

The verbalisation of emotional experience

En coll. avec Dols, J.M.F., Fernandez, A.J.

In Scherer, Wallbott, Summerfield, (Dir.), *Experiencing emotion : a crosscultural study*, Cambridge University Press; 117-128, 1986.

Edition de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme

8 The verbalisation of emotional experiences

*Jacques Cosnier, José M. F. Dols and
Alfonso J. Fernandez*

8.1 Introduction: definition and general problems

Emotion is a term that, although in common use, is difficult to define. This lack of an accurate and operational definition is, no doubt, partly the cause of numerous contradictory opinions about its 'nature' and functions. In a pragmatic way, it may be characterised by several facets (Scherer, 1984) and, in general, the different authors agree on the existence of three components:

- a subjective sensation (vécu, sentiment, feeling, affect), which allows one to distinguish many kinds of emotion: joy, fear, anger, etc.*
- vegetative bodily manifestations*
- observable behavioural manifestations (gestures, postures, actions)*

It must be noted that among the latter, motor reactions to emotion are mentioned, but verbal manifestations of emotion are rarely referred to. This chapter is concerned with verbal manifestations of emotion. Speech 'parole' or 'verbalisation' seems to have many important relations with emotions, and the omission of verbal reactions in definitions of, and research on emotion seems striking. It is perhaps linked to the frequent contrast which authors have made between 'cognition' and 'affect', with verbalisation generally being placed on the cognitive side and emotion on the affective side. In recent discussions on the functions of the hemispheres of the brain, right and left, these old ideas have returned in a more modern form.

However, despite this lack of general concern with verbalisation, emotion and speech (parole) have been linked and placed at the centre of clinical psychologists' concerns since the end of the last century. The ideas of Breuer & Freud in 1895, when psychoanalysis was originated, may be remembered here. These authors had noticed, when treating hysterical patients subjected to a prehypnotic state, that the accurate verbalisation of their feelings and memories had the power of making the symptoms and the anxiety disappear. This procedure, significantly named 'talking cure' by their famous patient Anna O., was used, as is known, in the early days of psychoanalysis. Since

then it has taken the form of an exclusively verbal therapy but psychoanalysts continue to claim that the relinkage of disorganised memories to produce a 'presentation of words' allows regulation of affect and frees the patient from his or her unconscious handicaps. We also know that some successors of Freud, such as Reich (1942), stressed particularly the non-verbal catharsis of emotional experiences, giving speech (*parole*) a more secondary role than in classical psychoanalysis.

'Body' or 'emotional' therapies are again of current interest today, and in two of their more elaborate forms, 'Gestalt' therapy and 'bioenergetics', the instances of linkage between emotions and speech (*parole*) are common. In fact, it now seems evident to clinicians that speech and emotion have many complex and almost permanent relations, in the releasing, in the discharge, or in the control of the so-called 'emotional' states. Placed in a new situation, each individual will behave on three levels: verbal, motor, and visceral. The reactions interact with one another and, depending on the individual, speech will play a more or less effective homeostatic role in such processes. These aspects have been particularly underlined by the psychosomaticians ('*Pensée opératoire*' of the 'Ecole de Paris', and 'alexithymy' of the American authors).

In addition to this role for speech in intrapersonal emotional regulation, work carried out in microsociology and contemporary ethnomethodology allows us to visualise another role for speech, in interpersonal emotion regulation. Ritualisations and social codifications of life provide behavioural models (stereotypes) that encourage control of the emotions in the presence of others and help a person to keep his or her emotions within the limits acknowledged as culturally suitable (see Chapter 1). Aristotle underlined this relation between emotional control and social organisation, and Elias (1977) has been able to maintain that the history of human civilisation is mingled with the history of the control of affect. The relations between speech and emotion are thus manifold and we have tried to treat them systematically in this chapter.

The present study is based on data from written questionnaires rather than on direct observations. Two levels of verbal activity may therefore be considered: the writer's activity, which produces a written discourse, and the verbal activities reported in the contents of the written discourse. We may say that the written text is a 'metaverbalisation' about 'verbalisations' which have taken place at another time and in another place. It is true that, as far as the study of verbal activity is concerned, the purpose of the questionnaire was to allow us to study the verbalisations, but we thought it was better to consider, if only briefly, the study of metaverbalisation as well.

