What language does to feelings

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Abstract

This paper distinguishes various ways in which language can act on our affect or emotion experience. From the commonsensical consideration that sometimes we use language merely to report or describe our feelings, I move on to discuss how language can constitute, clarify, and enhance them, as well as induce novel and oft surprising experiences. I also consider the social impact of putting feelings into words, including the reciprocal influences between emotion experience and the public dissemination of emotion labels and descriptions, and how these influences depend on the power of labelling to make complex feelings visible and thus easily accessible. Finally, I address and reinterpret some psychological findings on the so-called "verbal overshadowing" effect.

What language does to feelings

1   Introduction

Language is an important tool for interpersonal communication, but not only. As Clark (1998; 2008) has argued, for example, language can be seen as a way of extending our minds into the world, a "scaffolding" that enhances our cognitive capabilities. In this paper I want to explore a further way in which language transforms our minds—in particular how it acts on our feelings, i.e. our "affect" or subjective experience of emotion.[1]

I shall not deny that language often merely reports, or describes, pre-existing specific feelings. I shall not deny either, however, that putting one's feelings into words often changes them, in ways that I will try to specify below. These two claims need not be mutually exclusive, and this paper does not aim at defending *one* particular view of the relationship between language and affectivity. Rather, the main goal of this paper is to identify and distinguish between *the many* ways in which language acts on our feelings.

To this purpose, I will draw on various different sources—from psychotherapy, to phenomenology, to cognitive and affective science, and more. In some cases, I will appeal to existing research to illustrate a specific way in which, in my view, language impacts on affect. In

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[1] In what follows I will use the terms "feelings", "affect", "affective experience" and "emotion experience" as synonyms, to refer to the phenomenological-experiential aspect of emotion (for a different use, and the argument that "feelings" is a broader experiential category than emotion experience, see Ratcliffe, 2008). I will use the term "emotion" to refer to a broader phenomenon that encompasses affect, as well as non-conscious subpersonal neural and bodily events, and/or expression and behaviour (my terminology is thus similar to the one proposed by Damasio, 2003).

other cases, when evidence is meagre, I will myself propose ways in which further research could be carried on to support a specific point.

The resulting account will be one in which language, from allowing the organism merely to report how it feels (section 2), is gradually shown as also individuating, clarifying and enhancing its affective experience, in its individual and social dimension. Specifically, I will discuss how language is used by the talking organism as a self-exploratory tool in order to make its feelings explicit and more precise (section 3), and also how it can serve as an "external device" (i.e. external to the skin) to induce novel and/or surprising emotion experiences (section 4). I then will move on to consider explicitly the social impact of putting feelings into words, in particular the "looping effects" at play between emotion experience and the public dissemination of emotion labels and descriptions (section 5), and how these looping effects may depend on the power of language easily to "condense" complex feelings into words, thus making certain experiences more visible than others (section 6). Finally, I will discuss the intriguing phenomenon of "verbal overshadowing", reinterpreting it in a way consistent with the view developed in the rest of the paper (section 7).

Before starting, a *caveat*. Language is of course a very complex and multi-layered phenomenon; by discussing what it does to our feelings, I will not always refer to the same elements of language. Sometimes I will say "language" to mean individual words (spoken or written); other times I will refer to actual attempts to label one's feelings, and/or to "bring them out" via verbalization; still other times I will refer to conversations between two or more people. Also, the distinctions I will draw below apply as much to individual words as to rhetoric forms (such as metonymies, metaphors, etc.).[2] I hope that this loose usage of the term "language" will not come across as too distracting or imprecise, and that it will be clear enough, in every single case, which features of language are being discussed.

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[2] See Kövecses (2000), for example, for many of the metaphors that English speakers (and not only) commonly use when talking about emotions.

2   Simply reporting

In the philosophy of art, some discussions of the relationship between expression (including linguistic expression) and emotion experience have defended the view that the latter is *constituted by* the former, suggesting at the same time that this view is *at odds* with the claim that feelings can be individuated before expression, and that language sometimes merely reports or describes them. For example, in *The Principles of Art* (1938), Collingwood wrote that 'until a man has expressed his emotion, he does not know what emotion it is. The act of expressing it is therefore an exploration of his own emotions. He is trying to find out what these emotions are' (p. 111). For Collingwood, expression individuates and clarifies, whereas description classifies, generalizes, and thus makes language frigid and inexpressive—which is why a genuine poet never names the emotions he is expressing (p. 112).[3] According to Sue Campbell (1997), expression, and recognition of the expressive gesture on the part of others, are necessary to individuate one's own feelings; '[n]either you nor I have any reason to believe that I desire to quit smoking, if I never, at any time, engage in any *action* that could be so interpreted' (p. 48).[4]

As I shall discuss in the next section, I think it is true that putting one's feelings into words can clarify what one is feeling, and thereby constitute and change one's experience. It seems however undeniable that, sometimes at least, what we do when we talk about our feelings is simply

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[3] Similar claims can be found in Dewey (1934, esp. chapter 4).

