



Don't be blue! Sadness in the United States and India
Joanne Angosta, Kelly E. Grob, Meg Holly, & Kimberly A. Barchard
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Reference: Angosta, J., Grob, K. E., Holly, M., & Barchard, K. A. (2015, April). *Don't be blue! Sadness in the United States and India*. Paper presented at Western Psychological Association convention, Las Vegas, NV.

Contact Information: Kimberly A. Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, kim.barchard@unlv.edu

ABSTRACT

Understanding people from other countries is more important than ever due to technological advances that have dramatically increased international communication. Understanding their emotions is perhaps the hardest – especially when they come from another culture. People often describe emotions using figurative language (e.g., “Love is a red, red rose”). However, such language might depend on the country. In the United States, people often use the phrase “I’m feeling blue” to indicate sadness. It is important to assess whether this phrase would be understood cross-culturally – especially in countries with which we have strong cultural, historic, and economic ties. One such country is India.

A total of 429 participants (214 from the United States, 215 from India) completed this study through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowd-sourcing platform that allows researchers to recruit participants in specified countries. We found that more than two-thirds of participants from the United States but only one-tenth of participants from India indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. Therefore, people in the United States should be careful about using this piece of figurative language when talking to people in India: They may be misunderstood. This serves as a warning regarding the use of all figurative language when talking with people in other countries. It may be particularly dangerous in text-only asynchronous communications (e.g., blogs and emails) where nonverbal gestures and expressions cannot be used to indicate meaning and it may be impossible to ask for clarification. Being aware of figurative language when communicating internationally may help build cultural and economic ties around the globe.

INTRODUCTION

People use figurative language in everyday communication. In particular, descriptions of feelings are sometimes based upon colors, and this is seen cross-culturally (Amouzadeh, Tavangar, & Sorahi, 2011; Sakamoto & Utsumi, 2014). In the research literature, anger is associated with feeling red, envy is associated with feeling green, and sadness is associated with feeling blue (Amouzadeh et al.; Barrick, Taylor, & Correa, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, in the United States, we often use the phrase “I feel blue” to indicate sadness.

Because of technological advances, communication between different countries and cultures has become commonplace. It is therefore important to determine if people associate emotions with the same colors cross-culturally. Some color-emotion associations appear to be universal, such as associating red with anger; others, such as feeling green with envy, are not (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Amouzadeh et al.). The purpose of this paper is to examine the cross-cultural universality of the association between sadness and blue.

This study compares the association between sadness and blue in the United States and India. India was chosen as the comparison country because the U.S. has strong cultural, historical, and economic ties with India. Every day, business people, politicians, researchers, and others communicate between the United States and India. However, these countries are marked by vast differences in religion, culture, education, technology, and language, and so there may be differences in how people in these cultures' use figurative language to communicate about emotions.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 429 individuals (172 females and 257 males) were recruited for this study through MTurk. They received 35 cents for completing this 10-minute study. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 66 (mean 30.73, SD 9.31) and were from the United States (214 participants) and India (215 participants).

Measures

As part of a larger online study, participants indicated whether sadness was associated with feeling blue. Participants were also asked to complete a self-reported demographic questionnaire, which asked participants to rate their familiarity with English and to identify their race, sex, age, first language, and their country of residence.

Data Analysis

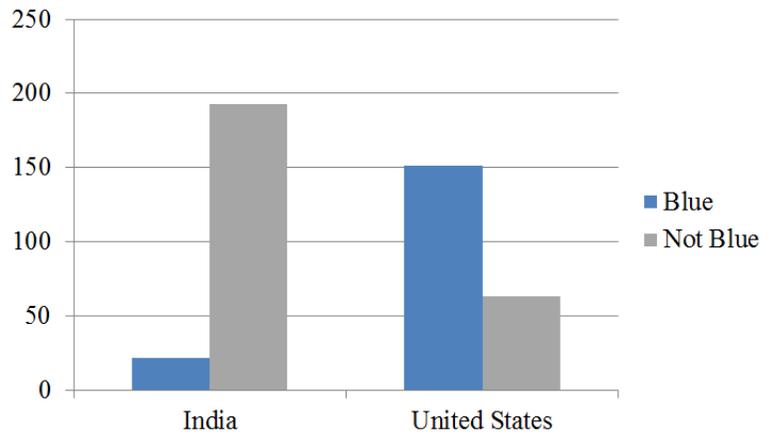
We used a chi-square test to determine if more than 50% of people indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. We repeated this analysis in the two countries. Next, we compared the proportion of people who indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue in the two countries, using the chi-square test of independence.

RESULTS

In India, only 10% of participants indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. This was significantly less than 50% (chi-square(1) = 136.01, $p < 0.001$). In the United States, 71% of participants indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. This was significantly more than 50% (chi-square(1) = 36.18, $p < 0.001$). The proportion was significantly higher in the United States (Fisher's Exact Test, $p < 0.001$). See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Number of People Who Indicated That Sadness is Associated with Feeling Blue



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if sadness was associated with feeling blue in both the United States and India. In the United States, feeling blue was strongly associated with sadness. Indeed, in the U.S., the association of blue with sadness goes at least as far back as the 1600's, when "blue devils" were said to cause melancholy and depression ("Blue," Oxford, 2013). In India, feeling blue was not commonly associated with sadness. This might be because Krishna, one of the Hindu deities, is associated with perfect love and has a blue body (Mahony, 1987).

Given these differences between the United States and India, people should avoid saying "I feel blue" or using similar phrases, when talking with people in India. They may be misunderstood. The use of "blue" may be particularly problematic when using text-only asynchronous communications, such as letters, papers, blogs, and emails, because these media lack the nonverbal cues that often disambiguate verbal material, and because communication partners cannot ask questions to clarify what someone meant. Indeed, people should be cautious about using any type of figurative language when communicating in writing with people from any culture besides their own. In our global society, we are all likely to work with colleagues from other countries. And when we write papers, we must assume they will be read by professionals in other countries, who may be using English as an additional language. To facilitate good relations and clear communication, we should avoid figurative language where possible and be quick to rephrase ourselves using literal words, when someone seems to be having difficulty understanding us.

REFERENCES

- Blue. (n.d.). In *Oxford English Dictionary: The definitive record of the English language*. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20577?rskey=GZqKVQ&result=1#eid>
- Amouzadeh, M., Tavangar, M., Sorahi, M. A. (2012). A cognitive study of colour terms in Persian and English. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 32, 238-245. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.01.035
- Barrick, C. B., Taylor, D., & Correa, E. I. (2002). Color sensitivity and mood disorders: biology or metaphor? *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 68(1), 67-71. doi:10.1016/S0165-0327(00)00358-X
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mahony, W. K. (1987). Perspectives on Krishna's various personalities. *History of Religions*, 26(3), 333-335. doi:10.1086/463085
- Sakamoto, M., & Utsumi, A. (2014). Adjective metaphors evoke negative meanings. *PLoS one*, 9(2). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0089008