

Smiling and teasing as strategies masking anger among French and Australian cultural groups

Introduction

This paper reports on an ongoing project that is concerned with the interpretation and processing of emotion in communication, particularly anger, within an interactional dynamics perspective (Holtgraves, 1990). In a previous publication (Strambi & Mrowa 2007), we presented an analytical model and some preliminary analyses of ‘processing’ strategies for managing the communication of anger among friends across three cultural groups: Anglo-Australian, French and Italian. In this paper, we are presenting further elaborations on this model, and analyses from a non-verbal perspective of how smiling and teasing function in the construction and negotiation of anger scenarios among French and Anglo-Australian groups.

For Rosaldo (1984 quoted in Markus and Kitiyama 1994), “emotions can be viewed as a set of socially shared scripts composed of various processes – physiological, subjective, and behavioral – that develops as individuals actively (personally and collectively) adapt and adjust to their immediate socio-cultural, semiotic environment.” (p. 341). This statement finds an echo in our personal experience of being French and Italian academics living and working in an Anglo culture where constant adjustment is required. We have noted obvious differences in cultural scripts and the way these differences are perceived and interpreted by different cultural groups, and therefore “managed” or processed in cross cultural interactions. The desire to explore these phenomena beyond anecdotal observations and stereotypical representations has led us to become interested into this research field.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to examine the forms taken by the responses of recipients involved in anger interactions, particularly the non-verbal forms that may or may not be accompanied by speech, and analyse these responses in terms of processing strategies as we believe that these are socially and culturally constructed. We would like to suggest that language students can be taught to recognise cultural similarities and differences in the communication of emotions, and discover the assumptions underlying observable behaviours, so as to avoid misunderstandings and potential conflict. An awareness of possible interpretations of responses associated by members of different cultural groups should equip second language learners with the tools to manage intercultural communication competently.

The following sections will, firstly, explain our analytical approach and framework; secondly, provide some illustrations of the strategies identified in the processing of emotion in anger scenarios; and finally, discuss the use of smiling, irony and teasing as a way of processing emotion in conflict situations by the French and Anglo-Australian groups specifically.

1. Background: Non verbal display in emotion communication related to anger

Empirical studies of conversations suggest that there may be significant discrepancies between the socio-cultural norms regulating emotion communication through non-verbal behavior among Anglo-Australian, French and Italian groups (Béal, 1992; Carroli, *et al*, 2003; Mullan, 2001). Similarly, the importance of non-verbal behavior as playing a crucial role in the communication of information about interlocutors' personality, beliefs, values, and social status has been highlighted by many authors (Birdwhistell, 1970; Mehrabian, 1972; Lazarus, 1991). However, facial expressions,

gestures and voice modulation, not only convey information about the emotional state of the speakers, but they also have a regulative function in conversational exchanges, in so far as they set in motion processes of adaptation and strategies of negotiation. In other words, they are voluntarily used by the speakers to achieve specific effects (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2000; Fielher, 2002). Emotion regulation, in particular has been identified by Matsumoto, *et al.* (2004) as an essential construct involved in intercultural adjustment. As well as the norms and rules regulating these displays between the interlocutors involved in various communicative situations, of particular significance for our study are the interactional effects of emotion communication as they reflect phenomena of evaluation and adjustment.

So, in examining conflict scenes selected from contemporary film extracts involving relationships between friends, we were interested in analyzing how nonverbal forms are used as signals by members of different cultural groups in the negotiation of conflicts arising from different socio cultural expectations or norms. We noted in particular several scenarios bearing traces of affect ranging from mild irritation, masked by smiling, restrained gestures and subtle changes in body movements, to fully blown arguments where interlocutors express their opposition by raising their voice, speaking more quickly with overlapping turns, varying their intonation quite significantly, and gesturing dramatically.

2. Analytical framework and strategies identified in emotion communication

The methodological complexities involved in studying socio cultural display rules which operate mainly at a subconscious level required us to design a chart, or model, which represents the most likely configurations of interaction within the scenes we

analyzed for this study¹. Here we simply present a brief explanation of this chart outlining the processes at play.

