

# The Language of Anger

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All human beings have emotions, and each emotion has its own mode of expression. The manner in which emotions are communicated varies with individuals and with cultures. The language of emotions is an acquired skill, as is speech. In order to understand this special language, people must learn to recognize the code or codes that are acceptable in their cultures. Before examining the language of emotion, in this case the language of anger, it is necessary to possess some knowledge about what emotion is and how it can effect us.

Emotions are intense, pervasive, agitated states which can be divided into those which are pleasant (joy, love) and those which are unpleasant (anger, sadness). The psychological vocabulary utilized in the field expresses the intensity of the emotional experience. The range of intensities can be seen in word pairs such as anger/rage, fear/horror, pain/agonny, and sadness/grief (Hilgard & Atkinson 1953: 133)

Emotional states, especially profound ones, cause a series of drastic physiological changes throughout the body. These changes are controlled in a very intricate manner by the central nervous system, by both division of the autonomic system and by the endocrine glands. Hilgard and Atkinson (1953: 163-164) list the following characteristics for these physiological changes:

*Blood distribution.* Alterations in blood pressure and the distribution of blood between the surface and the interior of the body occurs. An example of this phenomenon is the reddened face and neck of an angry individual. This flush is caused when the blood vessels in the skin dilate, and more blood is found near the surface of the skin.

*Heart rate.* The increased speed and force of the heart beat has long been an indicator of emotional excitement.

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*Respiration.* The speed and depth of breathing and the time spent in inhalation as compared to exhalation are considered important characteristics of emotional conflicts.

*Pupillary response.* The pupils of the eyes may dilate when an individual enters an emotional state.

*Salivary secretion.* Emotional excitations can cause alterations in the production of saliva. There may be a dryness of the mouth because of the decrease in saliva or a change in its consistency, or there may be an increase in the saliva production which, in an angry person could produce the effect of that person, literally, “foaming at the mouth”.

*Pilomotor response.* *Goose bumps* appear when the hairs of the skin stand on end.

*Gastrointestinal motility.* Strong emotions can cause changes in stomach and intestinal activity. The individual can suffer nausea and diarrhea.

*Muscle tension and tremor.* The person actually shakes during a highly emotional situation.

*Blood composition.* Endocrine glands are highly active during emotional states and literally pour hormones into the bloodstream. These hormones trigger alterations in the levels of acidity (pH), blood sugar, and adrenaline.

Adrenaline and a substance called noradrenaline play important roles in accounting for the physiological changes observed during emotional conflicts. There may be quantitative correlations between the degrees of emotions and the physiological reactions due to the presence of these chemical substances in the blood (Buss 1961: 100-101).

Buss (1961: 100-101) also cites the effects of the different concentrations of adrenaline/noradrenaline in the blood. The presence of noradrenaline (a substance similar to adrenaline, but lacking one methyl group in its chemical make-up) in the blood causes a significant rise in the blood pressure and the pulse rate, little or no elevation in cardiac output, and a drastic decrease in the blood supply to the skeletal muscles. These types of reactions are associated with moderately intense emotional states.

On the other hand, a high concentration of adrenaline is observed in states of high or low emotional intensity. The presence of adrenaline in the blood causes a moderate increase in the pulse rate, a significant decrease in cardiac output, and a drastic increase in the blood supply to the skeletal muscles (Buss 1961: 101)

These physiological changes are preparations that living beings undergo to be able to confront threats. In such an agitated state, a being is ready for the “sustained, violent activity [necessary] to overcome the sources of danger” (Buss 1961: 91)

One early twentieth century physiologist, W. B. Cannon, called these preparatory alterations “emergency reactions.” Cannon observed that “reactions that at first seemed independent and unrelated, form a pattern serving the common purpose of protection” (1929: 166). All these physiological changes that individuals suffer during such highly stimulated states seem, to indicate that emotion is a whole body experience.

Individuals may express any single emotion in a variety of ways. For this reason, it has been almost impossible for psychologists and physiologists to differentiate between human emotions. Particular body responses do not allow definition of a particular emotion because the different emotions share many of the physiological changes caused by the highly-charged state.

In addition to the physiological changes experienced during intense emotion, alterations in human communication can be observed. To better understand some of these changes, one must first look at what is considered a normal communicative act.

Normal communicative events are speech acts, “the things we do with utterances such as promise, bargain, warn, curse, or argue” (Eastman 1990: 130). It is necessary to clarify terminology in order to avoid confusion about what is a speech situation, a speech event, or a speech act. Eastman defines a speech situation as the setting in which a speech event takes place; a speech event is the “activity which rules and norms for speech use operate,” and a speech act is “the minimal unit of a speech event which implicates both social norms and linguistic forms.” Eastman further states that it is the speech act which “mediates between aspects of grammar and a speech event or situation” (Eastman 1990: 145).

