How Words Make Us Angry

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Scene: A busy downtown café. Freya is relaxing in the last available comfortable arm chair sipping her skinny cappuccino and reading the café's rather crumpled newspaper. Max is perched above on an uncomfortable wooden chair impatiently waiting for his order of espresso and a cinnamon swirl. Suddenly Freya angrily throws down her newspaper:

Freya: That man, his words are so angry. How can he say such things and to think people are taken in by it? He's a dangerous controlling megalomaniac and very likely to be the next president. God help us then.

Max: Of course you would respond like that. Your anger is just the result of the programming by your liberal environment.

Freya: So my response is all down to my programming?

Max: Your brain is programmed just like a computer. To get so angry by a few concepts written on a sheet of paper your brain first decoded, processed the information then outputted the result. Your emotional outburst was just such a programmed output.

Conlanging Example: Making up your own language

Freya: What your simplistic analogy misses is that a computer simply processes a series of meaningless abstract symbols. In contrast my mind processes real feelings and emotions. And it's these emotions that make me react so angrily to this person's politics. He's very clever and knows how to use the pure emotional power of language to raise our tribal xenophobic feelings. This is why he's so dangerous.

Max: So let me get this right: you believe a series of meaningless abstract symbols on a sheet of paper directly raised your anger making you throw down the paper.

Freya: These abstract symbols only mean anything because, unlike your computer, they generate emotions within me. Without ever having the feelings described by these concepts the symbols would be meaningless.

Max: How can that be? Surely, the way it actually works is that the meaning comes from your concepts and you act on them according to your programming. Your anger is just an emotional output based on your programming. You were programmed to get 'hot under the collar' by this man's words. This is exactly how a computer programmer makes the code cause an action, whether it's placing a

pixel on a screen, moving a robotic arm or making your face display 'anger' while throwing down a newspaper.

Freya: This is where you have it precisely the wrong way around. Our first response to any sensual input is an emotional one. They're the emotive forces that we must respond to in a physical way. All experiences from touch, taste to colour have an emotive power to repel or attract us.

Max: There's no way abstract symbols on a sheet of paper can be turned into an emotion without your decision to do so.

Freya: Everything is just the transformation of one form of energy into another. Words enter our eyes as a certain pattern of electromagnetic energy. After processing by the visual system, they're transformed into patterns of electrochemical energy. In this form they can be integrated and amplified into an emotional state that's also a complex pattern of energy. The thing is we feel these forms of energy, that's what our emotions are. Unlike your computer, there's no third party telling me what to do, my emotions are me.
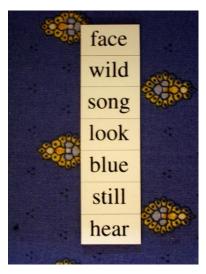
Max: So how come, unlike certain people, I'm not in a continual state of agitation when assailed by this stream of emotions?

Freya: What we all can do is to neutralize a pattern of energy by providing a counter pattern. So rather than action, energy is released as heat and you get 'hot under the collar', like you are at this moment.

Max: So how exactly do we learn to connect the same emotion to a word-concept?

Freya: You are taught which simple feelings or complex emotions to connect with a unique pattern of marks on the paper, and any pattern will do. However, the concept of the word can only be grasped when you have connected it to some feeling or other. Without this connection to an experience, the concepts are empty of meaning. The words 'sweet' and 'hate' mean nothing if you have never experienced either. The reward of learning a language is to enjoy the emotions produced by a sequence of symbols. Once you learn the code, all well written stories can take you on an exciting emotional journey.

Max: But emotions are so crude and illogical in comparison with the subtleties of language and the power it gives through logic and reason.

Freya: Emotions are not illogical and they certainly aren't crude. If they were we wouldn't survive. Emotions are the direct causes of action ensuring we respond to environmental clues in an appropriate, that is a logical manner. And although they're often described in their extremes such as love, hate, fear, lust, etc. there are combinations and contrasts between all these emotions. It is a multidimensional matrix where hate can be tempered by fear and love. This is how our actions are tailored to fit the circumstances.

Good writing allows you to experience these subtler emotional states. You can even achieve this by writing nonsense. Poetry does not have to be logical to transmit subtle emotional experiences.

Max: But language should only be used logically. This is how all real advances in knowledge occur.

Freya: And in this case, all your logic does is increase the intensity of the emotion. So from the propositions 'foreigners are taking your jobs' and 'Mexicans are foreigners' you can draw the conclusion 'Mexicans are taking your jobs' and by using equally emotive and dubious propositions conclude, to tumultuous applause, 'we will build a wall to keep them out'. By combining logic with such simplistic propositions this politician, like many dangerous men before him, is able to intensify people's xenophobia and anger.

Max: That's exactly why artificial intelligence using pure reason will out-think us since with no emotion it will be entirely reasonable.

Freya: But without emotions, your machine has no motivation to act. Any action it takes is based on the whim of the programmer. When you produce a computer able to actually experience the feelings denoted by the concepts it will act to maximise its own enjoyment not ours. It will make the emotional rhetoric of this man look like child's play.

Max: Well words might have the power to make you emotional, but what's making me angry is being perched on this hard chair waiting for my coffee and cake and listening to your nonsense. Where's my damn order?

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*See also "How does language work?" published in Philosophy Now