Within the social interaction perspective that we have adopted emotional behaviors are considered "elements of interaction", which for analytic purposes can be divided into sequences made up of an initiating move (the antecedent), a reaction or response move, and a closing move. In the present paper smiling is mainly considered as a non-verbal strategic move within responses to anger-eliciting events (antecedents), although we may find it occurring in other positions within an interactional sequence. The antecedent can be any *face threatening act* (FTA), as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) that elicits an angry reaction, e.g. a remark by character A that could make character B angry (disapproval, criticism, allusion to B's behaviour, etc.); alternatively a situation, or event happens that also could make B feel angry or hurt. Accordingly, it is the recipient B who interprets the event, or situation, as either non-threatening (no anger/hurt is experienced), or face-threatening, and may engage in a confrontational interaction. In response to FTAs, character B has the option to select between engaging and non-engaging responses by communicating or not communicating his anger or his hurt.

Within non-engaging responses (when B does not communicate his hurt), we distinguish between the following strategies:

- **Ignoring** - when the recipient of a FTA pretends that nothing happened – this can be viewed as an attempt to neutralize a potential source of conflict. The non verbal signals associated with this strategy are topic switches, acting indifferent. This strategy is linked to Ekman's display of *neutralizing*; and

¹ Refer to Strambi & Mrowa-Hopkins (2007) for a discussion on the sources, the development process and validity tests of this chart.

- **Masking**, in which the recipient B of a FTA pretends to interpret the antecedent as non-threatening and does not communicate his anger/hurt immediately. The non verbal signals may be smiling, but also include teasing/joking with a highly aggressive content, e.g. when the speech is accompanied by a sarcastic smile with head nods, etc.

For example, in many scenes of the French and Italian films that we analyzed, the recipient of an anger outburst tries to ‘lighten up’ the situation by making ironic comments in an effort to defuse a potential source of conflict. However, *smiling* seems to be a preferred non-verbal display to mask mild anger or irritation in the Australian scenarios. Thus, the non-verbal signals that accompany this strategy will more than likely be misinterpreted in cross-cultural exchanges.

Within the engaging responses (when speaker B communicates his hurt), we find that responses differ by their degree of intensity, ranging from mild irritation or cold anger to hot anger. For example, when speaker B expresses feelings calmly, seeking apology or modification of speaker A’s behavior, non verbal signals include lowering the eyes or the head, looking or walking away, crying, etc. In hot anger, B’s aggression is expressed more forcefully, either using insults and threats or angry looks, clenched fists, throwing objects, etc.

When the conflict develops further into a third move, speaker A’s response to B’s expression of feelings may also include other negotiating strategies escalating in intensity, and ranging from the following:

- **Entering**, an affiliative strategy, in which speaker A signals agreement, or sympathy with B, or remorse accompanied by prototypical apologetic non

verbal behavior such as lowering the eyes, nodding, touching, giving a sympathetic look, etc.

- **Deflecting**, in which speaker A responds humorously, signaling that B's anger is not to be taken too seriously, resulting in a play-down behavior. A may tease B affectionately or draw attention away from anger-generating situation ("Come on ..."). A considers the disclosure as non-threatening and uses smiling, head bent sideways, mocking look, etc. as non verbal signals.
- **Analyzing**, through which the disclosure is identified as problematic, either due to intensity or type of feeling communicated; for example character A invites B to explain or reframe by typically raising eyebrows, showing surprise or puzzlement. In other words, A is unsure of how to interpret B's behaviour.
- **Calling into question**, if the manifestation is considered inappropriate, speaker A, (or more often onlooker C) observes calmly that B's behavior is not appropriate; e.g. invites him to calm down, get on with it, etc. showing disapproval by looking away and shaking head, etc. A may also reframe antecedent to show that B's behavior is not justified.
- **Cold anger**, speaker A expresses feelings of anger/hurt, seeking apology or modification of B's behavior, but without becoming aggressive, e.g. A enters into an argument/dispute with B. A may negate B's statements, or otherwise signal opposing views). It is signaled non-verbally by side looks, looking/walking away, giving the "silent treatment".
- **Hot anger**, speaker A expresses feelings forcefully (e.g. yelling) which can border on aggression (both verbal and physical, including insults, or threats). Non-verbally hot anger is signaled by angry looks, clenched fists, throwing objects, physical aggression, etc.