8.2 Verbalisation

Speech, in its different forms (written or oral) is mentioned in various parts of the questionnaire: at the antecedent level, at the reaction level, and at the control level. We shall, therefore, study it successively at these three levels.

Speech and the release of emotion

The circumstances ('antecedents') that produce emotion are numerous, variable, and dependent on the individual and his or her culture. It is commonly considered that emotion is produced most often because the subject cannot or does not know how to elaborate an adequate response to the stimulus, and three features of a situation are considered to cause emotion: the new, the unusual, and the sudden (Fraisie, 1963).

Other aspects referred to as causes of emotion have been excess of motivation and emotional contagion. However, it seems to us that the relationship with the other person in a situation is an element that is very often present, even if it is not always mentioned. The accurate coding developed by our research group to quantify the items in the antecedent situations revealed situations involving social interactions to be predominant factors in eliciting the various emotions (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Social relationships and social interactions play an important role in joy, sadness, and anger, and even fear. These findings easily permit us to foresee the intervention of language (of 'verbality') in the antecedent situation. In order to specify the form of this verbalisation, we quantified its presence in two samples, the Spanish and the French subjects.

Speech was categorised by:

- the 'announcement of events': written or oral (informative speech)
- the 'means of interaction' (discussion): written or oral (interactive speech)

From this general analysis we found that, in general, the importance of speech in the production of emotion was, in decreasing order, as follows: anger; joy; sadness; fear. The basis for this highly significant effect is the difference between fear and the other three emotions in that there was a lack of the presence of others in situations which gave rise to fear.

Speech and the expression of emotions

The data concerning the use of speech in the expression of emotions come mainly from responses to the question: 'What did you say?' The reading of these responses readily shows that they are of three types:

- no response, 'nothing' or inner speech
- exclamations
- longer sentences or elements of discussion

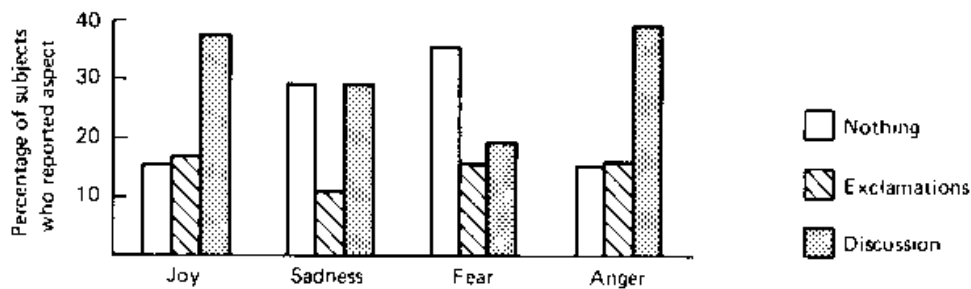


Figure 8.1 Types of verbalisation across the emotions

Table 8.1 *Percentage of verbal expression by emotion in each country*

Emotion	Country							
	Belgium	France	Great Britain	Israel	Italy	Spain	Switzerland	West Germany
Joy	71	73	82	63	77	66	79	88
Sadness	63	46	68	46	52	42	59	76
Fear	59	61	53	45	46	35	45	45
Anger	73	84	83	71	74	74	83	76
Total	67	66	72	56	62	54	67	71

This categorisation allowed us to establish the type of speech used for each emotion (see Figure 8.1). As can be seen from the figure, two groups of emotions emerge: those where 'discussions' are numerous and the absence of speech rare ('talkative' emotions), these being joy and anger; and those in which the absence of speech is frequent and discussions are less numerous ('silent' emotions), these being first fear, and then sadness.

There were highly significant country differences among these variables, as can be seen in Table 8.1. Subjects from Spain and Israel clearly tended to be 'silent' during emotional situations, compared with those from countries such as Great Britain and West Germany, who tended toward the verbal expression of emotions.

