

# Teaching languages—understanding cultures. A few remarks on *feeling* and *experiencing* in Hindi

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**Abstract.** This article offers an overview of the expression of emotions in the Hindi language. First it discusses the Hindi word *man*, which in day-to-day communication denotes that *something* that is inside an individual, where one's thoughts are born and thanks to which one can feel. Then, with reference to the opinion of Owen M. Lynch that in Hindi there is no specific equivalent of the verb *to feel*, the argument focuses on the analysis of a few examples of sentences in English, Hindi and Polish; all the English sentences feature the verb *to feel*, though not all of them refer to emotions/emotional states. The analysis reveals that in Hindi the equivalents of the verb *to feel* are less frequently used than in English (Polish stands somewhere in between). They appear especially in situations when one wants to share feelings that have been experienced with others. Also of great importance is that in Hindi in the majority of the sentences analysed the so-called experiencer subjects, or dative experiencer subjects, are used.

## **Introductory remarks or where are our emotions born?**

Having grown up in Polish culture, the majority of Polish language users take it for granted that our thoughts are not born in the same place as our emotions. What's more, because emotions are not believed to be rational, we are prone to rate them lower, assuming thus the priority of mind and reason over emotionality (Lynch 1990b, 5, 10) (and all this even though, on the one hand, the period of Enlightenment preceded the Romanticism that swept through 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and, on the other hand, the poetry of Romanticism played a key role in forming the Polish national ethos). Once we become students of Hindi, or for that matter of most other northern Indian languages, we learn that our knowledge about the place of birth of our emotions, and not only of it, is not as obvious and simple as we may have assumed it to be.

In Hindi we come across a word *man*, derived from the Sanskrit word *manas*, glossed as: 'mind (in its widest sense applied to all the mental powers), intellect, intelligence, understanding, perception, sense, conscience, will ... (the internal organ or antaḥ-karaṇa of perception and cognition, the faculty through which thoughts enter or by which objects of sense affect the soul ... distinct from ātman and puruṣa ("spirit or soul") and belonging only to the body, like which it is—except in the Nyāya—considered perishable); the breath or living soul which escapes from the

body at death; thought, imagination' (Monier-Williams 1956, 783) that itself is a derivative of the root *man*, meaning 'to think, believe, imagine, suppose, conjecture ...; to perceive, observe, learn, know, understand, comprehend' (ibid.). The Hindi noun *man* can put a potential interpreter—from Hindi into Polish or into many other European languages—into a great deal of trouble, because its meaning includes not only a cognitive and mental process but also an emotional process and even a metaphysical element. Thus, *man* can be translated into Polish as *umysł*, *rozum* (mind), *serce* (heart) or, accordingly *dusza*; *duch* (soul; spirit) (McGregor 1993, 788–9; Prasād 1984, 869–70).<sup>1</sup> To many Europeans such a complex of meanings contained in one word seems unusual and somewhat exotic.<sup>2</sup> However, some time ago Anna Wierzbicka raised a similar problem in relation to Russian and English in her seminal article 'Soul and Mind: Linguistic Evidence for Ethnopsychology and Cultural History'.<sup>3</sup> In her article, she points to a relatively commonly used Russian word, *duša*, and observes that in English translations of Russian literature it is sometimes translated as *soul* although more frequently it is either omitted or translated as *heart* or *mind*. Of interest in this context is also an observation quoted by an American anthropologist, Owen M. Lynch, that in Shakespearian England 'the heart "thinks" as well as "feels"'.<sup>4</sup>

Native users of Hindi,<sup>5</sup> when asked where *man* is located in our bodies, answer that it is somewhere inside us. Some try to be more precise and add that it is somewhere between the head and the heart, but others protest decidedly against such a statement and say that it is not something that can be experienced physically; in the same way that it cannot be seen, one cannot say where it is located. In other words, the word *man* in the day-to-day communication of Hindi speakers denotes that *something* that is inside an individual, where one's thoughts are born and thanks to which one can feel.

### How do we say that we feel something?

Some English-speaking scholars, e.g. the aforementioned Owen M. Lynch, point to the fact that in Hindi there is no specific equivalent of the verb *to feel* (Polish [*po*]

<sup>1</sup> Of great interest in this context is a reference to the most comprehensive Hindi–Russian dictionary (Beskrovnyj 1972, 2: 336–7), which provides the following meanings: '1) *dux*; *duša*; 2) *um*, *rozum*; 3) *želanije*'. The headword *man* in this dictionary does not contain the word *serdce* (heart) as a separate gloss, but it is contained in the Russian equivalent of the phrase *man lenā* (*pokoriat' č'e-l. serdce*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. remarks of Philip Lutgendorf, who is of the opinion that no one English term can express both its cognitive and its emotional connotations (Lutgendorf 1994, 19).