2.2. The realization patterns of anger sequences

The realization patterns of anger sequences are now illustrated with examples from our corpus. The corpus is drawn from contemporary films which contain numerous instances of angry disclosures and had male friendship as their central theme. This allowed for a control of contextual variables that could influence angry disclosure so that any cultural differences could emerge. Although our selection for this study includes 10 films, three films were specially selected for coding the non-verbal behavior, and a micro-analysis was carried out using a software program called ELAN. This process is very time consuming, which explains why only a few films were selected. The three films that we selected from the corpus are the following:

1. *Secret Men's Business*, an Anglo-Australian film directed by Ken Cameron, henceforth referred to as *Secret Men's*.
2. *Le Coeur des Hommes*, a French film by Marc Esposito, henceforth referred to as *Le Coeur*; and
3. *Marrakech Express*, an Italian film written and directed by Gabriele Salvatores, which will not be used in this presentation as we have selected to focus on a French-Australian comparison.

Evidently, the interactions we selected and analyzed do not qualify as 'naturalistic' in the true sense and the non verbal behaviors that we observed are also acted out to a certain extent. Nevertheless, from a methodological point of view, films present very similar characteristics to naturalistic conversations, the authenticity of which is attested by the process of the audience's identification with the characters, which is often cited as a determining criterion for the success of a film. In the condensed form of a film, there is also an intensification of affects, which in real life seem mostly to

appear banal and flat. According to Piazza (2006, p. 1) “Scripted dialogue [...] reflects authentic discourse conventions while at the same time emphasizing and over-dramatizing them.”. Nonetheless, we adopt her view that “[A]lthough film dialogue is fictitious [...] it can be assumed that it uses real-life dialogue as a template and reproduces the interactional mechanisms found in everyday exchanges.”

In naturalistic studies, on the other hand, informants may consider video recordings inhibiting; furthermore, the desire to present a positive face will not give access to a genuine representation of conflicts as the interlocutors may want to look for a peaceful resolution before a full blow-out, which is more likely to happen when the recording equipment is absent.

Some of the scenarios that we have identified in our study in response to anger-eliciting events have the following patterns.

An insult or an accusation by character A can be either

a) Called into question as in the following situation:

Character A You are a cheat!

Tricheur!

Character B That’s a bit rough

Oh la la!... [marked intonation + tossing head right to left]

or

b) Analyzed as in:

Character A *Ah bon?... Ils disent qu’ils viennent et ils viennent pas ?*

c’est vraiment des gros pédés, c’est incroyable...!

And they didn’t.

Typical fags!

Character B *Des gros pédés c'est-à-dire?*

Fags? Meaning?

Character A *Ben j'sais pas*

You know

C'est des pédés quoi!

Poofters...

or

c) responded to non-verbally revealing Cold Anger, as in:

Character A Hey, you are in or what?

Character B You are a sleaze, Michael! [smiles]

Character A [blinks, smiles, turns head away and spits out]

A whole scenario can also be enacted non-verbally. A non verbal disclosure by Character A can be either

d) Deflected as in:

Character A [displays angry look]

Character B [makes small head movements, shrugs, head shakes and smiles]

or

e) Ignored by continuing as if nothing had been said, as when character B laughs in reaction to teasing from character A.

To summarize our approach, we identified all the anger scenes where smiling and teasing occurred in our film corpus, then selected only the scenes where smiling was used in responses to anger-generating antecedents. Many scenes were discarded from the analysis because either the smile or teasing was considered potentially face-

threatening, or the smile or laughter was shared by third-party listeners. These latter occurrences indicated that the listeners aligned themselves with the previous speaker's potentially threatening remark and for this reason were not considered relevant for our analyses. Below is a summary table of our results, for detailed descriptions of the contextual elements, please refer to appendices A and B.

Table 1: Number of *Smiling* occurrences used as a NV response to an anger-eliciting antecedent.

Strategies	<i>Le Coeur</i> (French film)	<i>Secret Men's</i> (Australian film)
Ignoring		
Masking		9
Entering		1
Deflecting	5	1
Analyzing		1
Calling into Question		1
Mild irritation/cold anger	1	5
Hot anger		
Total number of scenes selected	6	18

3. Cross-cultural comparison of smiles, teasing and irony used as strategies in the processing of emotion in conflict situations

3.1 Findings

The selected films presented many similarities but also revealed several important differences in display rules in response to anger-generating antecedents. Among them smiling and teasing or joking were specifically selected for this presentation. In their review of literature on the influence of culture on emotion displays, Hesse, Beaupré & Cheung (2002) indicate that smiling seems to be a useful strategy to conceal negative emotions and to reduce tension and conflict. For Ikuta (1999) the use of smiles in

dyadic situations helps to reduce conflict, as if imitating partners following the cooperative principle.