[4] Campbell (1997) notes that accusations such as "You are too emotional!" target someone's emotional nature or character, not just a "style" of expressing one's feelings; she argues that these types of accusation work this way precisely because we take one's expressive style as constitutive of one's feelings. Her point is that it would be hard to make sense of these accusations if feelings were taken to be individuated already before expression.

report something that we have been experiencing up until then, without thereby changing such experience. I can think of situations in which I felt jealous or annoyed at someone, for example, and decided to communicate my feelings only after some time and hesitation. Even Austin (1962), who otherwise famously emphasized the performative aspect of language, granted that 'since our emotions or wishes are not readily detectable by others, it is common to wish to inform others that we have them' (p. 78). Reports might be more or less accurate and sincere, depending on how much we want to "let out", as well as how apt to the task one's expressive resources are. In many cases language will be poorer than the experience—as when one communicates one's anger with a tame "I am annoyed at you" while repressing a more complex mix of rage and resentment, perhaps accumulated over time. The point of reporting one's experiences is often, of course, not simply to describe them, but also to induce a reaction in the listener, to explain or justify one's own behaviour, to release oneself from a burden, to clarify one's own feelings to oneself, etc. Yet these are further aims and/or consequences of talking about one's feelings, whose existence does not seem to me to undermine, or prove wrong, the commonsensical consideration that we often put into words experiences we had before expressing them.[5]

Recent findings on the brain and bodily bases of emotion experience are consistent with this view. Although it is still unclear how subpersonal neural and bodily processes relate to feelings, there is increasing consensus that at least some emotions can be differentiated at the brain and bodily level (see the discussions in Cacioppo et al., 2000; Levenson, 2002; Murphy et al., 2003; Phan et al., 2002), with studies showing the temporal unfolding of several dimensions of physiological arousal during emotional episodes (e.g. Alaoui-Ismaïli et al., 1997; Christie &

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[5] This point is not affected by Wittgenstein's (1953) private language argument. The point is not, in fact, that words like "anger" get their meaning from referring to some private internal feeling. I shall assume throughout that when I describe my experience as one of "anger" I am using a word whose meaning I have learnt through intersubjective interactions.

Friedman, 2004; Collet et al., 1997; Gomez & Danuser, 2007; Sinha & Parsons, 1996), and studies suggesting that feelings co-vary with brain and bodily changes (e.g. Damasio et al., 2000; Lane et al., 1997; Vianna et al., 2006; see also Damasio, 2003, for discussion and further references). Research by Panksepp (1998) suggests that a number of affects in all mammals are underpinned by specific patterns of neurochemical activity; both he and Damasio (2003) have argued that affect depends on the state of the whole organism, and that different feelings depend on different configurations of brain and bodily activity.

So, although we do not know exactly how emotion experience relates to organismic activity, and although we are certainly not aware of all the processes going on in our organism at any given time, the available evidence shows that our organism, and that of other animals, can realize various patterns of activity before (or without) linguistic expression. It also suggests (although more work needs to be done in this area) that these patterns co-vary with one's feelings, and so it does not contradict the claim that what I shall call *affectively specific* emotions (namely, emotions experienced as specific feelings) are possible prior to verbalization—and, therefore, that language can, and often does, merely describe these experiences.[6]

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[6] But see Rolls (2008) and LeDoux (2008) for the (admittedly speculative) suggestion that some "higher-order" symbol-manipulating capacity is necessary for lower-order emotional processes to be consciously experienced. These authors would not deny that emotions can be felt prior to or without language, but would deny that organisms that lack brain systems for the "syntactic manipulation of symbols" can have affective experiences. I do not intend to tackle the hard problem of consciousness here, so all I will say is that I would rather endorse a different, "enactive" view of consciousness according to which living organisms possess primordial, non-reflective forms of self-consciousness (such as "sentience") in virtue of their specific organizational structure (for extended discussion, see Thompson, 2007; see also Damasio, 1999, 2003).

3   Clarifying and constituting

As mentioned, however, I think it is true that in many cases putting one's feelings into words can *clarify* and thereby *change* them. Exactly in which sense, however, is not easy to say. Collingwood (1938) suggests that before expression there is only a 'crude emotion of the psychical level' (p. 274), namely an undistinguished urge or charge to express oneself; engaging in artistic expression (including verbal expression) constitutes a process of self-exploration that, as Collingwood puts it, transforms this initially undistinguished urge into a specific conscious experience.

    This point can be made clearer, I think, by saying that putting one's affect into words is a way of becoming aware of, or making explicit, a pre-reflectively lived experience. The latter is usually characterized a state of awareness that is not (yet) reflected upon, and that requires effort in order to be made explicit (see Petitmengin, 2006). On this interpretation, Collingwood's "crude emotion at the psychical level" is a pre-reflective feeling that artistic expression, including verbalization, helps to bring at the level of reflective awareness.

    One way to characterize a pre-reflective feeling is as an affective experience that permeates one's consciousness and that colours one's experience of the environment, but that is not congealed or fixed into a bounded (some would say "categorical") state of awareness. As Petitmengin (2007) points out, various notions have been proposed that gesture at this pre-reflective level of affectivity—such as Gendlin's "felt sense", Stern's "vitality affects", and Damasio's "background feelings". The first notion, discussed by Gendlin in the context of his so-called "focusing-oriented" psychotherapeutic method, refers to an experience of significance that is (still) unclear and felt somewhat "at the edge" (Gendlin, 1996). A felt sense, Gendlin suggests, is a *somatic* experience in that it is felt within the body; it is not however a specific bodily sensation (such as the perception of one's heartbeat), but rather a physical way of experiencing a situation (*op. cit.*, p. 19). A felt sense can be experienced in certain parts of the body (stomach, chest, throat) more than in others, but it

remains at the same time oriented towards the world. A felt sense is thus best characterized as experienced *with* or *through* the body (as in Ratcliffe, 2008). In the course of a focusing-oriented psychotherapy session, the therapist helps the client become increasingly aware of felt senses, and eventually taps on this growing awareness to help the client change her experiences and behaviour.