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in *American Anthropologist* 91, 1 (March 1989): 41–58. In our paper, all the references are to its Polish translation; see Wierzbicka, 1999a.

<sup>4</sup> David Parkin quoted in Lynch 1990b, 15.

<sup>5</sup> This paper is based on interviews with educated native speakers of Hindi, basically from Delhi and different parts of Uttar Pradesh, which I conducted during visits to India from 1999 onwards, as well as on Hindi literature.

*czuć*, [od]czuć; *czuć się*) ‘and Indians get quite well without it’ (Lynch 1990b, 11). He also adds that in Hindi there is ‘a verbal construction *mahsūs karnā* or *mahsūs honā*, which means “it seems like” or “I feel” in general’ but ‘it is not used with any specific nouns for emotion, such as anger, or the like’ (ibid., 28). Suffice it to note here that *mahsūs karnā* (‘to feel, to suffer from; to be sensible of; to realise’) (McGregor 1993, 799) and *mahsūs honā* (‘to be perceived, etc. [by *ko*]; to seem [to]’) (ibid.) are in fact two separate conjunct verbs (Shapiro 1989, 139ff.) or verbal expressions (McGregor 1986, 56–9) that as a class consist of a noun/adjective plus *karnā* or *honā* as their verbal component (verbs of the first type are transitive, the latter are intransitive). And it is also important to add that in a different stylistic register they have the synonymic equivalents *anubhav karnā* (‘to be conscious [of, *kā*], to be alive [to]; to experience’) (McGregor 1993, 36) and *anubhav honā* (not glossed).

Further in his essay, Lynch observes that in our studies of emotions ‘some ways in which the verb “to feel” is used are of particular interest. One may say either “I am angry with you” or “I feel angry with you”. The former statement is emotionally stronger because it implies some censure of the other person; the latter, even though it contains the verb “to feel” is weaker because no such negative evaluation is implied’ (Lynch 1990b, 12–3).<sup>6</sup> Lynch also has the opinion that the use of ‘emotion words’ pivots on the social evaluative aspect rather than on their identification, which he exemplifies by saying that ‘it is most likely that one comes to know what it is “to feel” angry after learning from others what it is “to be” angry’.<sup>7</sup> His essay ‘The Social Construction of Emotion in India’, which serves as an introduction to the work *Divine Passions. The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, a collection of essays that he edited and from which I have liberally quoted his opinions, is based on an assumption that ‘emotions are fundamentally culturally constructed appraisals telling people what they *feel-experience* (emphasis added; DS)’. Agreeing in principle with Lynch as far as the assumption of the social/cultural construction of emotion is concerned, I would like to argue that he seems to forget about the social/cultural construction of the expression of emotions—to use almost his own language—when he talks about the Indian equivalent of the English verb *to feel*; symptomatically in the last of our quotations he adds one more verb, i.e. *to experience*, and puts them together in a pair. It appears that he is not really referring to the linguistic or, more precisely, psycholin-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Wierzbicka’s observations on the difference between two Polish sentences *Wstył mi* (I feel shame) and *Wstydzę się* (I am ashamed of). She states that the first sentence relates to a ‘passive’ inner state inaccessible to the outside observer, while the second sentence implies an active inner attitude and some kind of external expression. See Wierzbicka 1999c, 178.

<sup>7</sup> He refers to the work of Errol Bedford, ‘Emotions and statements about them’, in *The Social Construction of Emotions*, ed. R. Harré, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 15–31.

guistic reality of Hindi language users but to the realm of linguistic structures typical of English language users.

Let us consider a few sentences in English, Hindi and Polish that will illustrate my point. All the English sentences feature the verb *to feel*, and what is also important is that not all of them refer to emotions/emotional states.

1. I felt angry with him.

*mujhe uspar krodh/gussā āyā*<sup>8</sup>

Zdenerwowałem się na niego./ Rozłościłem się na niego.<sup>9</sup>

2. I feel hungry and sleepy.

*mujhe bhūkh lagī hai aur nīd ātī hai/mujhe bhūkh aur nīd lagtī hai*

Jestem głodny i śpiący.

