

From emotion to resonance: On the encoding and transmission of emotional information in communication

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

*emotionality;
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semiotics;
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As an inherent core attribute of human language, emotional expressivity far transcends mere emotional venting. It constitutes a complex, multi-layered semiotic system that collaboratively builds a bridge for externalizing our inner emotional world through sophisticated linguistic devices, dynamic communicative strategies, and creative stylistic methods. This paper systematically examines how these three types of mechanisms operate in concert to transform private, abstract emotions into perceptible, comprehensible, and resonant signs, while analyzing their core functions and aesthetic value in both interpersonal communication and literary creation.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient adage "Men are not sticks or stones—how can they be without passions?" acknowledges our innate capacity for emotion. Yet, emotion itself is an internal, private, even chaotic psycho-physiological experience, lacking inherent social dimension. For emotions to become communicable, understandable, and shareable social resources, they must undergo a process of "externalization." This process, the construction of emotionality, refers to the capacity in communication to encode and transmit emotional information through a series of conscious or unconscious semiotic strategies. It is no longer the raw emotion itself, but its symbolic representation. As linguist Roman Jakobson noted, the emotive function is one of the six fundamental functions of language, focusing precisely on the speaker's attitude toward the message[1]. This paper categorizes the means of expressing emotionality into three interconnected dimensions: linguistic devices (the micro-level lexical-grammatical system), communicative strategies (the macro-level pragmatic and paralinguistic system), and

stylistic methods (the aesthetic-creative system transcending conventional norms), and will delve into their operational mechanisms and socio-cultural functions.

Linguistic Means: Micro-grammar of Emotion. Linguistic devices constitute the most fundamental and direct coding system for emotionality, rooted in the core layers of language—lexicon, grammar, and syntax—providing stable "building blocks" for emotional expression.

Vocabulary serves as the most immediate label for emotions. Firstly, languages contain numerous affective words such as "love," "hatred," "joy," and "sorrow," which directly denote emotional concepts. More nuanced are the uses of evaluative lexis and modal particles. For instance, transforming "It happened" into "It tragically happened" imbues the statement with the speaker's judgment through a single adverb [2]. In Chinese, modal particles like "啊," "呢," "吧," and "哦" convey subtle emotional nuances—"你可真行啊!" (admiring or sarcastic) versus "你就这样吧." (resigned or disappointed).

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Syntactic structures form the rhythm and framework of emotion. Inverted word order, sentence-type selection, and shifts between declarative / interrogative / imperative modes effectively transmit feelings. Short, abrupt sentences or run-on constructions ("快! 跑!") create tension and urgency, whereas lengthy, nested complex sentences may reflect tangled thoughts or narratorial anxiety. Exclamations ("How beautiful this scenery is!") directly vent intense feelings, while rhetorical questions ("Aren't you ashamed?") intensify accusatory force. In Lu Xun's "The New Year's Sacrifice," the monotonous, repetitive syntax used to depict Xianglin's wife retelling her son's death conveys a profound, numb sorrow.

Building upon lexicon and syntax, rhetorical figures act as emotional amplifiers. Metaphor materializes abstract feelings ("Her heart felt as if hollowed out"); hyperbole intensifies emotional scale ("I'd wait for you till seas dry and rocks crumble"); repetition underscores emotional obsession ("Silence, silence! Unless we burst out in silence, we shall perish in silence!"). These rhetorical strategies break conventional linguistic logic, generating cognitive salience to evoke emotional resonance.

If linguistic devices provide static "tools," then communicative strategies concern how these tools are used in dynamic interaction. Involving pragmatics, paralinguistic features, and non-verbal cues, they render emotional expression more three-dimensional and authentic.