According to Stern (1998), the experiential world of infants involves traditional categorical feelings, a well as a variety of kinaesthetic-somatic-affective experiences, such as feelings of being touched in a certain way, feelings of movements around her, and feelings of affective attunement (or lack thereof) to the caregiver. Stern calls these feelings "vitality affects" and compares them to Damasio's (1999) "background feelings", namely feelings of being alive that constantly accompany all our experiences and that, on Damasio's theory of consciousness, depend on second-order neural processes constantly monitoring the activity of our body. Petitmengin (2007, p. 58) perceptively remarks that it is when we do not find the words to describe it, that this pre-reflective affective dimension of experience is most apparent; it is not reflective yet, but it is clearly present to one's awareness, as something meaningful but still nebulous.[7]

When a pre-reflective feeling becomes explicit or reflective by being put into words, it changes in the sense that it acquires precision (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 74). According to Depraz et al. (2003, p. 70), verbalization contributes its own 'quality of intuitive evidence' to an experience,

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[7] As Petitmengin (2007) emphasizes, pre-reflective lived experiences are fuzzy. This fuzziness should not be confused with meaninglessness or absence of what I call affective specificity. An emotion experience can in fact be pre-reflective and affectively specific at the same time. A state of depression, for example, need not be reflected upon in order to feel different from a state of elation; the difference, I would argue, lies in how one is pre-reflectively aware of the world and of oneself in it. As Gendlin (1996, p. 17) puts it, a felt sense, especially when just tapped, is unclear and nevertheless 'very definite', with 'its own unique quality'.

namely an 'expressive fulfilment or completion'. Importantly, verbalization has its own dynamics that influences the unfolding of the experience, in a process of mutual constraints: '[p]utting into words happens in successive layers which complete themselves, which bring forth complements, details, layers of meaning that each new reduction gives birth to' (Depraz et al., 2003, p. 71); '[e]xpression not only makes [experience] more precise, but makes it evolve, enabling us to discover new aspects of it' (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 74). As Gendlin (1996) puts it, when in the course of a psychotherapy session a client comes in touch with a felt sense, then a further step can be taken by letting this felt sense "move forward", namely expand and show the client the new possibilities of experiencing that it can engender.

Note that the discussion so far implies that the view that language (and expression more in general) is constitutive of one's affect is *not incompatible* with the one that feelings can be individuated before expression, and that language can merely report or describe them. Emotions, as argued in the previous section, can be affectively specific prior to expression (even Collingwood, 1938, at some point claims that '[t]he anger which I feel here and now, with a certain person, for a certain cause, is no doubt an instance of anger, and in describing it as anger one is telling the truth about it'; p. 112); putting feelings into words can, however, induce a movement from the pre-reflective to the reflective, which changes the experience and adds a sense of fulfilment. In this sense, verbalization is indeed *constitutive* of experience.

This "compatibilist" position is held also by Depraz et al. (2003). They first describe an early stage of formation of one's experiences that does not depend on verbalization, i.e. the "basic cycle of the reflecting act"; this cycle emerges from the interplay of two processes: the *epoché*, and "intuitive evidence". On their account, the *epoché* is accomplished in three phases (see *op. cit.*, p. 25): suspension of the 'realist's prejudice that what appears to you is truly the state of the world'; redirection of attention from the "exterior" to the "interior"; and '*letting-go or accepting* your experience'. Through these phases, the *epoché* allows various pre-reflective material to become

conscious, i.e. to move from a 'foggy', 'misty' and 'confused' (p. 37) state, to one in which more specific experiences come to awareness and are accepted as such by the subject. It is however via a process of "intuition" that what has come to awareness congeals or settles into a meaningful form (for details, see pp. 43-63). Intuition as they understand it 'has nothing to do with symbolic knowledge, be it logical or discursive' (p. 44). It is a dynamic process in which one's awareness strives to 'come forth' (p. 50), and can suddenly reach a feeling of completion.

Then they move on to discuss, among other things, the relationship between experience and expression, and verbalization in particular. The basic cycle of becoming aware can be accomplished without verbalization and 'simply lead to something that remains unsaid. We can easily imagine that you can live out this experience of reflection as complete in itself, that you cannot put it into words, or even that you have no intention of expressing it' (*op. cit*., p. 65). Yet this consideration does not prevent verbalization from being constitutive of experience. What verbalization does, as we saw, is contribute its own 'quality of intuitive evidence', i.e. a further sense of fulfilment, an 'expressive fulfilment or completion' (p. 70) this time, lived through as one puts one's experiences into words. Thus for Depraz et al. verbalization operates on experiences that are already formed at the level of the "basic cycle", such that from their reciprocal fine-tuning new, further individuated experiences can eventually emerge.

Linguistic expression can be constitutive of affect also in the sense that it is yet another form of bodily activity that contributes to the shaping of one's feelings. Speaking is (also) something a human organism does with her body, like dancing, gesturing, grimacing, screaming, singing, etc. If affect, as science suggests, depends in its nuances on the state and activity of the organism, then speaking can have an effect on it as any other such activity; and we can then agree with Campbell (1997, p. 50) that expression is the bodily articulation of one's feelings, and that '[t]he richer and more discriminating our ways of expression, the richer and more nuanced our affective lives'.