Verbalisation is linked to the presence of others in the antecedent situation, but, in addition, a highly significant result shows that subjects reported that they spoke more in the presence of relatives or friends than in the presence of unfamiliar others, except in the case of anger, where familiarity is irrelevant. This analysis can be supplemented by a more qualitative survey of the form and content of responses.

- (a) '*Nothing*' responses. There may be two reasons for these. First, that the emotional *vécu* and the reactive pattern block verbal enunciation. This is the mechanism prevailing in both sadness and fear. The

second reason is linked to the first. It is evident that 'lonely' emotions predispose little to verbal reactions. This is the case for a number of situations with respect to sadness, and numerous situations with respect to fear. In the latter case, moreover, the high number of 'no response' replies seems to correspond largely to the inadequacy of the question: 'What did you say?' with respect to the situation described, where there was no reason to say anything in the absence of an interlocutor.

- (b) *Exclamations*. This category was defined as 'exclamation', 'affect', 'word', 'humming', or 'vocal-emblems' (see Scherer, 1977). Although exclamations and interjections may, by definition, be expressive of emotion, an exhaustive analysis of the responses reveals other possibilities. For example, calling another person: 'help!'; categorical commands: 'stop!', 'go!'. These exclamations of a relational value have both an 'operative' and an 'expressive' value. Added to this must be the laudatory exclamations such as 'Bravo!', or the aggressive ones such as various types of insults.

There are, therefore, 'expressive' exclamations and 'relational' exclamations. Moreover, the fact that 'word' is included in the category of exclamations and 'complete expressions' in the category of 'discussion' is also worthy of comment when, as we have just mentioned, certain 'words' have non-expressive functions and certain 'complete expressions' are, on the contrary, equivalent to expressive exclamations: 'It is impossible', 'It is wonderful', 'How stupid I am'.

Taking these different observations into account, it seems that 'expressive exclamations' are frequent, above all in joy and fear, pejorative 'relational exclamations' are frequent in anger, and operative 'relational exclamations' are frequent in fear.

- (c) *Discussions* (sentences, complete expressions, discussion). These obviously include responses of several kinds. For example, speech can act as a means of 'emotional discharge', in that the subject feels the need to speak; this is typically the case in anger, where the aggressive discharge is often not controllable. But there are also other forms of discharge, for example exchanges which tend to make the other person share an emotional state. This is often the case in joy and sometimes in sadness.

8.3 The regulation and control of speech

In our questionnaire, questions were first asked about antecedents, then about reactions, and finally about control. In relation to control, two aspects were considered: (a) the intensity and method of control of verbal reactions;

and (b) the intensity and method of control of non-verbal reactions. However, this general concept of regulation and control implies a theoretical simplification containing ambiguities, since the regulation becomes apparent simultaneously at both an intra-individual and an inter-individual level (individual homeostasis and social homeostasis).

We have already seen that emotional reactions, for example those we have called 'expressive reactions of discharge', may play a role in individual homeostasis. And it appeared clearly in the responses, either to the question 'What did you say?' or more often, to questions on control, that these were clearly conditioned by social conventions and are therefore linked to inter-individual homeostasis. It seems evident that both intra-individual and inter-individual regulations are closely intertwined and that responses to the question 'What did you say?' are a consequence both of one and of the other.

In addition, in these processes, the verbal activity may be considered in two ways: *either as the object of regulation*, this being the sense of the question on the control of speech, or as an *instrument of regulation*, the subject using, for example, the speech activity to reduce bodily tension or to conceal his or her feelings. It is therefore advisable to study the control of speech and speech as an instrument of control successively.

The control of verbalisation

The level of control of verbalisation was reported by subjects on a scale from 0 to 9 in response to the question 'How did you try to control what you said?' The proportions of subjects in each sample reporting high control of verbalisation (scale values 6–9) for each emotion are shown in Table 8.2. For the responses on this scale we found highly significant differences between the emotions. The least controlled emotion was joy and the most controlled was anger, with fear and sadness in an intermediate position.

An examination of the degree of interaction shows a relationship with the social nature of the situation. There was a highly significant increase in the control of verbalisation in proportion to the number of persons involved in the situation, and, moreover, control increased very significantly with the familiarity of others present, especially in sadness and anger.

