

James M. Wilce. *Language and emotion*. (Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language) Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. (viii, 233)

This book rests on the presumption, “All speaking and writing is inherently emotional to a greater or lesser extent” (3), and the view that “this language-emotion relationship is crucial to what we call ‘culture’” (ibid.). Remarks like “the eons of evolution” necessary to arrive at the “contemporary language-emotion nexus” (5) and “language ... evolved with our species” (67) place the work firmly on an adaptationist footing. Numerous ethnographic studies that bear in one way or another on emotion in talk and talk as emotion are featured. It is in these data that the work makes its contribution. This review focuses closely on the view that clarity in the application of familiar nomenclature and fundamental principles is arrived at not by blurring boundaries and distinctions but by differentiating among concepts, i.e., by recognizing what is included in and delimited from their compass.

An immediate project in the work is challenging accepted notions about. Specifically the author takes aim at what he calls a “referentialist ideology” that defines language as “a communicative, informational, or representational system that makes extensive use of symbols, and is governed by syntax” (20). He points to elements of “voice, or dialect, or register” as indexical signs that “are precisely *not* part of sense, denotation reference, etc.,” but which nonetheless constitute signs of identity and are involved in identification (ibid.). What is construed in this work as a traditional language – emotion divide in the Western tradition is further challenged by the assertion that speech involves aspects of the brain, nervous system, and organs of speech that make up the speech apparatus (36).

The elements of “voice” that the author subsumes under language and are involved in identification processes for any speaker in fact acquire an iconic relation to that speaker — it

sounds like them, and what they do when identifying. Those who understand language to be a social construct will ask what part of individual voice constitutes *language*. Still, referentialists recognize this element of stylistic variation in language in a wide body of literature. That speech involves material, the vocal apparatus, the respiratory system, the nervous system, sound waves in air (36) seems a tautological observation; indeed speech is produced by material, and every introductory textbook in language and linguistics includes a chart of the relevant organs and a description of the physical process of production. The more relevant distinction lies not between language and material but between language and what it is not.

It is not clear whether it is the conception of language as a referential system or as a *merely* referential system that is the object of objection. If the former, those whose business has been the descriptive study of language as a system of communication, as has developed over more than two hundred years, will not be convinced, nor will the argument prevail for those whose study takes language as the manifestation of a uniquely human faculty. And if the latter, it appears that the position here conflates what language *is* with what it is used to *do*.¹

Semiotic concepts constitute a prominent part of the discussion. In Japanese, for instance, elements that have come to be associated with “women’s speech” are represented in the text as long considered indexical. Here the traditional notion of *index* is “problematized” by the author on the grounds that this manner of speaking results, apparently, from a literary representation which subsequently influenced the speech of the population it is said to index, i.e., the claim is made that the index preceded the referent (10 - 11). This discussion betrays a terminological blurring. If *index* means anything in semiotics, it names a relation of “existential contiguity,” e.g.,

¹ The “referentialist” view here reductively defines language as a symbolic system in the positivist tradition, ignoring what was established in 1962 by Hymes and in 1969 by Austin, that we *use* language to *do* things socially, a good number of which have to do with emotion and affect.

the sign bears a relation of spatio-temporal juxtaposition with its referent. If a sign predates its referent, that sign is simply not an index in the accepted sense.

With respect to the example of the aforementioned women's speech in Japanese, if in any photographic slice of time a given manner of speaking bears an existentially contiguous relation with a given population, it can be said that the relation of that mode of speech to that population is indexical, regardless of the apparent cause. The insistence on "natural causes" (11) is misplaced. Weathervanes, yellow snow, finger prints on revolvers, lipstick on shirt collars, and DNA traces on envelopes all may serve as indices in local semiotics.

A rough parallel can be seen in English. Today in many locations in North America can be heard vestiges of the erstwhile Valley Girl Speech, the manner of speaking of teenage girls in the San Fernando Valley region northwest of downtown Los Angeles in the 1980s. This speech was emulated broadly as iconic of the popular suburban, mall-shopping, beach-going, surf-loving girls who lived in The Valley and were popularized in films and television programs. Two generations later, some vestiges of Valley Girl Speech, including *totally* as a general purpose intensifier and the so-called *up-speak* (a high rising intonation at the end of declarative utterances), mark the speech of certain popularity-seeking, fashion-pursuing girls and young women across many regions. The iconic relation of these features with the girls of the San Fernando Valley is long forgotten, but this manner of speaking continues to index the speech of a population that has acquired them.

Now accounting for the development of the speech in Japan is a different story than describing its synchronic semiotics. If it is the case that these literary productions influenced the speech of females in their time, it can be said that the literary samples produced an affect in contemporaneous readers in the society such that they therefore employed speech forms that

sound like the productions of characters in those literary works, i.e., that sound like the *characters*. The speech forms that appeared in that literature thus bore an iconic relation with the characters who used them (and their affective states), and speakers were moved to emulate them. This manner of speech, once its relation to the literary genre was no longer transparent, came to serve as an index of those speakers who subsequently acquired that manner of speaking naturally. And it may just as well have been the case that a later generation of readers found in those literary works characters who sounded like *them*.