4   Enhancing

Becoming aware of one's feelings and labelling them can *enhance* them, in at least two senses. First, once we are clearer about what we feel, we may allow ourselves to experience our emotions in their fullness and indulge in them; we may let ourselves behave accordingly, thus enhancing them further.

Second, language can enhance affect also in the sense that it can "externally" induce experiences that would otherwise not occur. This is probably why many of us enjoy reading novels and poems. But writers themselves do sometimes try to let words "take the lead", so to say, in order to come up with something novel that will induce unexpected feelings. The Surrealists famously adopted various techniques to achieve this goal. One was the method of "automatic writing", which consisted in writing as rapidly as possible following associations of ideas, in order to free the creative process from the constraints of conscious will. This technique could produce fortuitous juxtaposition of terms, from which, as Breton wrote in the first *Manifesto* (1924), 'a particular light' could spring, '*the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive' (p. 32, emphasis in original). Breton gives a poignant description of what spontaneously generated poems can do to the mind; he talks of a 'dizzying race of images [that] appear like the only guideposts to the mind' (*ibid.*) and continues,

> [b]y slow degrees the mind becomes convinced of the supreme reality of these images. At first limiting itself to submitting to them, it soon realizes that they flatter its reason, and increase its knowledge accordingly. The mind […] goes forward, borne by these images which enrapture it […] (*op. cit.,* p. 33)

An even more "aleatoric" technique was the game of the so-called "exquisite corpse", in which various participants, in turn, added a word to a piece of folded paper without seeing the

others' contributions. This technique can generate surprisingly fine verses (or even poems) evoking peculiar affective atmospheres, as in the famous verse which gave the method its name: *le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau* ("the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine").

Surrealist writers would have probably loved "spoetry", i.e. poetry made from spam, or… automatic writing automated! (See http://poemsmadefromspam.blogspot.com/). All these techniques exploit the capacity of language to act on the mind like a drug, by boosting and/or moulding one's affect in novel ways (incidentally, Breton explicitly claimed that Surrealism acts on the mind like a drug). Using language in this way is not unlike using other forms of technology— from old-fashioned novels to MP3 players—to act on our emotion experience and explore new possibilities for feeling.

The claim that language can enhance affect is an empirical hypothesis. Support for it could come, for example, from a better understanding of *alexithymia*, a disorder of personality that literally means "lack of words for feelings"—from the Greek *a-* (prefix meaning "lack"), *lexis* ("word") and *thymos* ("feelings"). The term was originally coined by Sifneos (1972, pp. 81-2) in order to describe the difficulty, manifested by some psychosomatic patients, to use words for describing their feelings. The disorder is little understood, but some works suggest that alexithymic subjects have difficulties *identifying* their feelings, in the sense that they are confused about which emotion it is they are experiencing; also, they seem to be relatively unaware of changes in their feelings (see Bagby et al., 2006). Some studies also mention stiff bodily postures and facial expressions associated with alexithymia (for a useful overview, see Sveneaus, 1999). It would be interesting, then, to study whether these patients could come to identify and experience new, richer and/or stronger feelings if they learnt a richer vocabulary for affect,[8] and also whether a richer

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[8] Sifneos (1972) remarks in passing that alexithymic patients only parrot back the terms that the therapist gives them, and don't understand their meaning. It would be interesting to try to verify this comment more rigorously.

language could enhance other bodily means of expression. One could also study the effects of language on subjects who, for various reasons, are low in *emotional granularity* (e.g. Barrett, 2004), namely tend to report their affect coarsely along a pleasure-displeasure dimension, rather than differentiate between individual experiences such as fear, anger, sadness, disappointment, exhilaration, etc. If low emotional granularity is an index of a rather undifferentiated affective life, then again it would be interesting to find out whether training subjects to report emotions in a more specific, more "granular" way, would also transform their experience, as well as induce physiological differentiation. The idea, in other words, would be to exploit the transformative power of language to enhance people's affective life—very much like the transformative power of music is used in music therapy, as well as everyday life, to enhance patients' emotion experience, and to entrain and thereby structure their expression and physiology (DeNora, 2000).

5   Looping effects

A further way in which language can act on affect is by contributing to the construction of ecological niches in which specific behaviours and experiences can thrive. As Hacking (e.g. 1999) has argued, humans are *interactive kinds*, namely kinds that are influenced by the way they are classified and that influence what they classify (as opposed to *indifferent kinds*, like e.g. stones, which do not change as a consequence of how they are classified). The public dissemination of labels and descriptions of possible behaviours opens up modalities of existence that people eventually take up, enact, or even reject; and as people change their behaviour, labels and descriptions change accordingly: 'People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised' (Hacking, 1995b, p. 21; see also Hacking, 1995a, pp. 366-70). This "looping effect of human kinds", as Hacking calls it, is apparent in the case of

mental disorders, which appear, proliferate, and disappear in part as a consequence of which descriptions and classifications are available (Hacking, 1995b, 1998, 1999).