As might be expected, efforts to control verbalisation increased with the importance of the emotional verbal expression, especially in the case of anger, which proved to be both the most 'talkative' emotion and the most difficult to control. Finally, it is interesting to note that these findings also apply to the control of non-verbal manifestations and that the control of verbal expression and the control of non-verbal expression correlate positively, correlation coefficients for all subjects ($N = 779$) being as follows: 0.60 for joy, 0.51 for sadness, 0.52 for fear and 0.47 for anger.

Table 8.2. Percentage of subjects reporting high verbal control (scale values 6-9) by emotion in each country

Emotion	Country							
	Belgium	France	Great Britain	Israel	Italy	Spain	Switzerland	West Germany
Joy	28	28	8	27	25	17	15	16
Sadness	53	53	52	45	45	39	45	36
Fear	41	55	55	49	48	45	50	48
Anger	56	56	45	45	42	41	37	43
Total	45	48	40	42	40	35	37	36

We also cross-tabulated this variable by country, finding significant differences. It can be noted that subjects in France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Switzerland had a lower control of verbalisation during emotions than subjects in Belgium, Israel, and West Germany (see Table 8.2).

The study of the responses given to the question 'What did you do to control what you said?' allowed us to study the different mechanisms involved in the control of speech. In order to identify these mechanisms, a preliminary qualitative study was carried out on 50 questionnaires from the French sample, using the following categories:

- (a) *Repression*. Control of speech is achieved by an attempt at control over the voice, syntax, or semantics, that is as the subjects said: 'to say as little as possible', 'to explain calmly', 'to attenuate the sound of my voice more and more', 'to say the minimum number of words', 'to try not to be rude', 'not to use words connected with nervousness', 'not to speak in too abrupt a manner'. Examples of body repression such as: 'I held back my tears', 'I grit my teeth tightly', may appear here but they were generally more often quoted for control of the non-verbal manifestations. Repression was reported in 40% of the cases of anger, 10% of the cases of sadness, 5% of the cases of joy, and 4% of the cases of fear.
- (b) *Diversion*. Under this term we have grouped the mechanisms of the diversion of speech, the diversion of mental activity and the diversion of bodily activity. Examples are: 'I spoke of something else', 'I became immersed in reading', and 'I went to the cinema'. The cognitive activity seems evident to us: subjects focus their attention on what they do, or 'think about themselves'. These mechanisms were reported as follows: in 10% of the cases of sadness, in 8% of the cases of anger, and in 2% of the cases of joy.

- (c) *A group of categories that were reported with a frequency of less than 5%.*
 avoidance and flight: 'I left', 'I tried not to look at him';
 'masking' or inversion of affect: 'I hid my feelings'; in fear and
 anger: 'I smiled', 'I joked', 'I tried to adopt an indifferent attitude';
 neutralisation by convention: sheltering behind trivialities of conver-
 sation, acknowledgment, congratulations, condolences;
 physiological activity: drinking, holding one's breath; discharge:
 intense word activity;
 relationship with the other person: sharing feelings, looking for
 sympathy, asking for help.

Verbalisation as an instrument of control

As seen in the previous section, the control of verbalisation is part of a more general control of emotion, but, in addition, it seems that verbalisation may also be used as an instrument of control. This appeared particularly in the responses to the question: 'What did you do to control your non-verbal reactions?'

An examination of the responses led us to two conclusions:

- (a) The mechanisms of control involved were the same as those for the control of verbalisation (repression, deviation, etc.), but, obviously, with a greater bodily participation 'I shut my fists tightly', 'I contracted my muscles', 'I held back my tears', 'I thought of something else', etc.
 (b) Speech was referred to in the same terms as for the control of verbalisation.

These considerations encouraged us to study the distribution of speech activity across the emotions so that we might distinguish the emotions more precisely with respect to the type of mechanisms of speech used. We did this in accordance with a simplified classification, 'Repression of speech' and 'Regulation by speech' (in the latter term we included diversion, discharge, calling the other person, etc.). For this preliminary attempt we used questionnaires from the Spanish sample only. The results are shown in Table 8.3.