1.Paralinguistic Features: The Emotional Color of Voice

Paralinguistic features constitute the essential non-lexical elements of human vocal communication, functioning as a precise emotional "thermometer" that provides critical insight into a speaker's authentic affective state. These vocal characteristics transcend the literal meaning of words, conveying nuanced emotional information through several key dimensions. Pitch variation represents one fundamental

parameter, where elevated, shrill tones typically signify heightened excitement or intense anger, while depressed, low-pitched tones consistently convey profound sadness or solemn reverence. Vocal intensity manifests as another critical indicator, demonstrating a stark emotional contrast between roaring exuberance or fury on one extreme and intimate whispering conveying secrecy or tenderness on the other. Speech rate serves as an equally telling parameter, with accelerated delivery frequently signaling psychological tension or urgency, and deliberately slow articulation suggesting careful deliberation, emotional heaviness, or conscious hesitation. Furthermore, strategically employed pauses create meaningful silences that are often laden with substantial emotional or pragmatic significance, enabling speakers to emphasize points, build anticipation, or convey unspoken feelings. Collectively, these paralinguistic elements weave an intricate and richly textured tapestry of emotional intonation that complements and frequently overrides the semantic content of speech. A simple, frequently encountered utterance such as "I know" can — through subtle but deliberate variations in tonal quality, emphatic stress, and rhythmic pausing — communicate a remarkably wide spectrum of attitudes and emotions, ranging from willing compliance and genuine understanding to evident impatience, sudden realization, or profound emotional indifference, demonstrating the powerful contextual flexibility afforded by paralinguistic modulation.

2.Non-Verbal Symbols: The Body's Narration of Emotion

In direct face-to-face human interaction, substantial and often decisive emotional information is continuously transmitted through non-verbal symbols, which operate as an autonomous, potent channel of emotional narration parallel to verbal communication. Facial expressions—ranging from beaming joy to glaring anger, from subtle disappointment to overt surprise—serve as primary, immediate indicators of transient affective states, with particular configurations like

the genuine Duchenne smile being universally recognized across cultures. Gestures and postures provide equally significant emotional data, whether through aggressive displays like clenched fists signaling anger, defensively crossed arms indicating resistance or discomfort, or expansive movements and buoyant steps characteristic of dancing with delight that broadcast happiness and openness. Additionally, gaze behavior—including direct eye contact conveying intimacy or challenge, conscious evasion suggesting discomfort or deception, or sustained steady gaze indicating focused attention—forms a crucial component of non-verbal emotional exchange. These diverse bodily cues collectively constitute a comprehensive parallel system of communication that frequently surpasses verbal language in both its evolutionary primacy and its perceived authenticity. Since these non-verbal signals are frequently instinctive, generated through autonomic nervous system responses that prove difficult to consciously control with perfect consistency, they carry exceptional weight in interpersonal judgments regarding the genuineness and intensity of expressed emotions, making them fundamental to accurate social perception and emotional intelligence.

3. Pragmatic Strategies: The Social Management of Emotion

Emotional expression in sophisticated social contexts is seldom a straightforward, transparent process; governed by complex cultural conventions, interpersonal dynamics, and specific communicative objectives, it frequently necessitates the deliberate deployment of sophisticated pragmatic strategies that manage emotional display according to social requirements. Verbal irony stands as a quintessential example of such strategic management, wherein superficially affirmative words are intentionally used to convey a contradictory negative attitude, relying entirely on shared contextual understanding and mutual cognitive frameworks to successfully communicate nuanced stances like sarcasm, humorous critique, or other complex affective

positions. Furthermore, sophisticated linguistic mechanisms such as presupposition and conversational implicature systematically facilitate the indirect expression of emotion while maintaining plausible deniability. For instance, the seemingly simple statement "You've finally arrived" conventionally presupposes the other party's significant lateness, thereby implicitly conveying the speaker's annoyance or dissatisfaction without direct accusation [3]. Similarly, the question "Are you going to eat all of that?" often implicates doubt or criticism regarding portion size rather than genuinely seeking information. These advanced pragmatic devices highlight the inherent sophistication and cultural embeddedness of emotional expression within linguistic practice, illustrating the application of social and emotional intelligence through strategic communication that respects face needs, maintains relationships, and achieves communicative goals simultaneously.

While basic linguistic devices provide the essential static "tools" for emotional expression, comprehensive communicative strategies pertain to the dynamic, context-sensitive, and strategically motivated deployment of these tools in actual interactive scenarios. This broader category, encompassing pragmatic principles, paralinguistic features, and non-verbal cues, collectively renders emotional expression more multidimensional, culturally appropriate, interpersonally strategic, and perceptually authentic, creating a complex integrated system that transcends literal verbal meaning.