Hacking's (1995b) detailed study of multiple personality illustrates this phenomenon in all its complexity. For a start, he notes that the American *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (*DSM*) has offered criteria for multiple personality since the seventies, while in 1992 the *International Classification of Diseases* (*ICD*), predominantly used in Europe, still did not have a separate category for multiple personality.[9] In North America, and not in Europe, a "multiple personality epidemic" exploded in the 1970s. Only ten years before this explosion, the phenomenon was rare; yet ten years later, in the early nineties already, 'there were hundreds of multiples in treatment in every sizeable town in North America' (Hacking, 1995b, p. 8). Hacking suggests that factors responsible for the spreading of multiple personality, in addition to diagnostic criteria, had been the increasing attention paid to it by popular TV shows and other forms of media in the nineteen-seventies—such as, for example, the bestselling "multibiography" (and then movie) *Sybil,* published in 1973. *Sybil* contributed to making multiple personality known to the wide public, and many of the facts reported by Hacking illustrate looping effects. For example, in the book, Sybil has several alters, two of which are male; as Hacking remarks, 'after *Sybil* the floodgates were open to transsexual alters' (*op. cit.*, p. 77) and the number of alters diagnosed in multiples increased substantially, going from only two or three, to dozens. Influence in the other direction is seen in the fact that, as the number of alters increased, the name of the disorder itself underwent a transformation, and in 1994 it was changed from "Multiple Personality Disorder" (*DSM-III*) to "Dissociative Identity Disorder" (*DSM-IV*) (as such it still appears in *DSM-IV-TR*, published in 2000). Perhaps the proliferation of alters made it increasingly difficult to keep track of different

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[9] It still doesn't; in *ICD-10* (2007) there is only one entry (and no description) for "multiple personality" within the subgrouping "other dissociative disorders" (see F44.8), itself part of the broader grouping "dissociative [conversion] disorders" (F44).

personalities: '[i]nevitably the more alters that are elicited, the more they seem to be mere personality figments' (Hacking, 1995b, p. 27); and changes in name and classification, if Hacking is right, will have further effects on the behaviour of the people classified. One of the first things to change is the therapy. In fact, Hacking reports that as the emphasis shifted from multiple personality to dissociated identity, therapists changed their focus and, rather than treating alters as separate personalities, they aimed at reintegrating them into one.

These and several other data and considerations in Hacking's study illustrate his point that mental disorders can be *moving targets*: when a mental disorder is classified and thus "pinned down", the classification influences the people it classifies; people's behaviour changes as a consequence, so that at some point the classification needs to be modified, and so on.[10]

What about emotion experience and associated behaviours? To my knowledge, no work to date has explored the relation between emotion talk, feelings and behaviour in the details required to reveal interesting looping effects. A study in this direction is William Reddy's (2001) analysis of the events that led to the French Revolution, the subsequent years of the Terror, and the Napoleonic dictatorship. In his view, the French Revolution was largely the product of changes in emotion expression that began around 1650 with the development of sentimentalism. Sentimentalism played a major role in favouring and enhancing the expression of feelings between people. In depicting emotions as manifestations of people's moral goodness, it did not simply allow free expression of feelings; it also recommended it as a proof of one's moral status: 'public expression of intense feeling, rather than causing embarrassment, was a badge of generous sincerity and social connectedness' (p. 164). Sentimentalism spread via novels and visual arts and, Reddy argues, came to transform emotion expression in the private as well as political sphere.

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[10] See also the (shorter and more speculative) discussions of mental retardation, schizophrenia and autism in Hacking (1999) and the study of fugue, a "transient mental illness", in Hacking (1998).

One way in which Reddy illustrates this process is by reporting and discussing fragments of love letters of two people who then became political activists in the years of the Revolution, Jeanne-Marie Phlipon and Jean-Marie Roland (see *op. cit.*, pp. 166-9). The language of these letters echoed the one of sentimentalist novels, and often referred to maxims and principles of sentimentalist ideology. Sentimentalist tones and ideas also influenced policy debates, the writings of many radicals, and official records. The extremes of the Terror, Reddy suggests, were the consequence of sentimentalism's emphasis on "natural feelings", and of his Manichean tendency to divide people into naturally "good" or "evil" ones.

Reddy's historical approach is grounded on the view that how one expresses one's emotions in language changes the speaker as well as the interlocutor. He uses the term "*emotive*" to refer to a particular kind of speech act which has a 'self-exploratory or self-altering effect' (p. 101); as he points out in his analysis of Phlipon's and Roland's letters, the authors used rhetorical devices that did not simply describe feelings, but aimed at eliciting a response, in the interlocutor, which would validate the virtuous nature of such feelings. This attitude set up the conditions for a Hacking-esque looping effect; 'the more intense it [= the expressed feeling] was, the more likely to be natural and good. This conviction could make possible a kind of vicious circle, a kind of escalation of intensity, as individuals fine-tuned emotives in search of a natural elevation of sentiment' (Reddy, 2001, p. 169).

Reddy's study, one may object, fails to show that there is a privileged link between sentimentalism and expression of feelings in the subsequent dramatic political events. Given Hacking's lesson, however, I think we can at least grant Reddy his more general point about the historical method, namely that looking at the history of emotion expression may help us gather insights into why certain events unfolded in the way they did (and therefore historians should pay more attention to it). Reddy's study can then be seen as one initial attempt to put this method into practice.

