

7.1 Why not to base scientific constructs on everyday language

Why not just study vernacular usage? Aren’t people’s (reports of) the phenomenology of experiences definitive—at least of emotions? Well, no. People simply do not understand much about how their minds work, and much of what they believe about their minds is mistaken. Indeed, millennia of introspection has yielded very modest and often incorrect accounts of mental processes. Decades of research in psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience are only just beginning to construct limited, partial, tentative understandings of the mind—but certainly much better understandings than those ever produced by introspection and intuition. So while we listen attentively to our informants’, respondents’, and participants’ reflections on their introspections, taking into account and trying to make sense of their reports, we are not concerned if our conceptualization is not entirely congruent with anyone’s intuitions about how their minds, their social relations, or their cultures work. Not the least among our reasons for not being bound by informants’ intuitions about the kinds of emotions they feel or the distinctions among them, there is the fact that informants’ taxonomies differ from culture to culture, and are historically unstable. If we were to adopt one informant’s intuitive taxonomy at one point in one culture, we would violate other informants’ intuitive taxonomies: There is no universal consensus intuition about the phenomenological taxonomy of emotions (Wierzbicka 1999). So for kama muta, as for other psychological and social constructs, intuitive introspection cannot rule science.

Just as we cannot rely on intuitive concepts or taxonomies of mental states, we cannot rely on the folk categories implied by natural languages. No vernacular word in any culture encompass the full range of kama muta experiences and, as the same time, is limited to only kama muta experiences. Indeed, we should not expect a vernacular language to have a lexeme that exactly denotes any psychological state or process, or any other scientific construct or phenomenon. To make this error is to commit what we can call the lexical fallacy. While Figure 2 schematically depicts just one term from each language, each language has a congeries of relevant terms; which term should we pick? Does each affect word in each language represent a distinct and delimited psychological state or process? Moved, touched, rapture, the feels, heart-warming, feeling emotional, feeling sentimental, longing, nostalgia, etcetera denote intersecting sets of experiences, but the usage of each differs somewhat. Does each designate a somewhat different emotion, distinct from the others? If so, then there exist many thousands of affective states that differ substantially from culture to culture—or rather, from language community to language community. Moreover, this would imply that when a fluent speaker of multiple languages shifts from one language to another, her entire system of emotional states shifts, with new emotions emerging and some of those of the other language vanishing. The meaning of any word also depends on and varies with the context; so in each language is each word in each context a somewhat different emotion? If speakers use an emotion word
somewhat differently, does that mean that the emotions that they feel and that they observe are somewhat different? Furthermore, if we assume that every lexeme corresponds closely with a psychological entity, then what about adjectivally or adverbially modified words, or longer phrases and utterances: are each of them psychological entities, too? If so, then there exist an unlimited number of kinds of emotional experiences. While many contemporary anthropologists and perhaps some social-constructionist psychologists and philosophers would draw precisely this conclusion, we posit, on the contrary, that there are only a limited number of kinds of emotional experiences, none of which are precisely or consistently denoted by vernacular terms in any language. However, we posit that all aspects of any one kind of emotional experience are flavored and given meaning by cultural precedents, prototypes, paradigms, and precepts. That is, while the kinds of emotions are the same everywhere, produced by a limited number of psychological processes, the meanings and hence the experience of any kind of emotion vary differ greatly.

One of the most difficult and yet fundamental scientific challenges is to identify natural kinds of entities of any sort. The words of everyday language very often fail to correspond to any natural kind. The vernacular word and concept star is a congeries of very disparate entities – ‘suns’ of diverse types, planets, supernovae, galaxies, etcetera. Similarly, neither tree not vegetable is a biologically meaningful natural kind. The English word fish is not a biologically meaningful category, either; it includes animals that are taxonomically disparate, while excluding animals that don’t look like prototypical fish, but share crucial and distinctive biological features with other Craniata that are descended from the same ancestor. The same is true of emotion words in any language. Pride is most commonly used by English speakers in the West to denote the emotion of superiority that a person feels when an authority ranking relationship with a subordinate person or group suddenly intensifies. Yet it is also common to speak of one’s pride in one’s children, team, military unit, ethnicity, race, or nation, when the speaker is referring to a sudden intensification of her CS relationship with that person or group. There may be an element of authority ranking intensification alongside the CS intensification, but often there is not – the emotion referred to is simply a wonderful heightened sense of belonging. When a person says she is proud of her nation, she isn’t necessarily feeling that her nation is superior to others; she’s feeling a sudden joyous communion of patriotism. In other words, in this instance she’s using pride to refer to kama muta. So we can’t identify or distinguish among her emotions purely according to the words she uses for them. When she says she’s feeling proud – or nostalgic or emotional, or can’t find any word to label her emotion, we can and should look carefully to see if she’s feeling kama muta.
7.2 Natural kinds of human mental systems that have evolved to be necessarily realized in culture-specific forms.

Compare the conception of kama muta with other forms of social coordination that are based on an evolved psychological proclivity, where that innate proclivity can only be realized in cultural-specific forms. People everywhere copulate and engage in other kinds of sex; no one would doubt that human sexuality is an evolved adaptation, yet sexual practices, the meaning, and the experience of sex are incredibly varied. More specifically, there is no doubt that sexual attraction and arousal are universal, with a psychological foundation that, while individually variable, has innate roots. But every culture elaborates, direct, represses, or expresses sexual attraction and arousal in more or less particular ways. Kama muta is like sexual attraction – it has an evolved, highly structured psychological foundation that is implemented in culture-specific ways.

This is even clearer for ‘language.’ Most linguists agree that human ‘language’ is a natural kind, despite its great variations across time and communities, and the fact that it can operate through signs, writing, digital media and so forth. Though there is no broad consensus on any necessary and sufficient features that define language, no one would attempt to understand any human community, any human relationship, or any human life without reference to language. Furthermore, comparison among the structures, lexicons, uses, cultural evolution, and writing systems of languages require agreement that the entities being compared are languages, despite their differences.

Similarly, anthropologists construe marriage as a valid construct, though in any culture some or all of its most common features may be absent from some or all kinds of marriage. Marriage usually involves a combination of: an indefinitely long-term relationship that is difficult for one or both parties to dissolve, a relationship created by a witnessed ritual, formation of a social and legal unit, rights to a partner’s sexuality, restrictions on one or both partners’ other sexual partners, rights and obligations regarding the children born by the woman or women (if any) and assignment of such children to the father’s or mother’s kin group (or to both), naming of children in a way that identifies them with one or both parents, rights of children to inherit from parents or parents’ kin, diverse and extensive cooperation between the partners in production and consumption and corollary rights to what is produced, the wife’s regular preparation of food for her husband(s), rights and obligations regarding certain decisions concerning one or both parties (such as the power to control or have a voice in the other’s activities), co-residence, alliance between the partners’ respective kin groups, and so forth. In all cultures, most marriages are relationships between men and women, though often a man may be married to multiple women simultaneously, and sometimes a woman may be married to multiple men. In all cultures, marriage has most of these features, but in any given culture at any given point in
history some or all forms of marriage may lack any of these features. (For example, contemporary Western marriage is atypical in that is usually does not create any substantial alliance between the spouses’ respective kin groups. Nuer ‘ghost marriage’ is atypical in that a woman marries a deceased man.) Despite having no necessary and sufficient defining features, marriage is an essential construct for understanding any society, any community, and any person’s life. The same is true of kama muta.