



Academy of Aphasia 2011

Toward an Expanded Operationalization of the Verbal Expression of Affective Meanings

Gloria Streit Olness^{a,*}, Maria Muñoz^b

^a University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, USA

^b Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Background

A recent historical review and prospective account of neurolinguistics and communication neuroscience (Joanette, Ansaldo, Carbonnel, Ska, Kahlaoui, & Nespoulous, 2008) speculated on the increased contribution of emotional neurosciences to future advances in the field. The perception, expression, and experience of emotion is potentially altered in a variety of neurogenic conditions (van Lancker & Pachana, 1998), including aphasia, right hemisphere disorders, traumatic brain injury, dementia, epilepsy, and a variety of psychiatric disorders. Many channels are used to operationalize emotion in clinical assessment and research (Borod, Tabert, Santschi, & Strauss, 2000) including facial, prosodic, gestural, verbal, postural, graphic, and musical channels. Of the several ways to operationalize emotion, the verbal expressive channel has received relatively little attention as a research and clinical tool (as noted, for example, by Armstrong (2005); Bloom, Borod, Obler, & Gerstman (1992); and Sherratt (2007)) and has been operationalized almost exclusively as expression of emotive lexicon.

A parallel and extensive literature on narrative evaluative devices, based on the seminal work by Labov (1972), and also derived from Halliday's work in functional linguistics (Martin, 2000), provides a systematic account of naturally occurring verbal emotional expression, drawn from all levels of linguistic structure—phonology, lexicon, morpho-syntax and discourse—and from prosody. Evaluative devices express speaker emotion, attitude, and opinion through intensification of information (e.g., repetition, lexical choice, pitch peaks), slowing or suspension of the narrative event line (e.g. use of direct speech), mention of unrealized or potential events (e.g., through negation) and comparison (e.g. via superlatives, metaphor).

This evaluative framework is critiqued and assessed for its potential to enhance the research and clinical operationalization of the verbal expression of emotion.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: golness@unt.edu.

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