(Comp. Polish sentences: Jestem głodny/śpiący—Czuję się głodny/śpiący)

3. What do you feel when you love someone?

*tumko kaisā lagtā hai, jab kisīko/kisīse prem/pyār karte ho?*

*kisīko/kisīse prem/pyār karte hue, tum kaisā anubhav/mahsūs karte ho?*

Co czujesz, kiedy kogoś kochasz?

4. How do you feel when you see people fighting?

*logō ko larṭe dekh tumhē kaisā lagtā hai/tum kaisā anubhav/mahsūs karte ho?*

Co czujesz/ Jak się czujesz, kiedy widzisz bijących się ludzi?

5. You can never tell what she is feeling.

*vah kyā anubhav/mahsūs kar rahī hai/vah kyā soc rahī hai, tum kabhī nahī batā sakte*

Nigdy nie jesteś w stanie powiedzieć, co ona czuje.

6. I feel better now.

*ab maī (pahle se) acchā hū // ab maī (pahle se) behtar anubhav/mahsūs kartā hū*

Teraz czuję się lepiej.

The above-quoted examples, which can be multiplied, indicate that in Hindi the equivalents of the verb *to feel*, i.e. *anubhav/mahsūs karnā*, are less frequently used than in English (Polish stands somewhere in between). They are most commonly used

<sup>8</sup> Only the most common variants in Hindi are given, those which my informants perceived as the most natural. Some informants also gave here sentences including the noun *nārāzgī* and the adjective *nārāz*: *maī usse nārāz huā/mujhe usse narazgī huī*.

<sup>9</sup> But a Polish sentence with the verb *czuć*, e.g. \*Czułem się na niego zdenerwowany/zły, is incorrect. Note: in order not to multiply forms, only sentences with a subject/verb in the masculine gender have been given.

in situations when one wants to share the feeling with others, which is particularly visible in sentences 3 and 4. On the basis of other linguistic data, one can venture the statement that in Hindi such communication is more about sharing experiences than sharing feelings as such. Therefore the first part of Lynch's observation that '*mahsūs karnā*, [...] means [...] "I feel" in general' is right, though with one exception; the pronoun *I* should be substituted with the infinitive particle *to*. However, Lynch seems not to be right when saying 'it is not used with any specific nouns for emotion, such as anger, or the like'. If we, referring to our inner feelings and calling them by their actual names, intend to share them with others, e.g., we want to say in Hindi *I felt anger*, we have to use the sentence *mujhe gussā mahsūs huā* or *mujhe krodh (kā) anubhav huā*.

Of vital importance here is also to note that in the same and similar situations the sentences with the so-called experiencer subject<sup>10</sup> or dative experiencer subject are very common in Hindi, and they also form the majority among the quoted examples. The basic structure of such sentences includes:

1) the experiencer marked with the dative postposition *ko*, or without it in the case of pronominal objective forms such as *mujhe*, *use*, etc., (such a nominal phrase functions as the logical subject of a sentence);

2) and, typically, a verb *honā*, *ānā*, or *lagnā*.

An extended structure also includes a nominative-marked object/theme that functions as a grammatical subject with which the verb (*honā*, *ānā*, or *lagnā*) agrees.<sup>11</sup>

Here one can wonder, what all this has to do with cultures, ethnopsychology or psycholinguistics. As has been observed by many scholars, the structure of a language embodies in itself a *certain worldview* or *philosophy*, although to prove it in an accurate and verifiable manner is an entirely different task (Wierzbicka 1999b, 341). However, there can be no doubt that a thorough analysis of syntactic phenomena typical of a given language can serve as a valuable source of information on the ways of thinking common to a given linguistic community (ibid).

Tentative conclusions that can be drawn from the observation of the relatively high frequency of dative experiencer subjects in Hindi syntactical constructions, when set in their cultural context, may lead us, in my opinion, right to the traditional Indian concept of an individual; an individual that is not perceived as an axis around which revolves the rest of the world, but as an individual that is part and parcel of a larger milieu through which their (meaning both an individual's and of the constitutive elements of his/her milieu) identities are manifested.

<sup>10</sup> For more on experiencer subjects in South Asian languages see Verma, Mohanan 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the sentences: I like—*mujhe pasand hai* (but also: *mā pasand kartā hū*); I need—*mujhe cāhie*, How did you feel?—*āpko kaisā lagā?*, etc.

Of course, proving this assumption calls for much more meticulous analysis, which could not be carried out for the purpose of the present paper, the intention of which was to share these preliminary thoughts with others, understanding them as an indication of the possibility of future studies in this regard.

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