To further our understanding of the effects of available labels and descriptions on feelings and behaviour, a good place to start could be the history of mood disorders. We know already, for example (see Jackson, 1986), that the English term "depression", which started to feature in medical dictionaries in 1860, describes many of the symptoms that at the time of Hippocrates indicated *melancholia*; the latter term has been in use ever since to refer to a state of dejection and sorrow (see Burton, 1972). In medieval times, many of the features of modern depression were part of *accidie* (or *acedia*), the "noonday demon"—as John Cassian (ca. 360-435 AD) called it—namely, in Solomon's (2002, p. 293) touching characterization, 'the thing that you can see clearly in the brightest part of the day but that nonetheless comes to wrench your soul away from God'. Now, the terms "depression" and "melancholia" indicate physical processes. The former was originally devised from the Latin *de* (down from) and *premere* (to press), and has carried the meaning of "pressing down"; the latter is the Latin transliteration of the Greek term, which in turn derives from *melaina chole*, namely "black bile" (in humoural theory, the black bile was thought to be the principal etiological factor in melancholia). The term *accidie*, on the other hand, indicates a moral condition, a lack of something praiseworthy; it comes from the Greek *a-kedia*, which means "lack of care", heedlessness. These differences of course reveal, and are a consequence of, different attitudes towards depression in different historical and social contexts; whereas depression and melancholia have been associated with medical conditions, *accidie* was a sin, an indication that one was not rejoicing in the certain knowledge of God's love and mercy (Solomon, 2002). Yet the existence of labels with such different connotations would itself have contributed to deepening the gap between the medical and moral aspects of the condition. In medieval times, being classified as having melancholia rather than *accidie* would have led to a different treatment. There is evidence, in fact, that the recognition of the medical nature of the condition led to a relatively benevolent and empathetic attitude towards it (Jackson, 1986; Wenzel, 1967). Having *accidie*, on the contrary, was seen as a punishment of God himself (Solomon, 2002) and this judgment, we can speculate, would

have led those classified as *accidiosi* to experience their condition as profoundly disquieting and shameful, and perhaps also to try to disguise it. In the Renaissance, being melancholy was a sign of profundity, insight, and even genius (Solomon, 2002); melancholic people would have then behaved and felt very differently from medieval *accidiosi*—they could have indulged in their condition, and perhaps even cherished it as evidence of their perceptiveness. As Solomon remarks, by the end of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth 'all those who believed themselves to be geniuses expected themselves to be melancholy. While men of real brilliance might suffer, those who hoped to be mistaken for brilliant men acted out suffering' (*op. cit.*, p. 299).

A more detailed study, *à la* Hacking, of how changes in the classification, explanation and therapy of depression (as outlined e.g. in Jackson, 1986) have gone together with changes in the behaviour and experience of depressed people, and further historical accounts of mood disorders and emotions, would be one way of starting to explore the looping effects between emotion categories and human affect.

6   Condensing and making accessible

The power of language to transform people's affective life eventually depends on the relatively trivial fact that language can easily direct attention to possibilities of experience that would otherwise go unnoticed. Naming emotions squeezes complex feelings into something compact, i.e. a word; complex feelings, once labelled, are more visible, and thus more easily and readily accessible than in the absence of the word (this point is analogous to the one Clark, 2008, makes in relation to labelling and visual perception; as he argues, labelling reduces the descriptive complexity of a scene, creates a new realm of perceptible objects, an thus creates new targets for selective attention).

This time, a cross-cultural comparison of poetry and emotion labels will help support this point. Several Japanese poems express the specific experience of remembering something that was once loved but is now lost, as e.g. in the following two works reported in Watts (1957, p. 187):

No one lives at the Barrier of Fuha;

The wooden penthouse is fallen away;

All that remains

Is the autumn wind.[11]

The evening haze;

Thinking of past things,

How far-off they are!

The first poem in particular reminds me of a well-known piece by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale, "The House of the Customs Men":

You won't recall the house of the customs men

on the bluff that overhangs the reef:

it's been waiting, empty, since the evening

your thoughts swarmed in

and hung there, nervously.

Sou'westers have lashed the old walls for years

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[11] This is actually the first half of a poem by Fujiwara Yoshitune, reported also in Bownas & Twaite (1964, p. 103) in a different translation.

and your laugh's not careless anymore:

the compass needle wanders crazily

and the dice no longer tell the score.

You don't remember: other times

assail your memory; a thread gets wound.

I hold one end still; but the house recedes

and the smoke-stained weathervane

spins pitiless up on the roof.

I hold on to an end; but you're alone,

not here, not breathing in the dark.

Oh the vanishing horizon line,

where the tanker's lights flash now and then!

Is the channel here? (The breakers

still seethe against the cliff that drops away …)

You don't recall the house of this, my evening.

And I don't know who's going and who'll stay.[12]

Italian does not have a word for the complex experience evoked by this poem—a sorrowful and anguished awareness of the transient nature of human relationships and existence (which is different from *nostalgia*; the latter is a more personal and less existential feeling of missing something loved). Yet Japanese does have a label for it (or something very close to it), namely "*mono no aware*", usually translated as the "pathos" or "sensitivity" (*aware*) "of things" (*mono no*).

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[12] Translation by J. Galassi; see Montale (1998, p. 223).

