

## The Language of Anger: The Words That Impact Behavior for English Speakers

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*Persons and societies must, then, be studied primarily in the imagination . . . I do not see how any one can hold that we know persons directly except as imaginative ideas in the mind . . . I do not mean merely that society must be studied by the imagination . . . but that the object of study is primarily an imaginative idea or group of ideas in the mind, that we have to imagine imaginations. [Cooley, C.H., *Human Nature and the Social Order*]*

### WHY MUST WE CONSIDER LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION?

As professionals in the field of education and human development, child care and early education personnel are confronted with challenges that demand high sensitivity and insight into the workings of human relationships. The work of linguists can provide these professionals with tools for managing human systems and more effectively conceptualizing the many opportunities and constraints that come with the choices we make around the use of specific language. Early childhood professionals engaged in the management of anger and conflict must be keenly aware of the impact that these choices have on the social organization of individual and collective behavior. They must first and foremost become reflective of the languages moderating perceptions and reasoning patterns. What follows in this article is a brief account of what cognitive linguistic research has to offer these professionals.

**Linguistic mappings of social worlds.** Our language of emotion has not been left to chance; rather, it is highly organized and systematically tied to our development as social persons. The consistencies we observe in our emotional lives are not the result of pure genetic determination or brute observation, but rather reflect our personal learning histories. The language of emotion pervasive in all our relationships is rooted in life-long interactions between our biological and cultural heritages. It is for this reason that we must walk away from an approach to emotion that perceives it as following inevitable, inalterable developmental progressions beyond our influence.

We have a language of emotion precisely because it takes language to shape human interactions and human emotions in fundamental ways. The moment infants discover they can mirror their internal states through their vocalizations, our journey towards linguistic regulation of our inner life and our social systems begins. As development progresses, children become capable of reporting on their feelings, manipulating the feelings of others, and even engaging in complex forms of deception. A few years into this process, they will formulate complex "theories" of psychological events that underpin the regulation of their emotions and grounds their relationships to other persons on systematic understandings of what motivates them. Apprehension of the emotional lives of others effectively ends childhood egocentricity and inaugurates a form of social engagement without parallel in the natural world.

However, accidental and normative discoveries children make do not account for all we know about emotions. Reviews of ethnographic case studies reveal that categories of emotion do not emerge in all human communities in exactly the same ways (Lutz, 1994; Wierzbicka, 1993, 1999), and that emotion categories we take for granted as speakers of English may be "missing" in other language systems. We also find the languages of non-English speakers are often stocked with lexical references that have no counterparts in our own language, suggesting a somewhat different focus and orientation of emotion work in those communities. This cultural shaping of



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categorical systems appears to be in evidence in a great many areas of human thinking; most of our categorical systems follow this path toward increasing, instrumental diversification, and in most cases cultural systems play a pivotal role in their ultimate shape and capacity (Zerubavel, 1993, 1999).

**Socialization and social construction of emotions.** Ordinarily, emotions and the behavior systems organized and regulated by these emotions are intuitively understood by most as being in need of little support from language. We typically perceive and experience emotions as occurring prior to explicit, conscious thought. It is arguable, however, that this cultural model of emotions is in fact inaccurate. Just as astronomers revealed our perceptions had deceived us regarding the ordering of the universe, cognitive scientists are paving the way to a new understanding of the relationship of language to our internal life and our emotions. Intuition notwithstanding, now it seems clear that our planet is not stationary, and likewise, we are discovering the many ways in which our emotions are not immune to symbolic activity, even when they are perceived as unfolding prior to intentional actions.

**Speaking and thinking as social-cultural artifacts.** Human beings typically work collaboratively by means of a set of very powerful tools for representation and communication. Even behavior that is seemingly spontaneous typically arises “developmentally” from a process whereby “other-regulated” individual behavior is internalized and becomes “self-regulated,” often losing its verbal scaffold along this developmental path (Vygotsky, 1986; see also Harre, 1986, 1998). We are all the executors of a multitude of behaviors (both overt and private) that were initially patterned and sustained by others in our social world and only subsequently “transferred” to our sphere of personal control (Rogoff, 1991, 2002), in the interest of efficient “execution.” Notwithstanding personal and idiosyncratic forms pervasive in our systems of sense-making and communication, our behavior and personality systems remain social constructions — in the sense that they would not have emerged as they did and would not have the forms they do without social support and facilitation. With some regularity both overt behavior and private — not directly observable — individual processes are maintained and held accountable to the social systems from which they originate (Shotter, 1985, 1993, 1994).

