

Travaux du 19ème CIL | 19th ICL papers

Congrès International des Linguistes, Genève 20-27 Juillet 2013
International Congress of Linguists, Geneva 20-27 July 2013



Eva-Maria ENGELEN

University of Konstanz, Germany
eva-maria.engelen@uni-konstanz.de

Language Acquisition, and the Formation of Emotions

oral presentation in workshop: 106 Emotions in Language, Culture, Cognition [EmiL] (Barbara LEWANDOWSKA-TOMASZCZYK & Paul WILSON)

Published and distributed by: Département de Linguistique de l'Université de Genève, Rue de Candolle 2, CH-1205 Genève, Switzerland
Editor: Département de Linguistique de l'Université de Genève, Switzerland
ISBN:978-2-8399-1580-9

Language Acquisition, and the Formation of Emotions

Engelen, Eva-Maria
e-mail: eva-maria.engelen@uni-konstanz.de
Konstanz / University of Konstanz
Germany

Abstract: The aim of this talk is to demonstrate that language acquisition does have a great influence not only on the development of thinking and the constitution of cognitive representations, but also on the development of phenomenal feeling. Phenomenally felt emotions are intersubjectively constituted by language and get an empirical accessible content through language acquisition. The realm of the inner has therefore preconditions in social settings. This is shown by applying the triangulation model for language acquisition by Donald Davidson to emotions, as well as by applying the model of joint attention by Michael Tomasello to emotions.

There is a preverbal, precognitive situation that is a necessary precondition for thinking and language. It is a situation in which two individuals are directed to a third object in the world as well as to each other: “Each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts.” (Davidson 2001, 128) Davidson calls this joint directing towards a third object triangulation, Tomasello joint attention.

The fact that two beings are able to direct their attention to a third object is a precondition for communicating about the third object, to give it a name, a verbal symbol that is a cultural representation for the object as Tomasello writes (Tomasello 1999, 125). A child learns the historical and cultural use of the symbols while acquiring the concept. And what is important, it links it also with its own experienced perspectives, that is to say with the perceptual and motoric aspects of the situations he or she has lived through. This is the aspect of “internalization”, the subjective, individual aspect of representation that is added to cultural and social representation: “The way that human beings use linguistic symbols thus creates a clear break with straightforward perceptual or sensory-motor representations, and it is due entirely to the social nature of linguistic symbols.” (Tomasello 1999, 126) The subjective,

individual aspect of representation is therefore only attainable because of socially shared situations in which a concept is acquired via symbols that are used intersubjectively. In acquiring symbols one also finds out that they do not represent the world (respectively things and situations in the world) directly as perceptual or sensorimotoric representations do. („It seems significant also that linguistic symbols have a materiality to them, in the form of a reliable sound structure, because this is the only way in which they could be socially shared. These public symbols [...] are available for perceptual inspection and categorization themselves (which is not true, at least not in the same way, for private sensory-motor representations).“ (Tomasello 1999, 127)

The case of emotions is in this respect a very interesting one because they are sensorimotoric processes on the one hand and can be culturally formed via symbol respectively language acquisition on the other. That is to say that they have the aspect of being straightforward and also of being formed by the social nature of symbols. The fact that they are representing directly makes them objective but the fact that they are culturally formed through language acquisition allows for subjective phenomenal experience of these sensory-motor representations. Therefore they are directly representing in the first place, culturally formed in the second and subjectively experienced as a result of the human ability to direct the attention to his or her own mental processes. The latter allows you to experience yourself as yourself and to have emotions as your own emotional processes and to have your own perspective in the end. The ability to direct yourself to your own mental processes presupposes that one is able to identify the process. These are presuppositions but they don't tell us how it is done.

In the tradition of Cartesian philosophy it had been thought that it is doubtlessly possible to experience your own mental processes as your own because they are your own, and you can therefore not err about it. But even in order to identify a mental process like an emotion as your own, you need other human beings and you have to acquire symbols and concepts for it. It is not enough to have an emotional sensation in order to identify it as your own. In order to show this, I will apply what Michael Tomasello has shown about linguistic reference as a social act to basic emotions.

Acquiring language requires situations of shared attention in which the child directs his or her attention together with the caregiver to a third object and each minds the other's attention to the third object (Tomasello 1999, 96-99). Situations of jointly shared attention provide the intersubjective context in which linguistic reference can be understood as such. Joint attention is usually directed at a third object. But this doesn't have to be the case, and thus this linguistic approach can also be used to explain how emotions are semanticized and how even the so-called basic emotions get formed in a particular (linguistic) culture, including the phenomenal sensations themselves.

How are emotions semanticized?

In the case of physiological emotional reactions this means that the attention and the words of the caregiver can also refer to emotional reactions. It is true that emotions are not an independent third object in terms of reference but rather physical changes in the child's organism that feels them. But the adult can refer to the child's emotional expression linguistically and otherwise, and the small child, who cannot see its own expression, can feel its own emotional changes and thus is able to understand what the caregiver is referring to.

Both the child and the adult are paying attention to the emotional process of the child together, but this process manifests itself quite differently for the two of them. One is feeling a sensation and the other is seeing an expression. That the sensation and the expression belong together is not easy to understand because the one who is sensing it is not able to see his or her own expression – and cannot see it without a mirror – and the one who is seeing the expression is not feeling the sensation and can never have the sensation of another person. Therefore much has to be prepared before the child can learn something about his or her emotions.

