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Short Research Project 2: Expressions of Fear

According to Anna Wierzbicka, the emotion of fear is related to the idea that “bad things can happen” and focuses on lack of knowledge about the future (Wierzbicka 74). Wierzbicka provides the following definition of fear in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), which I adopt for the purposes of this paper:

Fear (X felt fear)

- (a) X felt something because X thought something
- (b) sometimes a person thinks:
- (c) “I don’t know what will happen
- (d) some bad things can happen
- (e) I don’t want these things to happen
- (f) I want to do something because of this if I can
- (g) I don’t know if I can do anything”
- (h) when this person thinks this this person feels something bad
- (i) X felt something like this
- (j) because X thought something like this (Wierzbicka 75)

Given this definition, there are many thoughts which could spark fear, including potentially dangerous, humiliating, or otherwise undesirable events.

This paper looks at a case study in the expression of fear, examining a particular photograph taken of the author in March of 2013. As a candid photograph, the picture represents a genuine demonstration of fear. Moreover, as the subject of the photograph, I can illustrate the context and thoughts associated with the expression which appears in the picture.¹ The image was captured at an Opening Round Championship Series tournament of the American Mock

¹ While this analysis is undoubtedly biased and subject to the fallibility of memory, it still provides an interesting and illuminating study.

Trial Association in Memphis, Tennessee. Our entire mock trial team was preparing to leave the courthouse, and we were given the news by our coach that the next team we would be competing against was the University of Texas, which has a very strong program. My friend Stephan was taking pictures of the group, and he captured me in the background making this expression.

Although not a high-quality photograph, the image can still be analyzed for facial features and



gestures indicative of fear.

I propose that the following facial features mark the emotional expression in this image as fear: wide eyes, mouth open, eyebrows neither raised nor lowered. Anna Wierzbicka describes the message of wide eyes as “I want to know more,” which is consistent with the relation of fear to unknown “bad things” happening in the future (189).

Someone experiencing fear would likely want to find out these unknown things which are causing them negative

feelings. Wierzbicka relates the element of an open mouth to the idea “I don’t know what I can say,” which is linked to surprise and astonishment (190-191). This, too, is consistent with the definition of fear, as the “unknown” element might cause surprise or astonishment. One would not know what to say because, according to component (g) of Weirzbicka’s definition, one does not know if he or she can do anything. The eyebrows in this image, however, are neither raised nor lowered. Wierzbicka calls these “immobile eyebrows,” and notes that they are unlikely to be deliberate, conveying the idea that “I can’t do anything now” (206). This would again be consistent with component (g) of the NSM definition of fear. Likewise, the corners of the mouth are neither raised nor lowered.

The hand gestures in this photograph are also telling. One hand is raised to the face, as if to touch the cheek. I would suggest that this placement of the hand by the face is an adaptor, a nonverbal movement involving touching one's own body. Adaptors turn one's attention inward, and are thought to be related to anxiety or some other inner state (Parks). Thus, by touching my face, I was drawing attention inward towards my own fear. The other hand, however, is clenched into a fist. Making a fist indicates the potential use of bodily force (Schubert 757), consistent with component (f) of the NSM definition of fear, "I want to do something because of this if I can."

Based on the analysis of this photograph, I pose the following translation of Wierzbicka's NSM definition of fear into context-specific components:

Fear (Shannon felt fear)

- (a) Shannon felt something because Shannon thought something
- (b) Shannon thought:
- (c) "I don't know what will happen in this next round of mock trial
- (d) we could lose the round against University of Texas
- (e) I don't want to lose the round against Texas
- (f) I want to do well in this round because of this if I can
- (g) I don't know if I can do well enough to beat Texas"
- (h) when Shannon thinks this she feels something bad
- (i) Shannon felt something like this
- (j) because Shannon thought something like this

Through this case study analysis of a specifically contextualized expression of fear there emerge broader truths about the manifestation of the emotion. First, facial expressions of fear are characterized by wide eyes and immobile eyebrows, as well as an open mouth. This makes expressions of fear similar to that of surprise. Second, fear is often accompanied by adaptors, nonverbal cues which draw attention to a person's inner state, or other gestures which might indicate components like the person's desire to take action. Therefore, while triggered by a wide variety of thoughts, fear causes several uniformly identifiable physical correlates.

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