## A COGNITIVE MODEL OF HUMAN EMOTIONS

One rubric that has helped us think about the socialization of emotions is the “idealized cognitive model,” developed

largely by George Lakoff (1987, 1993, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Cognitive models represent what typically happens when emotions occur, beginning to end, encompassing elements such as the precursors, the expression, and the consequences of emotion episodes. They are “idealized” in the sense that they embody abstract expectations and conceptual approximations based partly on a merging of numerous actual experiences with culturally transmitted beliefs. Cognitive models are not “flashbacks” or recollections. They are conceptualizations based on both, actual experience and the creative, instrumental “fictions” of our belief systems.

**Linguistic representation of emotions.** The cognitive models of emotions considered in this essay are representations of that range of variations that “English-communication” will allow and support. They are the result of “lexical” analysis of the English language. These models do not describe the range of expectations operating in other linguistic and cultural communities. Speakers of Spanish or Russian may differ from English speakers in their expectations and conceptualizations, partly because the symbolic framework they draw on differs from that available to speakers of English. However, a core of expectations seems to be assured by universal experiences upon which all human beings must reflect. In sum, think of cognitive models of emotion as an inventory of events that typically occur in a sequence of predictable structure, to which we attach labels such as “anger,” “fear,” “love.” Cognitive modeling reflects not just universal constants, but also culturally specific experiences and language practices.

**The structure of emotions.** Cognitive models of emotions represent a set of structural-temporal expectations that are fundamentally important. When we represent anger, for instance, the “offense” must occur very close to the onset of the emotion episode, or it does not make sense to most English speakers. The child that is hit becomes angry only after he’s been hit, not before. This is because the structural assumptions of our cognitive models of anger demand that our understanding follow that sequence: the “trigger” comes first and the “resulting” emotion follows closely in time. The structure of our cognitive model “enforces” a structure for emotion episodes, partly because that structure is more a reflection of what we actually feel and what actually happens, within some very clearly specified time frame. The design of our body and the structure of our social interactions are at the root of our “structural” reconstructions of the emotion event, and these tend to be widely shared across cultures. Cultural assumptions are typically tightly wrapped around the event structure of emotion episodes. The most cursory observations of emotion

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episodes provide ample, robust support to these structural expectations. However, once emotion episodes occur, considerations of “structure” may in most cases fall into the background and give way to a central focus on the meaning and content of the event. This is because what is “controversial” rises to the surface and “outshines” other aspects of the event.

**The semantics of emotion.** The “content” of our cognitive models of emotion is not so constrained by “reality,” as is largely the case with the structure the cognitive model proposes. The meaning or significance of emotion episodes reflects more closely the cultural framework within which the account of emotion events is produced. In large part, that content is comprised of a set of culturally transmitted metaphors that provide partial descriptions of narrow aspects or dimensions of emotions. Metaphors allow us to define what we have difficulty handling “conceptually” by comparing what we are trying to comprehend — anger and its behavior — to something we understand to a greater degree. When we feel and behave angrily, the complexity that arises can be perplexing even to our brightest scientific minds. However, simple metaphors provide “conceptual” access to that complexity, and offer a rational basis for informed personal and collective action.

**Metaphors and our sense of responsibility.** Immediately upon witnessing an emotion episode, individuals may report the exact order in which events transpired. Rarely, direct observation will cause disagreement, provided that all informants had equal access to the events as they took place. However, efforts to define the meaning of what was observed typically give rise to controversy and require some considerable arbitration — in a court of law, for instance, where such accounts are of great consequences. The difficulties we encounter in our efforts to personally and collectively tackle the definition of emotion events require that we devise “cultural instruments” capable of reducing that complexity to tractable form. In our everyday lives, metaphors provide the means whereby these complexities are managed with considerable success. I can describe my anger as an “explosion” and the results of my angry actions as “damages” to surrounding “things” or people. This Anger-as-Explosion metaphor suggests that my angry actions are rooted in a powerful release of energy that does not reflect faithfully my intentions, values, or goals. This metaphor helps to communicate the fact that the self feels compelled to act and feels (or wants to present itself) somewhat out of control. We will see below that metaphors accounting for degrees of responsibility are important elements of our accounting systems of anger episodes.

**Cultural bias in cognitive models.** Because the semantic “contents” of our model are more susceptible to culturally specific depictions, they are the source of bias and interpersonal politics. The content of our model also lends itself to deception. This means the content of our cognitive models can be more “contested” than is the event structure that our model describes. If the proposed structure of the emotion episode is not “right” — does not fit experience — the account is dismissed without hesitation, but more negotiation is needed to settle the question of appropriate — “metaphorical” — accounts.