We have in these results a general confirmation of all the preceding statements. Joy and anger are 'talkative' emotions, but anger is more repressed. Sadness and fear are less talkative. Subjects use repression in sadness in particular. We also see that repression via verbalisation is the most commonly used mechanism of control. The relation between the regulation of speech and physiological symptoms still remains to be discussed.

The hypothesis of 'verbo-viscero-motor' organisation suggests, in effect, that speech, like motor activity, plays a regulating role in the emotional state and, therefore, that it would be logical to find an inverse relation between the intensity of physiological symptoms and the degree of verbal activity.

Table 8.3. Percentages for two types of speech control strategies (Spanish sample only)

	Percentage by emotion ^a		Percentage of subjects ^b		
	Speech indicating regulation	Speech indicating repression	Speech indicating regulation	Speech indicating repression	Not codable as repression or regulation
Joy	54	46	72	10	78
Sadness	28	72	6	16	78
Fear	35	65	6	12	82
Anger	35	65	14	25	61

^a Percentages of descriptions in Spanish sample, where verbalisations could be classified as indicating either 'regulation' or 'repression'.

^b Percentages with additional category, 'no speech', mentioned.

But it was difficult to treat this aspect in the questionnaire used since the physiological symptoms were mentioned too irregularly, making the correlation between various control mechanisms virtually impossible. The reader is referred to Chapter 6, where some relevant findings are presented.

8.4 Metaverbalisation

Those completing the questionnaire also had to recall memories of the emotional situation through which they lived, and had to construct a verbal written report of this representation (Metaverbalisation). It is possible that they had to control the affective state evoked by these representations and that this would be reflected in the form of the written text.

We dealt with metaverbalisation in its quantitative aspect, comparing verbal production in some of the countries (France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, and West Germany) and across the emotions using the following two questions:

- (a) What happened? ('antecedents')
- (b) What did you say?

Analysis of variance demonstrates differences in the number of words used in the replies. For the first question (a) we found highly significant differences of 'wordiness' among the countries. In decreasing order these were: West Germany; France and Great Britain; Italy; Spain. Differences between the emotions were not significant in this case. For the second question (b), we again found highly significant differences of 'wordiness' among the countries, in the following order: West Germany; Great Britain;

Italy; France and Spain. We also found significant differences for the emotions in the following order: anger; joy and sadness; fear.

The interpretation of these results is difficult, because several factors are involved. The country differences in the description of antecedents may result from the nature of language itself (it is known that certain languages are more concise and economical in the use of words than others), and it may also involve a greater ease of written expression in certain countries. The fact seems to be that the 'Anglo-Saxon' speaking countries are more verbose than the Latin countries which, however, have the reputation of being more talkative. As far as the differences among emotions are concerned, the fact that anger occurs in the first place may be the result of the fact that anger leads to the most verbalisation, since it is the most 'talkative' emotion.

Finally, we think it worthwhile to underline the interest, together with the quantitative and general studies, of qualitative studies of particular cases which, in our opinion, allow an exceptional understanding of the intricacy and articulation of the various factors and mechanisms described above. We shall take two examples.

Example 1 (Subject 309, French. Emotion: Fear)

- Where did the situation occur? 'In an airplane.'
- How long ago was it? '2 months ago.'
- Who was involved? 'A friend of mine and I.'
- What exactly happened? 'I am never calm when travelling by plane. That flight was in an extra plane chartered by Air-Inter. The aircraft was old and looked awful, both inside and out. I did not move from my seat throughout the whole flight.'
- How long did the feeling last? 'The duration of the flight (1 hr).'
- How did the situation end? 'After a landing during which I was terribly afraid.'
- In your opinion, what words would best describe your emotion? 'Irrational panic.'
- What did you say? 'I felt stupid at having taken the plane knowing my reactions.'
- What were your bodily reactions? 'Intense nervousness; "torture" to hold my friend's hand which I did during almost all the flight; non-stop smoking; trying to shelter behind the reading of a newspaper.'
- What did you do to control what you said? 'Very little. I tried not to show my fear to passengers around me.'
- What did you do to control non-verbal reaction? 'I wasn't able to control it, or only at the beginning.'
- What would you do differently if you found yourself in such a situation again? 'I would avoid finding myself in such a situation

again: but everytime I take a plane I promise not to do it any more.
And I do it again!