4. Stylistic Devices: The Artistic Sublimation of Emotion

Stylistic devices represent the most refined and deliberate level of emotional expression, systematically transcending the conventional bounds of everyday communication to achieve artistic and rhetorical heightening. Through creative, patterned deviations from ordinary linguistic norms—including strategic repetition, figurative language, and syntactic manipulation—writers construct unique

imaginative worlds that achieve both maximal emotional impact and profound aesthetic sublimation. This transformative process is particularly evident in literary and rhetorical works where linguistic form and emotional function merge seamlessly to evoke targeted, powerful affective responses in the reader, demonstrating how stylistic choices directly shape emotional experience.

Narrative perspective itself functions as a powerful emotional filter that fundamentally shapes reader engagement and affective response. First-person narration establishes an intimate, deeply subjective emotional channel, forcibly drawing readers into the narrator's immediate internal world and evoking visceral identification with their personal feelings—a technique masterfully employed in Yu Dafu's *Sinking*, which immerses the reader in a pervasive, psychologically intense atmosphere of personal anguish, sexual frustration, and national alienation. Conversely, the third-person limited perspective strategically guides and constricts reader empathy by filtering narrative events exclusively through the sensory perception and emotional experience of a specific focalizing character, creating controlled alignment with that character's subjective reality. Even the ostensibly neutral, panoramic omniscient perspective inevitably reveals subtle emotional leanings and evaluative judgments through the narrator's selective focalization, descriptive emphasis, and implicit commentary, thereby systematically shaping the reader's affective journey and moral response to the narrative events and characters. These strategic choices in narrative technique demonstrate that storytelling perspective is never merely a technical decision but fundamentally an emotional positioning device that directs interpretive responses and determines affective outcomes in literary communication. Writers anchor abstract emotions to concrete images, transforming them into symbolic emotional codes. In classical Chinese poetry, the "moon" embodies homesickness, "willow branches" evoke separation, and "guttering candle" symbolizes fading life. These recurrent images form a cultural lexicon of shared

emotional symbols [4]. When multiple images coalesce into a unified atmosphere, they generate pervasive emotional resonance—as in Ma Zhiyuan's "Autumn Thoughts," where withered vines, aged trees, and crows at dusk collectively construct a profound landscape of desolation and nostalgic sorrow.

To convey extreme or distinctive emotions, writers often subvert linguistic conventions through defamiliarization [5]. Eileen Zhang's striking metaphor ("Life is a robe of gorgeous brocade, crawling with lice") materializes the desolation of human existence. Modernist poetry employs grammatical fragmentation, neologisms, and unconventional collocations to simulate subconscious flow or express modern alienation—exemplified by Bei Dao's paradoxical declaration, "The base need basehood for passport / The noble must nobility on their epitaph," where antithetical language delivers scathing critique of its era.

Stylistic devices represent a systematic departure from conventional linguistic norms to construct alternative perceptual frameworks that maximize affective expression. This process operates through calculated deviations from expected linguistic patterns, disrupting automatic cognitive processing and forcing reanalysis of conceptual structures. Within literary discourse, these devices function as linguistic catalysts that transform abstract affective states into concrete conceptual metaphors, creating what cognitive linguists term "cross-domain mappings" between emotional experience and physical reality.

The theoretical foundation for this process finds its articulation in Shylovsky's 1917 concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), which posits that art deliberately manipulates linguistic forms to "impede perception and increase its difficulty." From a linguistic perspective, this constitutes a strategic violation of selectional restrictions and semantic prosody - what contemporary pragmatics would classify as "systematic flouting of the maxim of manner." When Shylovsky observes that "art makes the stone stony," he

essentially describes how linguistic deviation can reactivate the semantic features of lexical items that have been bleached through habitual usage.

Eileen Zhang's metaphorical construction "life is a gorgeous robe crawling with lice" exemplifies this linguistic process through its deliberate collision of incompatible semantic fields. From a cognitive linguistic standpoint, this represents a masterful instantiation of conceptual blending theory, where the "life" input space receives unexpected projections from the "infested garment" input space. The resulting blend generates emergent meaning through:

Violation of lexical collocational norms ("robe" typically resists modification by "crawling with lice"). Activation of dormant cultural schemas regarding concealed corruption. This linguistic configuration produces what relevance theory would characterize as "massive pragmatic implications," forcing readers to engage in extensive inferential processing to resolve the semantic anomaly. The prolonged cognitive engagement required to reconstruct the intended meaning correlates directly with the intensification of affective response - precisely the "increased duration of perception" that Shylovsky identified as central to defamiliarization.

