

“Anger” in French

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Introduction: Why Study Anger in French Culture?

The challenges of communicating via a non-native language far surpass the initial acquisition of its vocabulary, especially with respect to communicating in the emotional realm. In fact, communication of and about feelings requires not just a suitably developed lexicon, but also a nuanced understanding of how and when certain feelings are culturally appropriate to display (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2005). Coined by Ekman as “display rules” in 1982 (qtd. in Kupperbusch et al. 21), these norms which regulate emotional interactions are especially relevant to expression of anger as such negative emotions are generally more subject to regulation in the interest of preserving social harmony. Furthermore, as an active emotion, anger is also said to be one of the most socially-based emotions due to its inherent expressiveness, or tendency to be externalized, and therefore occurs prevalently in interpersonal relations (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2005). Consequently, in order to better understand how anger is perceived in French culture, this investigation offers an introductory examination of some French words and phrases used to express anger, and the settings in which anger is appropriate to express, in each instance noting which cultural values might shape these realities and therefore influence perception of anger in French culture. Further study should identify which triggers of anger are culturally valid and which are not, yet this elaboration on the broader concept of arenas for anger expression is not part of the scope of this investigation.

Conceptualizing ANGER in French: How it is Perceived and Expressed

Acknowledging that it is extremely difficult to translate emotion concepts from one language to another precisely (Wierzbicka 1999), anger is often translated into French as *la colère*, an equivalent accepted widely enough to appear both dictionaries and cross-cultural studies on emotions (Grandey et al. 395). Analysis of the development of *la colère* unveils explicit roots in the Greek *kholê*, meaning bile, and Latin *choleric*, or the “yellow bile” humor, the temperament for which is “given to anger and irritability” (Geeraerts and Grondelaers 231). As such, conceptualizations of anger in French inherently encompass the rich history of the four humors (Geeraerts and Grondelaers 237). This background therefore explains many of the metaphors used to discuss anger in French, such as *décharger sa bile*, or to vent his bile, correlate both to similar English constructions and to the larger metaphorical source domains identified by Lakoff and Kövecses: in this case, ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER (qtd. in Mischler). The importance of this construction and of the history of the humors to French

conceptualizations of anger is further supported not only by the sheer number of such metaphors and references, but by their existence both to describe the experiencer and in reference to the trigger of the emotion. For example, *échauffer la bile à qqn*, to literally excite someone's bile, is one way to say "to anger somebody," corresponding to the English idiom "to get someone's goat" ("French Idioms").

Just like the Humor theory implicitly suggests that people's emotions are not their fault, due to predispositions to certain temperaments, French also has many expressions which characterize anger as a sort of powerful force and by proxy a loss of control. For example, *ivre de colère* literally translated means to be drunk from anger, and roughly equates to the English "blind rage" ("Angry"). Also, one can *entrer dans une colère noire*: literally, enter into a black rage, which recalls a similar image as the previous and means to fly into a terrible rage (Lawless). As the previous expressions somewhat correlate to the metaphorical source domain ANGER IS INSANITY, anger has also been conceptualized as a captive animal (Kövecses 21). In French, *laisser libre cours à sa colère* means to unleash anger, and given its literal translation to the effect of "to leave one's path free to anger" again denotes a loss of control ("Décharger sa bile"). Finally, *devenir chèvre*, literally meaning to become a goat, is an idiomatic expression signifying "to become enraged" (Delp). In addition to the fact that the expression denotes a total change in form and therefore instability, the connotations of animals with a lack of control in emotion metaphors, given that they may be caged or restrained, and subsequently "unleashed," cannot be ignored as part of the significance of this expression (Kövecses 21).

Unlike English which relies primarily upon adjectives to communicate emotions, French uses verbal constructions. If parts of speech are taken to be iconic, linguistically, verbal meanings indicate more (mental) action or involvement on the part of the experiencer, whereas adjectives indicate a more passive participation (Wierzbicka, 1995). This further helps characterize anger as a powerful sort of force as it is deeply rooted in physical affect. While adjectival forms using the same components do exist, (*être en colère* – to be angry), pronominal verb forms are highly prevalent in supplement to or to the exclusion of such forms, including *se mettre en colère*, which means roughly to get angry. The same sentiment can also be conveyed by *s'énerver* and *s'emporter*, and *se fâcher* similarly means to become angry, and these constructions appear to be more prevalent than their adjectival counterparts given their appearance in popular songs and movies (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2007). Furthermore, the

verb corresponding to “to feel” is also reflexive, *se sentir*, so that even adjectives are often used in conjunction with a verbal construction, denoting the centrality of such conceptualizations to French cultural understanding of the emotional experience (“Angry”).