This example clearly shows the overlapping of factors:

an intellectual (cognitive) defence against fear, which is reflected not at a verbalisation level but at a metaverbalisation level – it is ‘irrational’ and ‘stupid’ to be afraid to take a plane;

reasonings of justification (which attenuate for *the reader* the claimed stupidity, since, anyway, the subject is never calm in a plane) – the plane is old and its inside and outside are in a deplorable condition;

control reactions – the utilisation of the relationship with the other person (the friend plays a counterphobic role: ‘torture to hold his hand’), the distraction of attention (the reading of a newspaper), the diversion of activity (non-stop smoking), repression (disguising oneself with respect to the persons nearby);

humour at the metaverbalisation level (since it is manifestly for the reader’s benefit) – ‘I promise not to do it any more...and I do it again!’

Example 2 (Subject 311, French. Emotion: Anger)

- Where did the situation occur? ‘At the University.’
- How long ago was it? ‘A week ago.’
- Who was involved? ‘The professor and I.’
- What exactly happened? ‘I passed my written exam. It turned out that I had already done that exercise when going over the different subjects. Well, I found the correct result doing the intermediate calculations wrong. The professor then thought I had copied. She marked it on my copy and was very unpleasant to me during the last class, and at the end she gave me the copies back.’
- How long did the feeling last? ‘Until the following day.’
- How did the situation end? ‘Next morning I went to see her to explain that I remembered the result (it was not cheating!) and that I had made a mistake in good faith, so to speak, in the calculations. She was very cold towards me. I hope she realises the unfairness of her reaction.’
- In your opinion, what words would best describe your emotion? ‘Rage, a sense of unfairness, lack of understanding, hasty judgment.’
- What did you say? ‘I explained the situation. I said it was extremely painful for me to be accused of something for which I was not to blame.’
- What were your bodily reactions? ‘The moment I saw her insinuations as to my copying I understood her frankly disagreeable attitude in class. I felt like shouting, screaming at her, hitting out wildly. (I didn’t do so. I was in the playground then!)’
- What did you do to control what you said? ‘I spoke about it to my friend; I thought of what I would say to the professor the next morning.’

- What did you do to control your non-verbal reaction? 'I wanted to shout but I knew I was able to keep a hold on myself! Moreover, thinking of an explanation for the next morning relieved my feelings.'
- What would you do differently? 'I would do the same.'

The following points emerge from the example:

- the presence of verbalisation at all levels – at the level of antecedents (conflict with the professor), and with one's friend (search for relationship and social sympathy);
- defences are of a cognitive kind (reasonings, justification, anticipation of behaviour), of a relational kind (relationship with one's friend) and use discharge (speaking with my friend, relieving my feelings);
- these mechanisms are also present at the level of metaverbalisation (for the reader's benefit) – repeated details and reasonings to justify himself, and using the reader as a witness: 'It is not cheating!', 'I can keep a hold on myself', etc.

8.5 Conclusions

The study of the antecedents (see Chapters 5 and 11) has shown the importance of social and interactive factors in producing an emotion and the importance of language in emotional episodes. Once the emotion has been released, speech may occur. In addition there may occur various functions which it is difficult, and in fact artefactual to separate into the categories 'expression' and 'control', but which would seem to be more adequately described in terms of mechanisms of adaptation (individual homeostatic: regulation of the emotional experience; social homeostatic: regulation of the experience and control of emotional reactions at the same time). Among these mechanisms we should consider in particular:

- discharge mechanisms – speaking a lot, loudly, fast, etc;
- repression mechanisms – trying to control one's voice, speech, thinking;
- cognitive mechanisms – speaking with close attention and concentrating on verbal elaboration, quite often with one's attention and speech distracted and directed toward other objects;
- relational mechanisms – pragmatic: looking for help; appropriate or empathic action: using a witness, being understood, receiving support, sharing one's mood.

There is no doubt, as we have seen, that these mechanisms vary with the emotion, with culture, and, within each culture, with the individual's verbo-viscero-motor organisation. Further specific research should be carried out along these lines.