ABSTRACT

The Language of Emotions Questionnaire (LEQ) is a revised test to examine whether emotions are described using the same colors in different countries.

METHOD

Participants - We recruited 388 participants from the United States and India using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The participants were asked to rate the color associations for each emotion.

RESULTS

Results showed that happiness was associated with blue in the United States, but not in India. Sadness was associated with yellow in the United States, and blue in India. Anger was associated with red in the United States, and blue in India. Fear was associated with black in both countries.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that color associations for emotions vary across cultures. This suggests that emotional communication is influenced by cultural context.

REFERENCES


In our increasingly globalized society, it is more important than ever for people to be able to perceive the emotional connotations of written material. People from different countries communicate with each other through written media, such as email, blogs, Facebook, and text messaging. With the absence of visual cues and gestures, successful communication can be difficult. In particular, it can be difficult for people to communicate emotions, which are essential for conveying ideas which are most important, which deadlines matter, when someone is joking, etc. When discussing emotions verbally, people often use figurative language (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987). For example, someone might say "I feel blue." Literary analysts have found associations of emotions with certain colors. For example, anger is associated with red (Kovecses, 2005). "Anger is red" is known as a conceptual metaphor, in which the descriptor "red" can be used to connote anger (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Not all of these conceptual metaphors may be used in all cultures. The purpose of this study is to explicitly test whether seven color-based conceptual metaphors are used in two different cultures, the United States and India.

To accomplish this, we recruited 388 participants from the United States and India using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The participants were asked whether each of four emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, and fear) was associated with various colors and hues. The results supported five of the seven conceptual metaphors. In both the United States and India, happiness was associated with bright, anger with dark and red, fear with dark, and sadness with dark. Fear was not associated with white in either country. Sadness was associated with blue in the United States, but not in India. Thus, there are differences between how happiness is associated in the United States and India-associate emotions with colors. Because of these differences, one should be careful using color-based metaphors for emotions. Indeed, one should be careful using any type of figurative language when communicating with someone from a different country.

Is Sadness Blue? Cross-Cultural Differences of Color-Emotion Associations

Kimberly A. Barchard, Kelly E. Grob, and Paul M. Kirsch

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

In our increasingly globalized society, it is more important than ever for people to be able to perceive the emotional connotations of written material. People from different countries communicate with each other through written media, such as email, blogs, Facebook, and text messaging. With the absence of visual cues and gestures, successful communication can be difficult. In particular, it can be difficult for people to communicate emotions, which are essential for conveying ideas which are most important, which deadlines matter, when someone is joking, etc. When discussing emotions verbally, people often use figurative language (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987). For example, someone might say “I feel blue.” Literary analysts have found associations of emotions with certain colors. For example, anger is associated with red (Kovecses, 2005). “Anger is red” is known as a conceptual metaphor, in which the descriptor “red” can be used to connote anger (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Not all of these conceptual metaphors may be used in all cultures. The purpose of this study is to explicitly test whether seven color-based conceptual metaphors are used in two different cultures, the United States and India. To accomplish this, we recruited 388 participants from the United States and India using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The participants were asked whether each of four emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, and fear) was associated with various colors and hues. The results supported five of the seven conceptual metaphors. In both the United States and India, happiness was associated with bright, anger with dark and red, fear with dark, and sadness with dark. Fear was not associated with white in either country. Sadness was associated with blue in the United States, but not in India. Thus, there are differences between how happiness is associated in the United States and India-associate emotions with colors. Because of these differences, one should be careful using color-based metaphors for emotions. Indeed, one should be careful using any type of figurative language when communicating with someone from a different country.

INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly globalized society, people from different countries are communicating with each other more and more often, particularly through written media. When people describe their emotions, they often use metaphors (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987). Will a person in India understand what is meant by the sentence, “I’m feeling blue today,” or will there be problems of interpretation? The purpose of this study is to determine if emotions are described using the same colors in different countries.

Literary research has found that emotions are associated with specific colors. For example, sadness is associated with blue, anger with red, and fear with black (Kovecses, 2005). “Anger is red” is referred to as a conceptual metaphor, in which one concept (the descriptor) provides information about another concept (the emotion) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Extrinsic support for the conceptual metaphors can be found in the color wheel, which associates colors with emotions, and in facial blood loss when asked what color represents fear (Maalej, 2007). Moreover, people may not think of facial blood loss when asked what colors fear is associated with. Instead, individuals seem to link fear with external factors that cause fear, such as blackness and darkness. In addition, it is possible that a more realistic conceptual metaphor is “scared is white.” In the United States, “scared is white” is widely known divinities is the blue goddess Krishna, who is associated with divine and human love (“Krishna,” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014). Moreover, blue is associated with success in India and is the color of many Indian sports teams. Communication with other countries is widespread and unavoidable in the new globalized economy. This study showed that there are some differences between the United States and India in how people associate emotions with colors. Because of these differences, one should be careful using any type of figurative language when communicating with someone from a different country.