Mono no aware was singled out in the 18th century by the literary theorist Motoori Norinaga as the predominant feature of the 11th century Japanese classic, the *Genji* (see Ikeda, 1979), and is still central in Japanese culture and aesthetics (Parkes, 2006). Scholars debate on the exact meaning of the term; yet they seem to agree that *mono no aware* is awareness of the transient nature of all things, 'an emotional sense of the impermanence of life' (Ikeda, 1979, p. 109). A classic example is the sense of the fleeting beauty of the cherry blossoms; Parkes (2006) also mentions the image (from Ozu's film *Late Spring*) of a mirror reflecting the absence of the daughter who has just left home after getting married. This last image, together with the two short poems reported earlier, illustrate Watt's definition of *aware* particularly well: 'the echo of what has passed and what was loved, giving them a resonance such as a great cathedral gives to a choir, so that they would be the poorer without it' (Watts, 1957, p. 186).

For present purposes, it is interesting that several Japanese poems express *aware* (see for example the collections edited by Bownas & Twaite, 1964, and Stryk & Ikemoto, 1977), and that *aware* appears to be much more present in Japanese than in Italian poetry (Montale's recurrent theme of the transience of life is distinctive of his own poetry). *Aware*, for example, is one of the four moods that traditionally prevails in a *haiku*, the three-line poem of seventeen syllables usually written by Zennists.[13] Not only "official" poets and Zennists, but many lay people in Japan write *haiku*; most large towns have *haiku* clubs which publish quarterly magazines to which people from various professions and social classes contribute (Bownas, 1964). There are therefore relatively many occasions that allow people to express and experience *aware* (note the looping effect).

My suggestion here is that the very existence of the word "*aware*" has contributed to the prominence of the experience of *aware* in Japanese poetry and, more broadly, Japanese aesthetics.

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[13] The other three moods are *sabi* (quiet and deep solitude, loneliness, isolation), *wabi* (simple beauty, rustic patina), and *yûgen* (depth, mystery). Interestingly Watts (1957), Parkes (2006) and Stryk (1977) all give rather different translations of these terms.

Qua "material symbol" (Clark, 2008), the word flags the experience to which it refers, drawing attention to it; at the same time, the word is a simple and "cheap" (to borrow Clark's term) way of indicating something complex that would otherwise need many words (and considerable skill) to be evoked (see Montale's poem above). Once flagged and "condensed" by a label, the experience is more visible and accessible. Visibility and accessibility imply that people will enact, or try to enact, the experience more frequently, and that their behaviour (and most likely physiology as well) will change accordingly. (I myself, since learning about *aware* and exposing myself to works that evoke it, now perceive aware-affording situations more frequently than before.) Whoever aims at writing a *haiku* according to traditional rules, for example, will strive to evoke *aware* (or any of the other three experiences typical of the genre); this is because the word, by merely existing, presents the poet with a specific target.

The suggestion, in sum, is that labels for emotions have causal force. They can act as catalysts for a complex of feelings that may otherwise go unnoticed. Also, they can channel and structure expressive resources towards a specific type of experience. This capacity is just another aspect of the power of labelling (discussed at length by Clark) to create objects that, once there, make it possible to attend to them and to develop second-order thoughts about them. As Clark (2008, p. 45) puts it, 'the presence of the material symbol impacts behaviour […] by itself, qua material symbol, providing a new target for selective attention'; and paraphrasing his words, we can add that the act of labelling thus creates 'a new realm of possible affective experiences'.

7   Reinterpreting the "verbal overshadowing" effect

I should at this point mention a possible objection and/or counterexample to the view that language enhances and enriches affective experience. Some psychologists have shown that, under certain conditions at least, providing verbal descriptions (of a face or a voice, for example) can impair

subsequent recognition of the item described. Schooler & Engstler-Schooler (1990) originally called this phenomenon *verbal overshadowing*. The conditions under which the phenomenon occurs are not fully understood, and different explanations of it have been provided (for an overview and meta-analysis, see Meissner & Brigham, 2001). According to Schooler (2002) and Schooler & Schreiber (2004), verbalization induces a reflective attitude, which in turn leads to a *fragmentation* of the original experience; putting an experience into words thus makes subjects "lose touch" with its original holistic character (in fact, verbal overshadowing tends to occur specifically in the case of experiences that are difficult to put into words in the first place; see Schooler, 2002).

Prima facie, this interpretation of the verbal overshadowing effect would seem to be in tension with the present suggestion that language can refine and enhance emotion experience. A closer look at the available empirical evidence, however, re-iterates the importance of having a sophisticated language for being able to enjoy rich experiences. Take for example Melcher & Schooler's (1996) investigation of the effects of verbalization on wine tasting. Participants were divided into three groups: the Novices (people who drank red wine less than once per month), the Intermediates (people who drank red wine at least once per month), and the Experts (wine professionals or people who had taken several wine seminars). All participants had one minute to taste a target red wine; immediately after, subjects in the verbalization condition had 4 minutes to describe its flavour as precisely and in as much detail as possible (while "non-verbal" subjects solved crosswords). Afterwards, all participants were presented with four different samples of red wine, and had to recognize the one they had tasted earlier. Results interestingly showed that verbalization had different effects on wine recognition *depending on the level of expertise* of the participants: verbalization improved recognition of the target in the case of the Novices, impaired it in the case of the Intermediates, and did not affect it in the Experts.