## OUR CONCEPTION OF ANGER AS ANGLO-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

The following is a schematic presentation of the prototypical cognitive model of anger in most English speaking communities. The structure of the model reflects the unfolding of an emotion over time, as supported by our everyday observations. This cognitive model also results from the use of a multiplicity of “cultural” metaphors. We find it useful to present the model’s structural assumptions separately from the model’s metaphorical content. The reader should also note that investigators differ somewhat in their descriptions of our cognitive models of anger. I will provide here a description prepared by Professor Zoltan Kovecses, one of the field’s leading scientists. The reader is alerted to the fact that this is but one of a number of possible presentations.

**Our Prototype of Anger.** The prototypical model contains most of our fundamental expectations and assumptions about anger. However, we should note that non-prototypical models do also inform the members of the culture. Non-prototypicality results from the systematic violation of specific features of the prototypical model. It takes both prototypical and non-prototypical models operating within a community of language users to provide a sound foundation for human development and community life. Our systems of categorization would not function in the real world were it not for our capacity to extend prototypical expectations through non-prototypical concessions.

## PROTOTYPE SCENARIO OF ANGER

### Stage 1. Offending event

- Involves at least two individuals
- One individual is a wrongdoer
- One individual is innocent
- Wrongdoer takes intentional actions that offend the innocent

- Actions taken by wrongdoer “trigger” anger in the innocent
- Resulting anger varies in its intensity and that intensity should correspond to the seriousness of the offense
- The innocent is responsible for taking actions of retribution

### State 2. Anger

- Physiological changes (e.g., heat, pressure, agitation) in the innocent person “mirrors” the intensity of anger and the severity of the offense
- Intensity of anger compels innocent to respond to offense
- Retribution is dangerous and socially undesirable
- Retribution is detrimental to the innocent’s well being
- Innocent individual must exert control proportionate to the intensity of anger and protect self and others
- Loss of control may result in damages to self and others

### Stage 3. Attempt at control

- Innocent individual attempts to control anger

### Stage 4. Loss of control

- Individuals have a tolerance level for anger
- When anger surpasses that tolerance, the individual loses control and anger is expressed
- Retribution for offenses committed by wrongdoer follows from this loss of control
- The innocent individual responding through retributive actions is compelled to action and is not responsible for his behavior

### State 5. Act of retribution

- Innocent individual performs act of retribution
- Wrongdoer is the target of this retribution
- Offense, anger, and retribution, all must be proportionate
- Innocent introduces retribution in proportion to the intensity of anger and the severity of the offense
- When the value of the offense, the anger, and the retribution are made to be equal by the addition of retribution, balance is restored and they all drop to “zero”
- Balance ends anger episode, removes the offense, and eliminates the need for retribution

### Non-prototypical Scenarios resulting from violations to our prototype

- Anger that does not end with retribution, but is “insatiable”
- Anger that is frustrated, because retribution is not possible
- Anger that is “re-directed” and inflicted on non-causal object
- Anger that is “exaggerated,” where retribution or response exceeds cause
- Anger that is “controlled” or “cold,” where reason is not impaired to any extent

- Anger that is “constructive,” and yields desirable results
- Anger that is “prematurely terminated,” dissipated by unrelated factors before retribution
- Anger that “ends spontaneously,” for reasons unknown, without retribution
- Anger that is “successfully suppressed,” perhaps preventing retribution
- Anger with “controlled reduction,” where anger disappears before retribution ends
- Anger that “explodes immediately,” without attempt at control before retribution
- Anger that “burns slowly,” and lasts longer than expected
- Anger that is “nursed,” kept at slow burn over time until retribution can be carried out
- Anger that is caused “indirectly,” not by the offender’s actions, but by some other result

All these scenarios indicate selective violations of one or more conditions specified in the prototypical model. They are deviations from the expectations supported by the prototypical cognitive model. Systematic violations of the conditions — expectations — of the prototype do not invalidate the application of the category to these “exceptional” instances. Examining the metaphorical systems from which this model derives will help us to understand why and how these violations are possible without significant disturbances in our ability to understand that these situations are related to one another — categorically.

## SOME METAPHORICAL PILLARS FOR THE ANGER PROTOTYPE

Metaphors allow us to reduce the complexity of anger to some manageable form. Usually, some domain of understanding in which there is greater clarity (the source domain) provides a simplifying “picture” which can be used to account for the much more complex domain (the target domain) of an emotion like anger. The use of metaphor also greatly accelerates the development of knowledge, since it allows us to transfer our understanding through links between different domains. Without these linkages, each domain would require that we acquire information from some “point zero,” even when there is overlap in the knowledge that applies to these domains.