Fishman takes the idea of speech situations one more step. He defines the speech situation as “the co-occurrence of two or more interlocutors related to each other in a particular way, communicating about a particular topic, in a particular setting.” If the conditions of a given situation change, an adjustment in language variety may be required. This alteration in speech variety may also mark a modification in the relationship between the interlocutors or a change in the privacy or location of their interaction (Fishman 1972: 48-49).

In a speech event, “there are conversational maxims that people follow in the interest of effective communication” (Eastman 1990: 190). Grice (cited in Eastman) states these maxims as follows: (1) Quantity--be as informative as is required; (2) Quality--Do not say what you believe to be false nor for which you lack adequate evidence; (3) Relation--be relevant; and (4) Manner--avoid ambiguity, obscurity, length and disorder.

Based on these maxims, Grice suggests that people who engage in communicative acts follow what he terms the “Co-operation Principle”, which is to say that “both participants in the communicative act are assumed to want the conversation to function correctly” (cited in Eastman 1990: 190)

Basically, English conversations are governed by the principle of what is known as “turn-taking”: “The speaker determines who speaks next by asking a question directly, by nodding towards the person expected to take the floor, or by some other signal; the first to talk after a pause becomes the speaker, and the speaker continues to speak until finished” (Eastman 1990: 37). These “turn-taking” principles are part of Grice’s “Co-operation Principle”.

Hymes proposes the following image of human communication:

...the concept of message implies the sharing, real or implied, of (1) a code or codes in terms of which the message is intelligible to (2) participants, minimally an addressor and an addressee (who may be the same person) in (3) an event constituted by its transmission and characterized by (4) a channel or channels; (5) a setting or context; (6) a definite form or shape to the message, and (7) a topic and a comment (Hymes 1972, 26).

Synthesizing Hymes complicated definition, one can see that to have communication, the message must say something about something.

At times, though, for certain social or psychological reasons, concurrence and cooperation are NOT the objectives of communicative interactions, and, as a result, maxims, principles, and conventions are disregarded. Arguments or conflictive communicative situations are examples of such times. Anger, which is a major catalyst for arguments, is only one of a number of highly-charged emotions that the human being experiences.

Because anger is an emotion, it is also a whole body experience. "Anger is a response with facial-skeletal and autonomic components. It may be conceptualized as a drive state" (Buss 1961, 9). This designation as a drive state is due to the fact that emotions have drive properties. It is the drive status of anger that causes us to attack, physically or verbally, the source of our anger. Expression of anger is a part of the human field of expressions as explained by Rummel. He cites a subconscious aspect of verbal expression which includes the combination of words selected and the emphasis and tone used to speak them, and the non-verbal actions and gestures which accompany oral communication (Rummel 1991, 58)

Augsberger designates anger as "the curse of interpersonal relationships". He views anger as a demand, a demand that one be heard, a demand that one's worth be recognized, a demand that one is respected, that people stop trying to control one's life, that one is no longer taken for granted (Augsberger 1993, 154).

Kleinberg observed that "cultures teach conventionalized or stereotyped forms of expression which become a kind of language of emotion, recognized by others of the culture" (cited in Hilgard & Atkinson 1953, 175). It is this cultural influence which dictates the ways in which emotions are expressed within a given culture. In western cultures, anger may lead to arguments which, according to Eastman, "...are considered a social disjunction, not part of normal or usual communicative situations" (Eastman 1990, 192)

In these western cultures, there are linguistic as well as non-linguistic modifications that occur when individuals are angry and/or engaged in an argument. Both modifications will be discussed.

Since it is not feasible nor wise to provoke or interrupt an argument in order to observe that characteristics of this type of conflictive communicative speech event, one may make acceptable observations by viewing movie scenes which depict arguments. Hilgard and Atkinson lend validity

to such observation techniques in their reference to the fact that “skilled actors are able to convey to an audience any intended emotion by using facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures according to the patterns and audience recognizes” (1953, 175). For this paper, two American movies and one Mexican soap opera in which scenes of arguments are portrayed were chosen for analysis of the language, verbal and non-verbal, used during these emotional conflicts. The movies viewed were *The Prince of Tides* with Barbra Streisand and Nick Nolte and *The War of the Roses* with Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas. The soap opera chosen was *Volver a empezar* with Yuri and Rafael Navarro Sánchez. The following observations were made after analyzing the argument scenes characterized in these films.

Linguistic changes during an argument are diverse and may be extreme or subtle depending on the individuals involved. Alterations may be observed in such aspects as speech velocity, volume, tone and pitch of voice, articulatory gestures, lexical modification due to item selection, and total or partial disregard for the conversational norms usually observed by interlocutors during non-argumentative communication.

The velocity of speech may be radically increased by some individuals during an argument while others may greatly reduce the speed at which they are talking. Some people may raise their voice to where their utterances are very loud, to the point of reverberating, while others may lower their voices almost to the point of whispering. The tone and pitch of an individual's voice may be altered to where the speech attains a quality of screeching or shrieking.

