

# Perception of Emotion Is Culture-Specific

September 15, 2010

Want to know how a Japanese person is feeling? Pay attention to the tone of his voice, not his face. That's what other Japanese people would do, anyway. A new study examines how Dutch and Japanese people assess others' emotions and finds that Dutch people pay attention to the facial expression more than Japanese people do.

"As humans are social animals, it's important for humans to understand the emotional state of other people to maintain good relationships," says Akihiro Tanaka of Waseda Institute for Advanced Study in Japan. "When a man is smiling, probably he is happy, and when he is crying, probably he's sad." Most of the research on understanding the emotional state of others has been done on facial expression; Tanaka and his colleagues in Japan and the Netherlands wanted to know how vocal tone and facial expressions work together to give you a sense of someone else's emotion.

For the study, Tanaka and colleagues made a video of actors saying a phrase with a neutral meaning—"Is that so?"—two ways: angrily and happily. This was done in both Japanese and Dutch. Then they edited the videos so that they also had recordings of someone saying the phrase angrily but with a happy face, and happily with an angry face. Volunteers watched the videos in their native language and in the other language and were asked whether the person was happy or angry. They found that Japanese participants paid attention to the voice more than Dutch people did—even when they were instructed to judge the emotion by the faces and to ignore the voice. The results are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

This makes sense if you look at the differences between the way Dutch and Japanese people communicate, Tanaka speculates. "I think Japanese people tend to hide their negative emotions by smiling, but it's more difficult to hide negative emotions in the voice." Therefore, Japanese people may be used to listening for emotional cues. This could lead to confusion when a Dutch person, who is used to the voice and the face matching, talks with a Japanese person; they may see a smiling face and think everything is fine, while failing to notice the upset tone in the voice. "Our findings can contribute to better communication between different cultures," Tanaka says.