

Don't be Blue! Sadness in the United States and India

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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

Frequently, we utilize figurative language in daily communication. Although figurative language does not match the literal meanings of words or phrases, the actual meaning is still understood (Glucksberg, 2001). For example, descriptions of feelings are sometimes based upon colors, and this is seen cross-culturally (Amouzadeh, Tavangar, & Sorahi, 2011; Sakamoto & Utsumi, 2014). These colors include red, green, and blue; they are used for describing emotions which include the following: anger is associated with feeling red, envy is associated with feeling green, and sadness is associated with feeling blue (Amouzadeh et al.; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Barrick, Taylor, & Correa, 2002).

Because of technological advances, communication between different countries and cultures has become commonplace. In order to aid understanding across cultures, it is important to look at how people communicate emotions through figurative language. Although we often consider sadness within our culture in the United States, it is important to assess the similarities and differences in the interpretation of sadness cross-culturally – especially in countries with which we have strong cultural, historical, and economic ties. One such country is India.

Many cultures, such as the United States and India, represent emotions via colors; the emotions associated with a certain color, however, differ between cultures (Amouzadeh et al., 2011). Some color and emotion associations appear to be universal, such as associating feeling red with anger; others, such as feeling green with envy, are not (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Amouzadeh et al.). Associating sadness with feeling blue is an example of figurative language that is commonly used in the United States, (Barrick et al., 2002) but is that the case in India as well? These countries are marked by vast differences in religion, culture, education, technology, and language, so it is important to analyze the similarity between how the two cultures use figurative language as communication between them increases. This greater understanding of comprehension will assist those that communicate cross-culturally in the interpretation of potentially overlooked emotions. This paper will explore the hypothesis that sadness is associated with feeling blue in both the United States and India in hopes of better communication across the globe.

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.

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



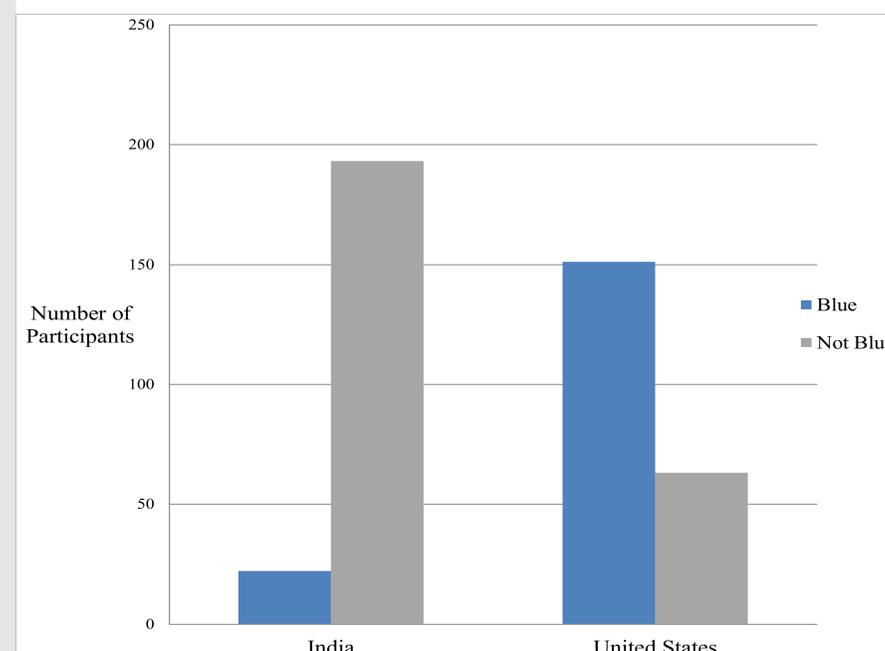
other countries, who may be using English as an additional language. To facilitate good relations and clear communication, we should avoid figurative language where possible and be quick to rephrase ourselves using literal words, when someone seems to be having difficulty understanding us.



RESULTS

In India, only 10% of participants indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. This was significantly less than 50% ($\chi^2(1) = 136.01, p < 0.001$). In the United States, 71% of participants indicated that sadness was associated with feeling blue. This was significantly more than 50% ($\chi^2(1) = 36.18, p < 0.001$). The proportion was significantly higher in the United States (Fisher's Exact Test, $p < 0.001$). See Figure 1.

Figure 1
Number of Participants Who Stated SADNESS IS BLUE



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