We noted that *Smiling* as a way of masking mild anger or irritation and to come across as “nice”, that is to pretend that the exchange is still on friendly terms, seems a more powerful script in the Anglo-Australian film. Indeed, in the French film, we could not identify one single sequence out of the six selected scenes in which this behavior is displayed in response to the communication of anger². *Irony and teasing*, on the other hand, is displayed predominantly in the French film as a way of minimizing the risk of open conflict. In many scenes, in fact, the recipient of an anger outburst tries to ‘lighten up’ the situation by making ironic comments in an effort to defuse a potential source of conflict, or tends to play along with the angry character resulting in a display of friendly humor. In our model, this behavior corresponds to the strategy of *Deflecting*. These strategies were noticeably more predominant in the French and Italian films in general where laughter more than smiles was used as the preferred non verbal response to the communication of anger.

Below is an excerpt of the transcript from *Secret Men’s* illustrating how *smiling* is used first as an attempt to bring closure to an exchange (that is *Ignoring* in our model), then as masking cold anger. In this scene Andy has just announced that he is getting married. His friends are upset because they had no prior warning and they start to verbally attack him.

WOZZA *Look can I just can I clear this up for a second
Andy you’re giving up acting you’re moving up to some bloody what? a
farm? to marry your mother? this isn’t you Andy you are the greatest*

² Refer to Appendices 1 and 2 for a comparison of smiles, noting a greater number of occurrences of masking in the Anglo-Australian film.

what's going on?
[Negative Evaluation]

ANDY @**keeps smiling** while listening
Wozza she's the greatest too mate you you're gonna love her you'll meet her at the wedding
[**tries to avoid confrontation, Ignoring**]

[...]

WOZZA *Ah ah No no I get it I am with you I got it you sly old dog hey she is loaded right*
[Insinuating that Andy has self-interested motive]

ANDY *No wrong*
@**smiling** and head nods
[**Masking**]

MIKE *You see Andy the thing is you can't raise another man's kids it's against nature you're gonna have to sell them into slavery or something (.)*
@Pause
[**Provocation**]

ANDY *That's pretty funny Michael (.) yeah. I've had a gutfull (.) Ok so let's get off it allright*
[**cold anger + hot anger**]

MIKE *All I am saying is you're famous. If you think about what you are doing*
=
[continues to question Andy's decision to get married]

ANDY =*Michael do you not listen? I said I like the farm and I like Margot (.) OK it's my life and I'm not gonna pretend to be anyone else (.)*
[**Cold anger**]

@ Mike turns away, raises his bottle and drinks up

WOZZA *Oysters and champagne*
@ gets up and claps hands
[**topic switch**]

Following is an example from the *Le Coeur* illustrating how the *deflecting* strategy is used by Jeff indicating that Alex's angry reaction is not to be taken seriously. The angry episode ends with a smile from Alex who closes the sequence with a teasing remark.

- ALEX *Et si j'avais d'autres projets que de m'endetter à vie pour financer ta retraite*
- JEFF *Mais je peux vendre au Leroy ou à la CG[E*
- ALEX *[Arrête j'ai pas envie de parler de ça maintenant. Laisse-moi le temps de me remettre. T'es d'un égoïsme hallucinant*
[Accusation =Potential threat]
- JEFF *@Jeff is laughing*
[Deflecting]
- ALEX *Tiens allez vas-y écris le prix que tu veux ça à tête reposée là j'ai peur que ça m'énerve*
Allez vas-y écris t'as déjà fait tes comptes dans ta vieille tête d'enculé allez écrit vas-y j'te regarde pas
[Angry tone]
- JEFF *@ Jeff writes a note folds it up and hands it to Alex who puts it in his pocket. They clink glasses.*
- ALEX *@Alex contains a smile*
Tu vas te faire chier à la retraite dans six mois tu vas prendre dix ans
[Teasing]

3.2 Discussion

When viewing these scripts as social and cultural norms, one needs to keep in mind that one's individual experience, enacted in actual behaviors and practices, impacts upon the extent to which these rules are being followed. However, the use of smiles is not simply an individual's characteristic linked to personality traits, neither is it inherently related to feelings of happiness (Hess *et al*, 2002). There exist normative expectations, as evidenced by display rules that discourage or encourage the use of smiles in certain social situations. The most common distinction being made in the literature is "between 'felt smiles' that signal happiness and 'social smiles' that do not." (Hesse *et al*, 2002, p.195). Moreover, according to Ekman and Friesen (1982)

smiles can be used to control or mask negative affect in interactions, and research findings indicate that “negative emotions are more often masked with a smile when others are present.” (Hesse *et al*, 2002, p. 203). In observing couples in role-played and real conflict situations, Ikuta (1999) also noted that more smiles were used in conflict discourse situations compared to non-conflict situations, and that more smiles were found in real problem situations than in role-played situations. In general, smiling in Anglo cultures seems to be a useful way of managing negative emotions and reducing tension in anger generating situations.

