



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

What the Theory of Affective Pragmatics Does and Doesn't Do

Fischer, A.H.; Sauter, D.A.

DOI

[10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100](https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100)

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Psychological Inquiry

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

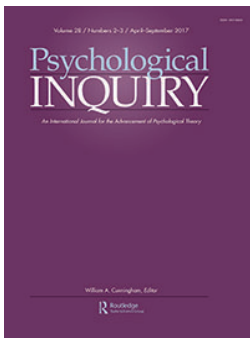
Fischer, A. H., & Sauter, D. A. (2017). What the Theory of Affective Pragmatics Does and Doesn't Do. *Psychological Inquiry*, 28(2-3), 190-193.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Psychological Inquiry

An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory

ISSN: 1047-840X (Print) 1532-7965 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpli20>

What the Theory of Affective Pragmatics Does and Doesn't Do

Agneta H. Fischer & Disa A. Sauter

To cite this article: Agneta H. Fischer & Disa A. Sauter (2017) What the Theory of Affective Pragmatics Does and Doesn't Do, *Psychological Inquiry*, 28:2-3, 190-193, DOI: [10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100](https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2017.1338100>



Published online: 18 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 68



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



What the Theory of Affective Pragmatics Does and Doesn't Do

Agneta H. Fischer and Disa A. Sauter

Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

The theory of affective pragmatics (TAP) is proposed as a theory on “what emotional expressions ‘do’ from a communicative point of view” (p. 171). We think that Andrea Scarantino’s (this issue) aim to present a more integrative theory on emotion expression is laudable, and we also appreciate his aim to bridge the gap between two opposing theories on emotion expressions, namely, Ekman’s Basic Emotion Theory (Ekman, 1992) and Fridlund’s Behavioral Ecology View (1994). In this commentary we question some of premises of TAP, point some issues that need further clarification, and assess the overall added value of TAP, giving existing theory and research.

Which Phenomena is TAP Trying to Explain?

TAP is proposed as a theory on what emotional expressions *do* from a communicative point of view. This question can be examined in two ways: (a) How emotional expressions (EE) have evolved and thus what function(s) they have been selected for during their evolution (and for which species and under which circumstances). These questions relate to the *production* of EE, or the *why*-question. (b) We can also ask what kind(s) of information can be inferred from an emotional expression by observers as a way of examining what emotional expressions do. This question concerns the *perception* of EE, or the *what*-question. To us it is not clear whether Scarantino’s conception of EE is primarily based on the answer to the first or to the second question, or whether he thinks that both production and perception are intrinsically intertwined, or whether he considers this distinction irrelevant. On one hand, he says that EE

only presupposes that I voluntarily or involuntarily provide you through my emotional expression with natural information about my being in an emotional state that would be satisfied by a certain kind of behavior on your part (p. 178)

On the other hand, he argues that he will disregard communicative effects, which are “the consequences brought by expressing emotions” (p. 177). Although these two quotes seem to suggest that TAP is primarily based on the production of emotional expressions, the taxonomy of the communicative moves suggests that the perception of EE is equally important. We think it is crucial that the relation between production and perception is better clarified, for both theoretical and methodological reasons.

It further remains unclear what counts as an *emotional* expression. In rightly avoiding an unproductive discussion

about the definition of emotions, Scarantino seems to implicitly define expressions as emotional, if observers can infer an emotion. This is a practical solution to this definitional problem, but it still raises the question of whether EE that are not perceived as emotional, but still were produced while experiencing an emotion, would count as EE. Take the example of the vocalization of relief. There is cross-cultural evidence showing that humans from different cultural groups produce sighs in response to a prototypical relief scenario. However, relief vocalizations are not reliably recognized as expressing relief in all cultural groups (Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010). Whether observers can infer other information from sighs of relief remains to be seen, but this is certainly a phylogenetically old EE (meaning that it should have had time to take on a secondary communicative function). Indeed, there is evidence that even rats produce sighs (Soltysik & Jelen, 2005) in response to a relief-eliciting stimulus (a stimulus indicating that the expected shock would be omitted). The question thus is whether sighs of relief would count as EE in TAP, if the vocalization does not appear to communicate an emotional state on the basis of perception data. In other words, the question is how TAP deals with the fact that some facial expressions may be *produced* in an emotional state but not recognized as such. This brings us to the next important assumption of TAP.

TAP’s Assumptions

Emotional Expressions Need Not Be Signals

Scarantino takes the position that EE have evolved as signals, that is, that they have been selected during evolution because of their communicative functions. He makes this claim most strongly on p. 178: “Signaling, the genus of which emotional expressions are a species, is widely acknowledged to have the *primary* [emphasis added] function of influencing a recipient to the advantage of the signaler.” Although communication has no doubt been a primary source of evolutionary pressure for some EE, this broad claim is based on a premise that is worth examining: Are all EE products of primarily communicative evolutionary pressure? We argue that it is premature to reject the possibility that some EE have not evolved as signals, that is, they were selected primarily—or even exclusively—for non-communicative functions. This is consistent with research showing that fear expressions enhance, whereas disgust expressions diminish sensory acquisition (Susskind et al., 2008).

