

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES M. WILCE, *Language and Emotion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, viii + 222 p., index.

Language and Emotion by James M. Wilce probes the interrelatedness of feeling, speaking, reflecting, and identifying. Drawing on over 100 ethnographic case studies, the volume presents an exhaustive survey of linguistic anthropology's treatment of emotion. Wilce's work also fills a void in the existing literature by providing an analysis which is not only historically and semiotically informed but which treats identification, affect, and communication as processes rather than as uncomplicated or fully realized facts. This concentration on the evolving nature of language and emotion makes Wilce's book an original contribution in that it not only attends to language and emotion as distinct and solidified realities but concentrates on their dynamic and co-constitutive dimensions. For example, *Language and Emotion* begins with a rich description of one particular speech genre, Muslim laments – songs of mourning – highlighting more than their referential functions. Throughout the book, Wilce shows how “feelingful language” – including but not limited to the Muslim lament – involves the linking of language and affect as they pass through processes of identification. Wilce manages in a short space to survey a vast literature concerning communication and affect and particularly linguistic anthropology's treatment of the subject of emotion, arguing that they have largely failed to take history into account and have created “more heat than light.” *Language and Emotion* moves strongly in the direction of rectifying this situation by reconsidering emotion in light of both the local and global histories of the relationship between affect and communication.

The ground which Wilce covers in *Language and Emotion* cannot possibly be examined in such a short space, so I will proceed by introducing and then discussing in more detail the three major ways that this volume stands apart from the existing literature, before moving on to a brief criticism. Incidentally, these three departures play out as strengths in the text. First, in his discussion of language ideologies, Wilce makes a strong argument for further study of the relationship of language and emotion to power. Second, he highlights the problematic nature of indexicality and what this means for those who study the relationship between talk, feeling, identity and the processes of identification. Finally, Wilce ties the book together by discussing the linkage between cultural concepts of feeling, language, and political economy.

In order to highlight the political dimensions of language in a broad sense, Wilce examines several different speech events, to name a few: a presidential speech, ritual laments (the author's own specialty), and national narratives of war and other acts of aggression. Any thorough examination of the relationship of

language, emotion, and power would more appropriately be the subject of a book rather than a short chapter. However, Wilce is able to cover this ground in a satisfying way by highlighting the way emotions and speech are caught up together in what he calls “practice bundles” related to law, ethics, and power. Wilce rounds out his initial discussion of the political nature of “feelingful language” by citing examples from studies of presidential candidates’ use of emotional language. The chapter concludes that much ground has been gained by uncovering the co-constitutive and affect-laden nature of ideological speech acts and political power.

Wilce’s book also stands apart from previous treatments of its subject matter through its problematization of the indexical relationship between language and identity and between emotion talk and emotional states. By way of example, he highlights the process whereby whole languages come to be associated with emotion (i.e., French and Italian) or reason (Latin, German, and English). Looking to previous research by Alvares-Cáccamo, Wilce argues that associations which attribute relative levels of emotion to language are rarely made through direct communication but link speech forms with social entities through indexicality. Importantly, Wilce calls into question the extent to which language can be said to act as a sign (or a sign-vehicle) pointing to identity, all the while coexisting with it. Additionally, he argues that indexicality can be used to construct linguistic stereotypes. Wilce moves beyond drawing associations between languages and relative levels of emotion and instead examines a broad set of practices of identification and their intersection with talk and feeling. Ranging from the modern Bengali equivalent of the West’s “coffeetalk” (and its signification of the freedom and leisure, and thus higher status, of those at liberty to chat) to popular concern over appropriate language, Wilce underscores linguistic anthropology’s need to rethink the relational aspects of language and emotion to processes of identification and disidentification. (See also Deborah Cameron’s book *Verbal Hygiene*.) Compellingly, *Language and Emotion* considers with equal weight anthropological work concerning both speech acts which signify emotion and social movements inciting passion towards linguistic codes as historical and part of the process of identification. (See also Dipesh Chakrabarty’s article “Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity” in the journal *Public Culture*.)

Language and Emotion contributes to scholarly work on communication in a third sense in that it describes the linkage between cultural concepts of feeling and language and political economy, examining historical shifts in local and global ideologies of language and emotion. This departure from previous research is supported by Wilce’s discussion of ethnographies which examine the manner in which emotion comes to be pathologized in face-to-face interactions. Wilce demonstrates the way this process operates, for example, in his discussion of the influence of the “English psychiatric register on the discursive practices of Bangladeshi psychiatrists” (178). Wilce claims that the practices of Bangladeshi psychiatrists are shaped by their engagements with global psychiatry, by undergoing training in English-speaking countries, and by scouring the internet for articles in English. The adoption of the “English psychiatric register” by Bangladeshi psychiatrists leads them, in their practices as well as the psychiatry magazines and circulars that they produce, to marginalize indigenous linguistic constructions which signify something like “to be struck by” in favour of those

which signify “to suffer from.” Wilce’s discussion of his ethnographic work concerning the role played by global ideologies of language and emotion is one of the more compelling parts of this book.

Having gone through Wilce’s arguments and contributions at some length, it should be mentioned that the asset of this text – its broad scope, its empirical richness – sometimes plays out as a weakness. The use of over 100 case studies in a relatively short book makes for an ambitious survey. More often than not, his discussions of the empirical material gleaned from his and others’ fieldwork which might lend some clarity to his many insights are relatively short, and Wilce moves quickly through them without providing a thorough theoretical exegesis. Given that he tries to tackle several complex issues and to construct many intricate arguments in such a short space, he does not always articulate his accounts in a satisfying way. However, *Language and Emotion* is exciting in that it pushes us in the direction of a more comprehensive theory of linguistic practice which might galvanize future work on the relational aspects of affect and communication. And if such future work takes into account the global and local realities of “feelingful language,” as Wilce’s does, then so much the better. The issues that he raises in *Language and Emotion* could sustain an entire scholarly career, and *Language and Emotion* leaves me looking forward to Wilce’s future elaborations on the topic. Any scholar interested in moving beyond works which treat language and emotion as discrete entities would benefit from an engagement with Wilce’s book. Beyond this, *Language and Emotion* is a methodologically interesting text, serves as an example of the richness of detail that ethnography makes possible for anthropologists and other social scientists, and stands out as a book worth reading for anyone who wishes to become familiar with the breadth of inquiry that ethnography allows.

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