**Metonymy and communication.** A form of metaphor known as metonymy is key to our ability to detect, express, and conceal anger. In metonymy, a part of some object comes to symbolize the whole of the object, and vice versa. When we refer to an athlete by the country that he represents, in the Olympic

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Games for instance, we are using a metonymy: “. . . the United States made it to the finish line first.” Metonymy allows us to create a code whereby we can “see” and “convey” anger. In the realm of emotion the following metonymies are prominent within the Anger cognitive model.

Anger is Body Heat (e.g., she is a hothead.)

Anger is Internal Pressure (e.g., he almost burst a blood vessel.)

Anger is Redness (e.g., she got red with anger.)

Anger is Agitation (e.g., he was hopping mad.)

Anger is Interference with perception (e.g., she was blind with rage.)

The “Anger is Heat” metaphor has two forms, one that refers to fluids and another that refers to solids. The fluid version of the metaphor is the most elaborated version in our cognitive model of anger.

Anger is Hot Fluid (e.g., he was filled with anger.);

(e.g., simmer down, you’re reaching a boiling point!)

Anger is Solid Heat (e.g., she was on fire.)

The fluid version also codes for duration and intensity of anger, as when we use “simmer” to indicate a low boil or “stew” to indicate when we hold on to anger for a long period of time. When anger subsides, the fluid is said to be “cool” and “calm.” “Calm” here refers to the fact that a hot fluid is often in observable motion — boiling.

A major supporting metaphor for the “Anger is Heat” is the “Body is a Container” metaphor, which allows us to represent the self — or body — as having “contents.” The “Anger is Fluid in the Body” metaphor is an instance of this. Emotion is but one of the many contents which can be represented as contained by the body — or self. Note also that “overarching” metaphors can lead to more specific ones, as in the previous example. This yields great coherence in our conceptual systems and remarkable productivity.

**Metaphorical entailments.** Metaphorical entailments are fundamental to the metaphorical process; it is the result of linking two concepts together (e.g., fire and anger). Entailments allow what we know about one concept (the source domain) to inform what we believe about another concept (the target domain), as when we apply our understanding of heat to our understanding of anger. Entailments are always present when metaphor is used, even when one of the domains is “concrete” or “non-metaphorical,” as in the case of fire.

When we link the “Anger is Hot Fluid” to the “Body is a Container” metaphor, we find the following entailments to be comprehensible to speakers of English. We “visualize” hot fluid rising just as anger rises; this is a metaphorical entailment. The angrier we become, the higher the hot fluid rises in the container, in perfect correlation (e.g., I felt a towering rage inside of me). Furthermore, just as heat applied to fluid generates steam and pressure on the walls of the container, application of the “Anger is Hot Fluid” metaphor means that the build-up of anger causes pressure in the body to rise (e.g., he was bursting with anger and could barely keep it in). And since hot, boiling fluid generates bubbles that burst and make noise, causing the container to “rattle,” applying the Anger is Hot Fluid metaphor means that the angry person is seen as “agitated” (e.g., she was shaking with anger). And just as pressure mounts inside a container with hot fluid and threatens to cause the container to explode, the angry person is said to “vent” precisely to prevent some destructive “burst” of anger. Exploding objects set fragments in motion that can strike surrounding objects and inflict damages on those objects; an angry person that does not vent or contain anger may hurt persons and damage objects in their context (e.g., she hit the ceiling and went through the roof). When a person “explodes” what is inside come out (e.g., he had a cow). Metaphorical entailments give us a system of understanding that is productive and coherent; a superb tool for increasing our understanding of complex subjects.

Because what we “know” through one metaphor can trigger other logically connected concepts, application of one metaphor can lead to the creation of other metaphors. Agitation, for instance, present in hot fluids, transferred to the “angry” persons concept, can generate an association with agitation in an insane person. Hence, an agitated person that is angry to some excessive degree can be said to be “insane” (e.g., when he gets angry, he goes bonkers, and becomes a madman).

The cultural assumption that anger is a negative emotion leads us to “divorce” ourselves from our anger or from the results of our “angry” actions. The “Anger is an Opponent” metaphor — an instance of “personification” — helps us to make sense of the “struggle” to keep our anger in its “place” and to prevent its “unfettered” manifestation. When we fail in our efforts to “contain” and “wrestle down” our anger, this metaphor allows us to dissociate ourselves from the results of “externalized” anger and to claim that we lost control — maybe even our sanity — and are not responsible for our angry actions and resulting damages. Consider the following language: “It