This result, as I interpret it, does not undermine the proposal that language can enrich one's experience, but supports it instead. As Melcher & Schooler (1996, p. 240) themselves pointed out,

the Intermediates were characterized by a strong discrepancy between perceptual and verbal expertise. They resembled the Experts in terms of perceptual expertise (the non-verbal Intermediates' discrimination was not significantly different from the Experts' one), but were more like the Novices in terms of verbal expertise (they used less than half the number of formal wine terms than the Experts). One possible explanation of the Intermediates' susceptibility to verbalization, therefore, is that their vocabulary was too poor to allow them adequately to describe their perception; their description of the target wine was thus not rich enough to allow them to remember it in all the details required to distinguish it from other wines. If they had had a richer vocabulary, they might have provided richer descriptions and therefore remembered flavours in a more detailed way.

Indeed, training to become a wine expert involves learning how to talk about wine (see e.g. Bach, 2008). Wine talk has several functions, and one of them is precisely to refine perceptual discrimination by making the taster attend to features of the wine that would otherwise go unnoticed, and that it would be difficult to bring into reflective attention. Whereas, arguably, a more sophisticated discriminatory capacity does not necessary lead to a heightened enjoyment (Bach, 2008), there is little doubt that learning how to describe a wine brings about a change in one's experience and makes it more "granular".

This interpretation differs from Melcher & Schooler's (1996) in that it does not posit a disruptive effect of verbalization *per se*, but rather a disruptive effect of *poor* verbalization. In a (rather ambiguous) passage, Melcher & Schooler (1996, p. 240) wrote that 'verbalization encourages an inopportune shift from the stronger foundation of their [= the subjects'] perceptual expertise to the shakier scaffolding of their developing wine vocabulary'. Read in the broader context of their discussion, this passage means that what is "inopportune" (i.e. a source of impaired recognition following verbalization) is the shift itself from a *non-verbal* perceptual experience to a *verbal* description— i.e. it is the act itself of putting into words. As Melcher & Schooler emphasize

in other passages, 'verbalization can produce a generalized verbal 'set' that can systematically *bias* individuals to foreground verbal knowledge *at the expense* of perceptual knowledge' (*op. cit.*, p. 241, my emphasis; see also Schooler, 2002, and Schooler & Schreiber, 2004).

On the present interpretation, what is "inopportune" is rather the attempt to describe a *rich and detailed* perceptual experience with an *impoverished and imprecise* vocabulary. Putting a complex experience into words need not have a negative biasing effect; as Melcher and Schooler's results in the case of the Experts suggests, possessing a vocabulary that is rich enough to do justice to a complex experience leaves the latter "unbiased". This interpretation is consistent with the results of a later study by the same authors (see Melcher & Schooler, 2004), which showed that subjects who had received "conceptual training" on mushrooms did not show verbal overshadowing of mushroom recognition, and even appeared to benefit from the training. The conceptual training consisted in a 35-minute lecture providing, among others, fundamentals of mushroom morphology, visible features and characteristics used for classification, pictures, drawings, and some technical vocabulary used in describing various shapes and parts of mushrooms; subjects were also instructed to take notes during the lecture. Following the training, they recognized mushrooms better than subjects who had only received "perceptual training" i.e. had learnt to categorize mushrooms non-verbally. In addition, results suggested that conceptually trained subjects had even benefited from the training.[14]

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[14] To be precise, Melcher & Schooler (2004) discuss two experiments. In both of them, subjects in the conceptual training condition listened and watched the lecture; only in the second experiment, however, were they explicitly told to take notes. Results of the first experiment did not show a significant verbal overshadowing of mushroom recognition in these subjects (only a trend towards it); results of the second experiment not only clearly showed a lack of verbal overshadowing following conceptual training, but also a (marginally) significant facilitation of perceptual recognition. See Melcher & Schooler (2004) for further details, discussion and *caveats*.

8   Conclusion

Language, as the foregoing discussion is meant to show, can act on feelings in many different ways. It can merely report (i.e. describe) specific affective experiences that pre-exist verbalization; as such, it is an important tool for interpersonal communication (section 2). Yet it can also modify one's feelings. Putting one's experiences into words can help a fuzzy pre-reflective feeling to become explicit, and this passage from the pre-reflective to the reflective level of awareness can trigger new experiences (such as a sense of fulfilment) that further contribute to transforming the original feeling (section 3). Language can also act as a device that pulls the mind "from outside", by signposting and recommending possibilities of experience. This power of language has explicitly been acknowledged and exploited for creative-artistic purposes (section 4), but it is also (more or less) tacitly exerted in our everyday talk about feelings. As interactive kinds, we are influenced by the way in which we are classified; thus, at any place and time, available emotion labels, most common modalities of emotion expression, and predominant attitudes towards them, are likely to influence our experience and behaviour. Emotion talk contributes to creating niches in which specific feelings can flourish (section 5). Ultimately, the capacity of language to mould our feelings depends largely on the easiness with which labels can flag possibilities of experience. Words are cheap ways to make feelings—including complex ones—visible and accessible (section 6). Possessing a label for a certain experience can thus turn out to be a very effective way of entraining the affective lives of several individuals.

The various ways in which language acts on feelings distinguished here are, of course, not independent, and overlap in several respects; thus, for example, the power of words to enhance affect and induce novel experiences exploits, partly at least, the capacity of language to make explicit feelings that would otherwise remain tacit and/or unacknowledged. Because language is

such a ubiquitous phenomenon in our life, and because it is something we do as well as something done to us, we cannot expect that the influences it exerts on our emotion experience will take place in isolation from one another. Still, I hope that the distinctions drawn here have managed to flash out what a versatile resource language is, not only when it comes to solving problems and storing information, but also when impinging on that most central feature of our mind, its affective and feeling dimension.

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