A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO EMOTION CONCEPTS IN A SENEGALESE COMMUNITY

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In the cross-cultural study of emotion, language is often a crucial source of information. Many aspects of language are pertinent: emotion terminology, together with the talk that defines terms and elaborates upon them; speakers' attributions of emotion to themselves and others; and the display of emotion during talk. Though of course linguistic evidence is not the only kind of evidence that might be relevant to a cross-cultural analysis, any or all of these linguistic behaviors potentially enter into the attempt to understand the cultural frameworks within which emotion is conceptualized. This paper explores some sociolinguistic issues relating to that attempt. Fieldwork in a rural Wolof community in Senegal provides a case at hand.

What a sociolinguistic approach to emotion concepts does is to call attention to the ways that language — and therefore the implications about emotion to be drawn from language — reflects (and contributes to) a social order, i.e. social groups, relations, and practices. That social order, in turn, provides the background for cultural theories and ideologies concerning emotion, and provides the sites in which those ideas are enacted. I argue, first, for the relevance of social structure for a study of emotion concepts. Insofar as ideas about emotions are related to ideas about persons undergoing them, people conceive of emotion in relation to a social system. Moreover, one's position in that system makes a difference to one's conception of emotion, as well as to the appropriateness of emotional displays. Further, I argue that the linguistic evidence usually drawn upon as evidence of emotion concepts actually derives from a particular set of discourse practices (conventions for the use of language in social life) whose cultural significance deserves examination in its own right. Finally, I suggest that such phenomena as multilingualism and the history of cultural and linguistic contacts have a special relevance for conceptions of emotion as well.

A Wolof Ideology of Emotion and Society

When I first began ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork in a rural Wolof community in 1970, I had no particular intention of focusing on emotion. Instead, my primary interests concerned social hierarchy, and the linguistic usages associated...
with that hierarchy in Wolof ways of speaking. Yet, Wolof consultants explained the connections between styles of speaking and social rank in terms of a theory of emotionality which, for them, underlay human conduct in all its modalities, including speaking. Questions about emotional expression, cultural differences in conceptions of emotion, and the linguistic avenues for displaying emotion and for talking about it thus emerged as important in understanding the account my consultants were providing.

While some of the other ethnographic cases that have loomed large in recent debates about culture and emotion have involved societies that are very small-scale and/or are set apart on islands (Ifaluk, for example — the site of Lutz's [1988] study — and other cases from the Pacific; see White and Kirkpatrick, 1985, among other works), the Wolof are relatively numerous, their social structure more complex, and their region of residence not sharply bounded off from other peoples'. The Wolof number some two to three million people, urban as well as rural, elite as well as peasant. They are the largest single ethnic group in the Republic of Senegal and dominate its economic and political life. Although most of my fieldwork took place in a single rural village of about 1200 inhabitants, and although one must not assume that urban Wolof, or Wolof living in other regions, share all the ideas these villagers held, nevertheless these ideas were supposed to be relevant throughout the population. That is, villagers apparently assumed that they are applicable to Wolof people anywhere, and even to people of other ethnic groups as well.

Like many other peoples in the western sahel and savanna region of Africa, the Wolof traditionally were organized in a complex system of social stratification, usually termed a "caste" system in the African ethnographic literature. This is a system of ranked groups and subgroups, occupationally specialized and strictly endogamous. Although undermined by government policies and other factors, the caste system retains considerable importance in rural communities, and even (according to some observers, e.g., Silla, 1966) on the urban scene. Differences in rank are an acknowledged value, a principle that organizes many kinds of social activities and relationships, ranging from types of economic activities and exchanges to the regulation of marriage, and including everyday social contact and conversation. In this paper I focus on the relationship of this aspect of social structure — the traditional system of stratification — to conceptions of emotion, and to certain patterns of language use.

There are three principal ranked categories, each of which includes various subgroups: high-ranking persons (geér, 'nobles') and two sets of low-ranking categories, jaam 'slaves' and nyenyo (the various artisan castes). Of the low-ranking castes the most numerous and conspicuous is the bardic caste, or griots, whose specializations are rhetoric and the arts of communication, such as public speechmaking, praise singing, secular music, and message-relaying. Other low-ranking groups include blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and weavers, among others, as well as the "slaves," most of whom are menial agricultural laborers owing part-time service to higher-ranking persons. Within each category there are further distinctions of rank, according to more detailed criteria of occupation, lineage, seniority, and the