seemed he had finally come to grips with his anger, but somehow he lost control and was overcome by it in the end.” The “Anger as Opponent” metaphor and “Anger as Insanity” metaphor, when joined, can lead to the “Anger is a Beast Inside a Person” — an instance of “animalization.” This metaphor suggests that anger “preys” on persons and destroys the humanity of an individual. Persons that have fallen prey to anger are dangerous to others around them (e.g., she unleashed her anger and almost bit my head off). The reader will recognize that these metaphors are fundamental to cases of “insanity” in our legal system.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Anger is a negative force, with some exceptions. It should be clear from the language observed here that our cognitive model of anger is evaluative and gives anger a negative value. Anger is understood as a negative emotion because of the effects that our cognitive model “asserts” that it has on self and the community. The cognitive model demands that occurrences of anger be prevented or undone. Left without redress, anger will “mount” and ultimately destroy its host and possibly others around him or her. This is the “prototypical cognitive model” of anger, pervasive in communities of English speakers.

However, as we have already observed in some of our non-prototypical models, anger is, under special circumstances, understood as a positive or morally neutral force. Because we can create “non-prototypicality” in our systems of categorization, our conceptual systems are more coherent and flexible. This in turn leads to applications of the model to a great diversity of instances; we create classification systems that encompass all of our experiences within the economy of one coherent system. Owing to this human capacity for pliable categorization, penguins are birds that don’t fly, whales are mammals with fish-like anatomy and a life in the sea, and — to children mostly — socks are mittens (see also Zerubavel, 1993).

**Metaphor defines personal responsibility.** As we have seen, questions of responsibility are settled mostly through metaphorical definitions of events, rather than through structural-temporal descriptions of actual occurrences — we know the order in which things happened, but we typically disagree about how to “color” the events, how to describe them “contentfully.” Purely “object-oriented” and sequential language gives us only a notion of “causation.” Objectification and serial ordering are not enough to formulate a moral concept

like “responsibility — and in fact are used often to have the opposite effect, to de-moralize descriptions. What language we use to define personal agency matters a great deal and has an impact on results, consequences, and social and personal responses to the actions of others. The precision with which language and scenarios must be presented — and suppressed — in a court of law to make — or break — a case of presumed rage and temporary insanity stands as a quintessential instance of this principle. The outcome of the struggle over meaning by defendants and plaintiffs rests on the linguistic skills of a talented few and the chance recovery of whatever fragmentary evidence survives actual historical events.

**Metaphor that strengthens brings restrictions.** The uninitiated will find that, in a system of meaning that is heavily dependent on the use of metaphor, her access to the significance and value of social events and personal actions is difficult, and often impossible. This applies equally to children and “outsiders” — those not yet socialized into the culture. In relation to anger episodes, both children and cultural “outsiders” find that they understand “when” things happened; they just are not privy to “why” things “mean” what they mean to “bona fide” members of the cultural community. Why situations are marked by “anger” eludes them like a moving object in a darkened room, even when they understand their own actions can result in anger in others.

**Metaphor “extends” human development.** Cultural specificity of “content,” brought about by the use of metaphor, means that children and “outsiders” both progress slowly and painfully toward cultural mastery and social participation; they understand the “temporal” dimension of social situations long before they can define properly the “semantics” — significance — of human interactions. For this reason, children and outsiders are mired in difficulties while navigating the moral worlds of socialized cultural members. Social interactions do not just transpire in sequence; they are “colored” through metaphorical language that stems from the communication habits of specific communities.

**The economy of cultural time.** When we handle incidents of anger, in child care settings for example, we don’t have the luxury of waiting for insights that come from years of work by disciplinarians like neuroscientists and philosophers. Figurative language, such as metaphors and metonymies, help us to create a symbolic context in which constructive actions can be taken, sometimes even before some formal science can be produced and consulted. It is true that for individual participants in cultural communities this means a longer “learning curve”

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and longer stays at the periphery of communities. However, for society, these artifacts bring the processing and storage of remarkable “quantities” of information. Because our individual “inventive” insights are “locked” in such cultural artifacts as metaphors and cognitive models, conceptual sophistication achieved over time can be “retained” and “transmitted” across generations and cultural communities, relatively free from variations in individual capacities.

**The open society.** Cognitive models and metaphors do not give us knowledge that is “final,” “finished,” and “sacred.” Only some elements of our understanding are based on universal human experiences. Our constructions of a concept like “anger” go much further than anything “direct” observations could ever yield. Communities of speakers of a language and practitioners of cultures “create” notions and “collect” and “transmit” them to the “uninitiated” cultural apprentice. As creators, therefore, we need always be aware of the role we play in the production of understanding, and we must not allow the presence of our past solutions to derail our necessary and continuing journey towards more useful ways of understanding our reality.

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