Phonetic fluctuations are also observed. A number of people clench their teeth or lock or clamp their jaws shut when they are angry. These actions can result in a modification of the normal movement of the tongue or lips, or articulatory gestures. As a consequence, the pronunciation of words can be transformed. An example of this is when the “s” is elongated into a sort of hiss. Also, when the teeth are clamped shut, the speech string tends to come out garbled because proper bucal movement is impaired. The alteration in respiration and saliva production may also play an important part in phonetic modification during an argument. Some people actually become “spitting mad” because of the excess of saliva in their mouths and the force with which they exhale and speak during a quarrel.

Lexical selection during a verbal conflict may be contrary to the norm in that use of obscenities in great quantities may occur during a dis-

pute. Words that are not ordinarily part of normal social discourse may be liberally sprinkled into the utterances heard in a verbal row. Also, lexical items that have negative connotations, i. e., words with highly emotive, hurtful meaning may be selected instead of less emotive, less intense ones utilized during “normal” speech events. It should be pointed out that the tone of voice with which a word is spoken may transform a perfectly neutral, non-hurtful word into one that is highly emotional and negative.

Grice’s “Co-operation Principle”, mentioned earlier, with its conversational maxims, loses its strength during an argument. Normal “turn-taking” is forgotten, with the participants in the argument ignoring the procedures of normal communication. In a two-participant argument, it is not uncommon that both people are speaking at the same time, and the usual “it’s your turn” signals are disregarded. The pauses observed during normal discussions may totally disappear or be greatly prolonged with long periods of silence occurring.

Returning to lexical selection, the lexical items chosen for use during a quarrel may produce various violations of Grice’s maxims. Sarcasm, irony, understatement, and overstatement are only a few of the possible violations of these conventions that can be seen during a conflictive interaction.

While various linguistic modifications are apparent during verbal conflict, arguments are also rich in non-linguistic elements...body language.

One gesture observed in the three films mentioned and in remembered personal arguments is that participants in a conflictive speech event tend to lift their chins from the normal position. This may occur to allow freer passage of air in and out of the trachea. It may also be a challenge gesture.

Another commonly seen gesture is “pointing” with the index finger. this “pointing” may reach the point of one interlocutor poking the chest, arm or shoulder of the other. This seems to be an emphatic gesture which angry people use to stress what they are saying. The “pointing or poking” may be done simultaneously with a key word or phrase.

People engaged in arguments may clench their fists in a mild annoyance situation. This action could be considered preparatory to attacking or defending oneself. In a more agitated situation, one may use his fists to

pound on the desk, table or wall, but in a rage situation, the interlocutors may reach the point of hitting each other with their fists.

Facial movements abound during an argumentative encounter. The eyebrows can be raised and the eyes opened wider. The opposite can happen. The eyebrows are lowered and the eyes squinted. The nostrils can flare, possibly aiding respiration. The mouth can be set into a snarl or sneer, possibly to intimidate the opponent. If the angry person is one whose saliva production increases during an emotional state, he may actually foam or froth at the mouth during an argument. Some individuals may even develop nervous ticks, muscle tremors, in the eye and mouth areas during such an agitated state. In extreme rage situations, the hair may stand on end.

An angry person may sling her head around in exaggerated negative or positive movements; again, these may be actions to emphasize or reject what is being said or heard. They may also be totally unconscious, involuntary movements. The body of an angry individual may tremble, depending on the level of anger. This quaking may be closely related to the blood supply to the skeletal muscles. The tremors may be more pronounced in the lower and higher levels of the anger state. This muscular reaction may also be considered as preparatory to attack or defend as necessary.

The space that people maintain between each other during normal conversation can vary tremendously during an argumentative situation. The interlocutors may move much closer to one another, possibly giving a challenge signal. Remembering that people tend to elevate their chins during an argument, it is possible to observe people actually chin to chin during an argument. The opposite situation may also occur in which the participants move farther away from each other, maybe to defuse the possibility of a physical attack or to gather forces to continue with the argument.

Anger as well as any other emotional state, is very personal, and individuals can, and do, react in very different ways. Some people might scream, yell and throw things while others may lower their voices and speak very precisely while struggling to control the desire to attack.

In the American and Mexican Cultures, people have learned to recognize the verbal and non-verbal clues that serve as indicators of anger. Arguments are important parts of human behavior which have their own language. Apparently, little, if any, research has been done in the realm of the language of emotion. Further study of this sociolinguistic area could prove



enlightening, especially in the cultural area. There are probably many universals of arguments to be found between cultures which would be interesting points to investigate, but what of the cultural differences to be found in the way peoples argue? Do the Japanese argue in the same way the Egyptians or Eskimos do?

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