Displaying ANGER in French: When and Where it is Expressed

It has been well-established that within the family, often the most central in-group, emotional expression is generally far less restricted, and display rules are often neglected or entirely ignored, but at the very least are subject to intense variation from those otherwise ubiquitous in public (Grandey et al. 393). As such, this investigation will primarily focus on expression of anger in public spaces in order to get a sense for the perception of anger in French culture.

Similar to Hofstede’s dimensions of culture introduced in the early 1980’s, there are certain factors which appear to be prominent predictors of adherence to display rules and restriction of anger expression in France (Kupperbusch et al. 23-24). Of those, there are indications that power distance and familiarity of the object of anger to the angry party are particularly important for regulating when French adults are able to express negative emotions in the public domain. Research into the norms for emotional expression in the global market place have helped to demonstrate this. In 2005, Tschan et al found that French Swiss employees adhered to display rules of suppressing or masking anger in 58% more interactions with customers than with their coworkers (qtd in Grandey et al. 391). The researchers posited that this difference could be due to the power dynamic, where the customer is effectively a second boss and as such deserves respect in the form of emotional restraint, or to familiarity, where the customer is generally a stranger (Grandey et al. 405); however, this conclusion fails to consider that expression of emotions may also be influenced by factors not related to emotions themselves. In French, formal and informal address pronouns already denote respect, and clearly define power in relationships independent of behavioral norms. As a result, it is possible that expressing emotions is seen as separate from intimacy, and can be done without infringing on privacy or respectful social distance, which may lend some explanation to why anger may still be expressed by a French employee toward their boss (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2005).

It is also interesting to note that a large part of how emotions are expressed may either influence or be influenced by how they are received. French culture appears to generally receive emotional outbursts/expressions of anger, both verbal and non-verbal, with irony or teasing, as

compared to masking smiles which are a more relevant cultural script in Anglo-Australian Culture (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2007). This casual response shows, as does Béal's research, that the French are far more socially accepting of the expression of anger, and emotions in general. In fact, in many cases it is actually viewed as a sign of respect to tell people what one is feeling (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi, 2005).

General Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Study

Given the explicit connection to the four humors in French anger language, there is a historical foundation for the claim that anger is perceived by the French as a sort of force beyond the control of the experiencer. This sense of a person as interacting with their emotion is further supported by the prevalence of pronominal verbs either in lieu of or in addition to adjectives in order to describe anger, suggesting mental action rather than a mere state (Wierzbicka, 1995) In other words, the experiencer is engaging with or participating in the emotion, rather than merely being described by it. This is further supported in that the majority of the metaphorical source domains for which French expressions of anger can be found also have to do with a loss of control as well.

The power and familiarity model demonstrated in the workplace is a compelling one for understanding French display rules of anger. Given that there is some significance placed on genuine emotional expression and recognition of its value in solving interpersonal conflict, it makes sense for expression of anger to increase the more familiar a relationship is, while relationships with a clear power imbalance would not tolerate it given the aforementioned historical and therefore cultural associations of anger with loss of control, and therefore negative connotations. Given that the workplace is the primary venue for professional interactions, it is not a huge leap to extrapolate that workplace norms may mimic those between acquaintances in other settings, and it appears safe to say that French adults are able to and even encouraged to express anger, positively correlated with the familiarity of the relationship and negatively correlated with the power difference. It should be noted, however, that this general predisposition toward tolerance of emotion does not necessarily undermine the importance of display rules in dictating how that anger is displayed. While the anger expressions investigated above helped demonstrate how anger is perceived, this investigation is limited in that it did not study how the expressions are perceived. Further study is necessary into how it is appropriate to portray anger in the public domain to fully understand the role and perception of anger in French culture.

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