absent third party. The authors convincingly demonstrate how conversation participants ostensibly fail to affiliate with the complaint, using electronic devices as excuses for distraction. Less convincing was the labelling of the sequence as “troubles talk”. While it was indeed announced as such by the participant’s own allusion to romantic frustration, it quickly evolved into (apparently unwelcome) ‘gossip’. One very appealing hypothesis is that the emotion at stake here is not complaint, but jealousy. The non-affiliative stance, and general lack of engagement of most other participants suggest that they may indeed interpret this complaint as an indirect, and somewhat dishonest, expression of jealousy. As above, this hypothetical strategy is hardly demonstrable based on direct observation of local conversational interactions. But again, it would be better to recognize the methodological limitation than ignore a plausible hypothesis; this recognition hinges upon the possibility that internal, ‘silent’ emotional experiences may contribute to shape social interactions.

The above weaknesses by no means cancel the value of the approach adopted in the volume. On the contrary, they confirm the need for and benefit of a conversation-analysis approach to emotions, as firmly theorized in the introduction and successfully implemented in the rest of the book. I suggest taking yet one more step ahead, and embracing even more earnestly the social and interactional impact of internal emotional states.

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