No laughing matter: Creating and interpreting emotions through interaction

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The theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2017) posits that emotions are not present in the brain a priori, but rely on our interpretation of affective states. This interpretation is driven by shared cultural emotion concepts which we use to categorise our feelings. However, this view places too much emphasis on internal cognition. In our view, the driving force for creating and interpreting emotion is interaction, and 'emotions' are constructed through discourse. One advantage of this approach is that emotions are not taken to be different in this regard from other types of concepts.

Underpinning this is an action-based account of meaning (Eshghi et al., 2022). Any given action (including linguistic actions) provides constraints on potential follow-up actions, but does not determine them. Agents opportunistically pursue affordances relevant to their current goals by engaging directly with the environment, including their interlocutors. This serves to confirm or disconfirm their expectations rather than enriching intermediate brain-internal representations. Following Breitholtz (2020), we model affordances in the form of topoi – non-monotonic and defeasible principles of reasoning recognised within a socio-cultural community.

For example, in the case of emotion the associated topoi for some collection of actions may suggest an interpretation of one's own or another's behaviours as due to nervousness or, conversely, excitement, depending on the interactional context (see also Frijda et al., 2014). We provide examples of laughter in dialogue, where, for example, laughter may be interpreted as signalling nervousness in a job interview, or mis-interpreted as displaying a non-serious stance towards the situation.

References

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