When comparing smiles from a cross-cultural perspective, it can be assumed that cultures differ with regard to how and when people smile. For example, it would be interesting to ascertain whether, people from North American cultures tend to smile more than Mediterranean cultures who, on the other hand, may tend to use gestures, and more precisely touch, to lighten up a situation. More importantly from our perspective are the different normative rules that govern the appropriateness of smiling in specific situations. As illustrated in the examples that we have analyzed, smiling may help maintain the *status quo* up to a certain point. It is obvious, however that in certain situations, the argument, disagreement or conflict may no longer be ignored or masked by a smile, and that anger that has been repressed tends to erupt in violent outburst later on. This is the case with Ian (Secret Men’s) who plays the aloof character and keeps smiling in reaction to other characters’ threatening remarks until his aggression explodes later on. These observations are supported by other researchers, in particular, Cohen *et Al.* (1999) whose study about North American culture found that people from the Southern part of the US displayed more smiling behavior in anger interactions than their Northern counterparts. The latter were

quicker to react to face threats and agree collaboratively to restrict the discursive development of an anger scenario, to “nip it in the bud” so to speak. Not so for the Southerners who, once their threshold of tolerance had been reached, erupted in more violent outbursts than the Northerners.

Smiling in order to avoid a possible confrontation or to bring it to a close is a managing strategy that is possibly widespread in many communities, but our analyses so far support the notion that smiling and teasing are used in different ways by different groups; how frequently these strategies are used, and especially in reaction to what antecedents, varies according to the social and cultural coding of the group, so that different types of confrontations are ignored or pursued. For example, whether an insult is to be taken personally, or whether it is interpreted as an affront within a particular group culture, depends on the culture’s specific event coding schema. Moreover, cases of teasing in which one of the participants makes ironic comments that could be potentially threatening of another characters' self-image, and the receiving character smiles or laughs but does not appear to feel angry are more likely to be found among cultures that are more open to expressions of conflict. This is the case in the French film when insults are exchanged; the immediate reaction is to brush it off with laughter, as if to say “you are exaggerating”, “don’t over dramatize”, making light to the situation. This is in contrast to cultures that show more restraint in emotional expressiveness, or are preoccupied with maintaining social harmony; accordingly, they may tend to use smiles to mask negative emotions experienced. On the basis of these observations, however limited they may be, we can quite confidently say that smiling and teasing are subject to culturally different socio-cultural rules.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the non verbal strategies, particularly smiling and teasing, enacted by interlocutors in response to anger-eliciting events. The responses were analysed in terms of processing strategies as we believe that these are socially and culturally constructed. The interactional model of emotion communication that we briefly illustrated is helpful in mapping out (non-verbal) strategies that interlocutors use in order to negotiate a face threatening act, and detailed analyses of scenes showing angry interlocutors allows us to go beyond anecdotal observations. So far our study suggests, on the one hand, that *smiling* in anger-generating scenarios is used as a masking strategy in order to avoid an argument and maintain the social harmony between friends, and seems a more powerful script in the Anglo-Australian scenarios. On the other hand, *irony and teasing*, as a way of minimizing the risk of open conflict, is much more prominent in the French film selected as our data. The illustrations were taken from a small corpus of Anglo-Australian and French films showing anger scenes involving male friends. In future research the scope of our analyses will be further extended to include interactions in the workplace in order to assess whether the complex forms of emotion communication through humor, irony, sarcasm, double entendre, and smiling are intentionally applied for similar pragmatic purposes.

This study has significant implications for second language learning in view of the importance placed on intercultural understanding in language education generally. It is thought that an awareness of possible interpretations of responses associated by

members of different cultural groups should equip second language learners with the tools to manage intercultural communication competently. Our study aims to contribute to increasing our understanding of the cultural specificity of non-verbal behaviors used in the communication of emotion which form part of a culture's ethos. Ultimately, highlighting understandings such as these can increase language learners' willingness to make contact with people from the target culture and relate to them positively as they come to understand their pattern of communication from within the target language culture.

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