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Short Research Paper #2

I got Pranked and I Don't Mind: Physical Correlates of Pleasant Surprise

In her book, *Emotions across Languages and Cultures* (1999), Anna Wierzbicka proposes using Natural Semantic Language (NSM) to describe facial behavior as it is accurate and readily translatable. In this paper, I will propose an explication for a very specific blend of emotions experienced by people (whom I will refer to as victims from now on) who have been pranked by Just for Laughs: Gags, a reality television show. I will then point out some common physical characteristics from ten pictures of these victims and discuss how they might correlate to individual components in the explication.

In order to understand the emotion described in this paper, one first has to understand the context. Just for Laughs: Gags is a hidden-camera comedy show that plays a wide range of pranks on unaware passers-by in order to capture their candid expressions. These pranks can range from plain silly to extremely shocking. At the end of the prank, it will be revealed to the victim that the whole event was staged. The faces I will analyze in this paper were made when victims of shocking pranks found out that they were on film. Given the nature of the series, the expressions captured are as genuine as can be and serve as excellent data.

Description of the Emotion

While I use the term “pleasant surprise” in the title for convenience, this emotion is much more complex as the situation is much more specific. For example, one might react to surprise birthday party with an expression similar to the one shown in Figure 1. The victims’ surprise, however, may also include a mixture of embarrassment and relief. As such, I propose the following explication to describe their state of mind:



Figure 1: Pleasantly surprised

X finds out he/she was pranked

- (a) X thought something (very) bad (Y) was happening
- (b) X knows that Y was not real now
- (c) X did not think that Y was not real a very short time before now
- (d) Because of this, X feels something (very) good
- (e) X thinks something like this:
- (f) Y was not bad

- (g) If I do not see anything now, nothing bad will happen
- (h) If I did not do anything, nothing bad would have happened
- (i) I did some things (Z) that I do not want people to see
- (j) A lot of people will see Z

Component (a) describes the victims' initial conception of the situation. As the victims' reactions as well as the severity of the pranks vary, "very" is placed in parentheses. Component (b) describes the victim's current perception of the situation, and (c) describes the unexpectedness of the revelation. While not everybody may take being pranked well, component (d) is valid since Just for Laughs: Gags only selects positive reactions to broadcast. Again, the intensity of the good feelings depends on the victim, so "very" is parenthesized. Components (f) to (j) describe the thoughts of victims that arise from the situation (components (a) to (d)). Components (f) and (g) aim to capture the sense of relief that the victims feel, and components (h) to (j) describe the sense of embarrassment that they feel.

Description of Faces

With the exception of pictures 1, 6, and 8, the eyes of all ten victims are closed (refer to Appendix). The victims depicted in the three exceptions also have their eyes narrowed. This is in stark contrast to the expression in Figure 1 in which the woman's eyes are wide open, an expression typically associated with surprise. This discrepancy is due to the difference in the natures of the "surprise" felt in the two situations: while the birthday girl's surprise stems from visual stimuli, the victims experience an epistemic surprise. Therefore, I would argue that the birthday girl widens her eyes to take in more information regarding her visual surprise, whereas the victims' surprise does not have a direct effect on their eyes and acts only as an intensifier of the overall reaction (this hypothesis is based on the assumption that the victims would have reacted in a similar fashion even if they had suspicions about the situation (therefore negating the "surprise" factor), only in a less extreme manner). Rather, it is components (f) to (j) that results in the victims' eyes being closed: since the situation was no longer dangerous, it was okay to close (or narrow) their eyes, and since they felt embarrassed about the situation, they wanted to reduce visual input to reduce awareness. It might also be argued that the victims pictured in 1, 6, and 8 did not close their eyes completely as they were not as embarrassed.

The next significant characteristic that can be observed from all ten pictures is the victims' widely opened mouths. Generally, it is considered rude and probably obnoxious to express extreme emotion without reservation in a public setting, but it can be argued that the element of surprise

(as captured in component (c)) caught the victims off guard so they could not control themselves in time. Another possible explanation for this might be that, as described in Wierzbicka (1999), the victims “[want] to say something and yet [do not] say anything” (p. 191). It should also be noted that the upturned corners of the victims justify component (d).

Lastly, all the victims display a retraction of their necks as well as varying degrees of tilting their heads upwards. Similar to why they close or narrow their eyes, it can be argued that the victims are letting their guards down due to the sudden sense of relief (components (c), (f) and (g)). It can also be associated with embarrassment (components (h) to (j)) as turning one’s head away from an embarrassing situation can also reduce one’s consciousness of the embarrassment.

Discussion

Besides the expression examined in this paper, there are plenty of other interesting emotions that were captured on Just for Laughs: Gags. Not only does it capture expressions that are very genuine, it also provides a very clear prototypical situation to work with rather than using hypothetical situations or anecdotal evidence. In a way, it is like a fairly well controlled experiment, except nobody is making use of the data.

Also, the reactions described in this paper are by not necessarily universal as the victims analyzed here are all from Quebec. One thing that I noticed when searching for faces on Just for Laughs: Gags videos was that victims who were visibly of Asian descent (probably tourists) generally had particularly watered down reactions. It will be interesting to conduct more detailed studies on how people from different cultures react to similar situations. In fact, Just for Laughs: Gags has recently begun a new venture, Just for Laughs: Gags Asia, and I believe we can learn a lot about display rules in different cultures from comparing these reactions.

References

- Just for laughs: gags.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://gags.justforlaughs.com/>
 Wierzbicka, A. (1999). *Emotions across languages and cultures: Diversity and universals*. Cambridge University Press.