Through such linguistic mechanisms, stylistic devices transform ephemeral affective states into durable cognitive events, demonstrating how systematic manipulation of linguistic structures can fundamentally reshape emotional experience within discourse comprehension.

In an era increasingly defined by social media and virtual interaction, systems of emotional expression are undergoing profound transformation. Linguistically, internet vernacular has generated a rich repertoire of emotional signifiers—from early emoticons to contemporary memes—effectively constructing an entirely new vocabulary of affect. On the level of communicative means, video calls and voice messages have redefined the transmission of paralinguistic cues, while digital behaviors such as "read but unanswered" have themselves become vehicles of emotional expression.

Stylistic approaches are likewise evolving: online literature cultivates narrative modes adapted to digital reading habits, while short-form videos have developed their own grammar of emotional expression through editing rhythms.

These developments, far from diminishing the value of traditional systems, in fact affirm the stability of their fundamental framework—all technological innovations serve to expand, rather than replace, the three foundational layers of human emotional expression. A truly moving and successful expression of emotion often emerges from the precise choice of vocabulary, the dynamism of syntactic structures, the authenticity of tone, physical coordination, and the cohesive atmosphere crafted by stylistic composition.

A deeper investigation into the mechanisms of emotional expression not only furthers our understanding of the intrinsic connection between language and human psychology, but also enhances our communicative efficacy and literary appreciation. Through the continuous process of decoding and encoding emotions, we come to understand others more fully, and ourselves more clearly.

Conclusion

In summary, the realization of emotionality in human communication constitutes a complex process of semiotic transformation that progresses from micro to macro levels, from rule-governed to creative expression, and from individual to social dimensions. The three dimensions examined in this paper—linguistic devices, communicative strategies, and stylistic methods—collectively form a trinity of interdependent systems that constitute an ecosystem for emotional expression. Linguistic devices provide the grammatical and lexical foundations for emotional encoding, establishing the basis for expressive precision; communicative strategies contribute physical and situational dimensions to emotional exchange, ensuring authenticity and dynamic adaptability in interactions; while stylistic methods expand emotional expression into aesthetic and

philosophical realms, transforming private feelings into public art accessible to collective appreciation and reflection through creative deviation and defamiliarization.

These three dimensions are not isolated from one another but are intrinsically interwoven in every successful emotional expression. A moving gaze (communicative strategy) may require precise lexical framing (linguistic device) to crystallize its meaning; the power of great literary works (stylistic method) fundamentally stems from their profound insight into universal human emotions (operating at linguistic and communicative levels). Therefore, research on emotionality must move beyond singular, linear analytical frameworks and instead adopt a comprehensive semiotic perspective—one that examines how different semiotic modalities interact within specific socio-cultural contexts to collaboratively weave the fabric of emotional meaning.

The significance of this research extends beyond theoretical systematization to encompass broad practical applications. In interpersonal communication, it enhances our capacity to decode emotional cues and improve empathetic engagement and communicative effectiveness. In literary and artistic criticism, it provides sophisticated analytical tools for understanding how canonical works achieve their emotional power. In artificial intelligence and human-computer interaction, comprehending the complex mechanisms of multimodal emotional expression represents a crucial step toward developing genuine "emotional intelligence" in machines. Particularly in today's context of accelerating globalization and cross-cultural exchange, understanding both the cultural specificity (such as Western directness versus Eastern subtlety) and universality of emotional expression holds vital importance for eliminating misunderstandings and promoting mutual learning among civilizations.

Ultimately, the exploration of emotional expression methods constitutes, at its core, an exploration of humanity itself. It

reveals how our ways of expressing emotion simultaneously define and construct our human nature. Just as we cannot think without language, we cannot feel and connect without these culturally embedded semiotic systems. Future research could further investigate variations in the weighting and interactive patterns of these three dimensions across different cultures, or examine the profound transformations emotional expression undergoes in the digital media age. This semiotic path from emotion to emotionality continues to extend toward new horizons, inviting us to journey forward.

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