The primary effort in this book is centralizing the role of emotion, and thus affect, in linguistic communication. In evidence of this, in one anecdote cited, a severely aphasic person nonetheless demonstrates the impulse to coparticipation (50). Whether this is attributed to the “mimetic capacity” (69) of the human nervous system, effectuated via mirror neurons (49) — an important component of evolutionary psychology in accounting for affect and language and a central assumption in this work (69) — or to other origins, even the “referentialist” theory of language recognizes this impulse as fundamental to (but not equated with) what Steven Pinker calls “the language instinct.”

Certainly a divide in the scholarly treatment of cognition and emotion in the West can be demonstrated; witness, for example, the enduring influence of “The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain,” (Benjamin Bloom, M. D, Englehart, E. J. Furst, W. H. Hill, and David Krathwohl, 1956), which differentiates the “cognitive” domain from the “psychomotor” and the “affective.” But in the early Western tradition, Aristotle placed *pathos*, along with good character, in the first rank among the means of persuasion, and Augustine commented on exciting the passions of hearers. Robert Burton (*Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621) recounts an anecdote when an orator in Rome

successfully defended an exceedingly beautiful woman accused of adultery, in part by tearing her upper garments from her body to expose her nude torso to the judges, that they might know that none could resist her beauty, and thus not blame her for yielding to the passions she excited in her lover. It should also be pointed out that a considerable literature in clinical pragmatics has developed around the faculty of using and interpreting language as it communicates affective states of speakers and hearers. Indeed, as the author notes, writing about medicine historically “did not shun references to the author’s thought processes and emotions,” but only over a couple of hundred years has become “ever more affectively removed” (177).

This in turn leads to an observation about the book. Ubiquitous in the work are mentions of “Western attitudes” and “the West,” although it is not clear that Chekhov, a Russian writer of the nineteenth century, is a valid emblem of “the West” (19), nor how the primitive Judeo-Christian mysticism resurrected in contemporary Pentacostalism fits into Western ideologies (160), which come across here as a monolithic socio-ideological construct. Furthermore, since what we know as the Western tradition is a confluence of Semitic, Greco-Roman, and Germanic steams, with a new spring of scientific reason, reinforced by the Renaissance, which of these is intended to stand in for the “West” in this context is not clear. The uniquely and unequivocally Western development that has substantially removed affect from scientific discourse, though, is academic (secular) Scholasticism, in which every point and assertion is justified by reference to authority (in which stylistic tradition this book is unfailingly executed).

Stereotypes about gender and emotion are ubiquitous in our culture and seem to have found their way into the book as well. The remark that “demasculization of academic writing ... might well begin with intentionally blurring the line between observation and participation” (133) observes that modern academic prose reflects a non-emotional standpoint, and presupposes that

that “stance” is masculine in nature (ibid.). This presupposition is problematic, given that elsewhere it is noted that in terms of denying having feelings, attributing personal causes to emotions, etc., there are found “no significant differences between men and women on these measures” (89).

What is perceived here as the focus of psychiatry, “classifying illnesses as natural kinds” (177), as represented in the *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, is seen as reflective of “the pull that myth and magic exert on psychiatry” (176).² The assertion that the effect of these categories is “pathologizing conditions that involve ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ emotion” (172), though, trivializes what are in fact serious conditions, which comprise bundles of symptoms and behaviors, whatever they are called (witness the schizophrenic who killed more than 30 persons at West Virginia University). Noteworthy in the context is an uncritical reference to language philosopher Kripke’s theory that scientific terms bear an indexical relation due to consecutive retelling (by “a chain of scientific authorities”) as the term spreads (197, n 7). It should be pointed out that Kripke’s causal theory of reference is thoroughly refuted in David Boersma (*Pragmatism and Reference*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008, 218), where it is observed that whatever else can be said about language, it comprises elements that are conventional in the community of speakers who use it. As Saussure famously put it in his *Course*, language is a “social fact,” with, we might add, all the emotional and affectual concomitants thereof.

So, too, words like *suffer*, that have acquired currency in the medical sense, and their dictionary translations, like *lāg* ‘strike’ (77) and *bhug* ‘affect, suffer’ in Bangla, about which much is made (178, f), have become conventional in turn. One must also recall that English

² Curiously, earlier on the page it is remarked, “psychiatry deals in interactive kinds, whereas the natural sciences deal with natural kinds” (177). This distinction in characterization is not commented upon.

employs *acquired* alongside *suffer* in reference to disease conditions, and in Chinese *da* ‘strike, beat’ appears in many compounds, ranging from *dakai* ‘turn on (a light, etc.)’ to *dazaqiang* ‘smashing and looting’. Too much can be made of the dictionary definitions and etymologies of such words, especially by foreign observers who see in them something remarkable, when in fact native speakers regard them as ordinary terms (on this see George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 1776). The presence of such items is better accounted for by historical (i.e., established usage and borrowing) and typological considerations.

A final note. The text, overall, could bear a good editing pass. *Verb phrase* is used several times before we encounter *VP* accompanied by a parenthetical gloss (77). Whether data and non-English words appear in italic or plain type is frequently inconsistent, which induced at least this reader to reread numerous passages looking for what the type face signifies.

While employing a great deal of esoteric terminology, this book focuses diverse ethnographies on the place of emotion and affect in language and discourse, while posing a number of questions that are worthy of being raised. But while the so-called “referentialist” definition of language — “a socially constituted, interactive phenomenon,” as Goodwin and Duranti (*Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*, Cambridge UP, 1992 13) put it — is challenged for its lack of representation of emotion, a revised definition is not offered. At the same time questions arise about how some fundamental concepts are applied.

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