And how does the caring person know that the child has a certain feeling? He or she will know it by the bodily expressions that the child is showing. Here I would like to quote a paragraph by Wittgenstein: “What would it be like if human beings showed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word ‘tooth-ache’.” (Wittgenstein 1958, No. 257)

Following this chain of reasoning, one can utter the following thoughts: “What would

it be like if human beings showed no outward signs of fear (did not look frightened etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word ‘fear’.”

It would not be possible to teach the child the use of the word ‘fear’ because the other person would not know when the child was feeling fear and would therefore not know when to utter it with respect to the child. Tomasello’s model of joint attention as an approach of language acquisition¹ only works because the feelings of the child and his or her bodily expressions are linked. If this were not the case there would not be something we could call a “third object” in these situations, because the sensation and the expression would coincide only sporadically, or not at all. One could not use the same word to refer to these two phenomena.

The words with which the adult or older children refer to the emotional expression then allow for an intersubjective reference to these sensory-motoric processes just as the emotional expression does. In this way the emotional processes are connected with linguistic expressions, sequences of action, and meaning. At the end of the learning process the meaning of the learned vocabulary of emotion belongs to the sensory-motoric process just as much as it helps to determine how the emotions are phenomenally felt. Hence we can assume that the so-called basic emotions are inborn and hence universally given without having to underplay or even deny cultural and linguistic influence.

How are emotions semanticized? Part II

Let us take an example to make this point clearer: An infant’s reaction of alarm is designated with the concept of fear by means of the sensation being paired with the word through repetition. For the growing child to make this word into a concept, it can’t just learn the sound of the word, but rather must also be familiarized not just with the use of the word but also with several forms of behavior that help to constitute the word’s meaning. For example, it will learn when it is entitled to feel the emotion and when it isn’t. Maybe when the child looks ready to cry and seeks eye contact with the care giver, the care giver will say: “you don’t have to be afraid of the guinea pig.” The caregiver might react differently in the presence of a rat. The child will perceive others

¹ See also the triangulation-model for language acquisition by Donald Davidson (2001).

having a certain facial expression and possibly will get protected and comforted. In this way the word ‘fear’ is embedded in contexts of actions and situations and “melded” with a certain sensation of emotion. In addition, ways of regulating emotion are learned conceptually, that is, together with the concept, and are actually a part of the full meaning of the concept. Only when the word is introduced in this way can we say that the child has become familiarized with the concept of ‘fear’. The sensation of an emotion and the concept ultimately can no longer be separated; hence for the child that has become familiarized with the concept there are no longer any non-semanticized bodily sensations.

Thus the child cannot identify its fear as fear just by feeling it, but only when the reactions of the caregiver allow for a common orientation and thus an identification of the sensation as fear. The emotional process identified in this way takes on its meaning in numerous situations that belong to the acquisition of the concept, based not exclusively on the physiological reaction, but based among other things on the physiological reaction that first allows for reference. One might compare Wittgenstein’s following remark in order to understand this better: “[...] But suppose I didn’t have any natural expression for the sensation, but only had the sensation? And now I simply *associate* names with sensations and use these names in descriptions. —” (Wittgenstein 1958, no. 256.) This does precisely not work.

Ludwig Wittgenstein rightly notes that language also takes on a very prominent role in identifying sensations: “When one says ‘He gave a name to a sensation’, one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone’s giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word ‘pain’ is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed.” (Wittgenstein 1958, no. 257.)

That which we identify as fear, by means of the facial expression of a scared or panicked person among other things, belongs to the physical changes that occur in a person under great and acute fear; hence this facial expression is also part of an imagined scene in which people break out into panic. But what these people are feeling can be culturally slightly variable at least, depending on how this basic emotion has been semanticized in the culture – yet since it is a basic emotion, neither

the expression nor the sensation can turn out completely differently. This explains how it is we are still able to understand the emotionally relevant descriptions from past cultures and can develop an empathetic engagement to them, just as we can to those from contemporary cultures that our own culture might not share any lines of tradition with. There might and will be nuances of meaning concerning the emotions described and the related sensations, and thus the empathetic engagement might be more or less accurate. But to put the point metaphorically, there is a fundamental and shared human tenor that sets the space of meaning. This space of meaning does not determine completely what is felt, and you have to have learned to identify your own emotions through language in order to be able to feel phenomenally what others feel phenomenally. The process that leads to a new nuance of meaning is usually a very complicated one and the process that leads to a new nuance in meaning also leads to a new nuance in feeling but it is not a new feeling altogether.

In summary: That there is something as a common space of meaning for emotions that is given by intersubjectively accessible expressions a precondition for having something that plays the role of the “third object” in language acquisition. It is a precondition for our ability to refer to emotions as mental processes and to acquire concepts for them. But the fact that emotions are intersubjectively constituted by language is also the reason why they can be phenomenally felt as our emotions. We need a conceptualization or semantization for this via language acquisition, otherwise they would just be bodily sensations that we could not identify as such: “For “sensation” is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands.” (Wittgenstein 1958, no. 261) And I hope to have given a justification for it.

Literature:

Davidson, Donald 2001 *Subjectiv, Intersubjectiv, Objectiv*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomasello, Michael 1999 *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1958 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.