Thus, some EE currently serve nonsocial, individually adaptive functions. Consider the case of pain. If you burn yourself on a hot stove, you may wince, withdraw your hand, and grimace, that is, your vocal, postural, and facial configurations change. These changes may allow others to make inferences about how you feel, what has happened to you, and even what you may do next (e.g., exclaim a profanity). This, of course does not mean that the others' inferences are what caused those changes to occur in you. It may—or may not, depending on the situation—be detrimental to you that others can infer information based on you EE, but the evolutionary advantage of the nonsocial adaptive functions could be sufficiently strong that it would still be adaptive to produce the EE, both during evolution and at a given moment right now. If widening your eyes in reaction to an immediate threat confers a larger evolutionary advantage than the potential evolutionary cost of someone else being able to infer in a fight that you are a wimp from you widening your eyes, this EE would still continue to be selected for. This reasoning suggests that EE should not necessarily be assumed to have evolved as signals, or being best understood as tokens of communication. Nevertheless, such EE may still allow observers to infer social information, but this does not necessarily mean that the primary selection pressure during evolution was social. In fact, the EE often communicated by someone in pain, namely, aggressive behavior, may be opposite to the natural information communicated by a person in pain, namely, soliciting help or comfort, implying that if the cause of the pain had nothing to do with the other person (e.g., Berkowitz, 1990).

Regardless of their evolutionary history, it is still worthwhile to ask the question of what EE do *now*. The next question then becomes whether EE are currently communicative, that is, whether they are produced for communicative purposes at the present time in evolution. Imagine someone watching a disgusting film fragment on television on his own. Does the expression of disgust on his face here communicate anything to anyone? How could we explain someone producing EE (in this case, a facial expression of disgust) when being alone? Fridlund (1991, 1994) referred to the imaginary presence of others, which he called “implicit sociality.” On this view, we are always thinking about others when producing EE. Another, we would argue more parsimonious, possibility is that the disgusted EE, produced when alone in response to a disgusting film, is not communicative. The production of this EE in this context does not mean that this EE could not in principle also warn others, or that others could infer social information from them, but it seems a stretch to argue that EE always engage in communicative moves (see also Horstmann, 2003).

We thus question the premise that emotional expressions are a species of the genus signal. This raises the question of whether TAP rejects EE being signs or whether TAP acknowledges that some EE are signs, but the theory does not account for them. Another possibility is that TAP considers the difference negligible between EE that evolved as signs and as signals and applies the same framework to both. If so, this would seem to assume that signs and signals serve the same communicative functions to the same degrees and in the same ways despite the different

evolutionary pressures that they would have resulted from. We encourage Scarantino to clarify this point.

Voluntary Versus Involuntary Expressions

Another assumption that needs clarification is the role of volition and its relation with natural information. TAP argues that EE can be “reflexively caused by the emotions they express” but that they often are not (p. 171), and ambitiously attempts to account for both involuntary and intentional EEs, because both carry information, although different in nature. Thus, polite smiles communicate that someone merely wants a social connection but is not necessarily happy, whereas Duchenne smiles would communicate that someone feels happy and wants to connect as well. It is not clear to us how voluntary EE relate to involuntary EE, because some of TAPs claims may not work for both. Surely, involuntary EEs, which may be governed by display rules or strategic motives, by definition do not communicate emotions in the same way as involuntary automatic EE. The Expressive_{EE} will by implication always be different for voluntary and involuntary EE. In addition, TAP claims that EE have natural meaning because of statistical correlations between emotion types and expression types. However, is this really true for EE that are voluntarily produced?

We agree with Scarantino that there is no one-to-one mapping of emotion categories and EE configurations. Of interest, sometimes these correlations may exist in the perception literature but not in the production literature on the same emotion. For example, although the facial expression of surprise is cross-culturally well recognized (Ekman, 1992), which may point to a one-to-one mapping of emotion type and EE, research on the spontaneous expression of surprise shows a strong dissociation between the experience and expression of surprise. Although the subjective experience of surprise was reliably elicited across a range of experimental paradigms in eight studies, overall only 11% of the participants showed a visible facial display of surprise, using mostly only the raising of the eyebrows (Reisenzein, Bördgen, Holtbernd, & Matz, 2006). In other words, from the perspective of the production of EE, the one-to-one mapping between emotion and expression seems to be absent. We wonder how TAP reconciles such findings.

Communicative Moves

In TAP, emotional expressions are conceived of as communicative moves. This serves the goal of establishing common ground between Ekman and Fridlund, whereby EE can be seen as communicating emotions *as well as* social motives:

...the core tenet of TAP is that emotional expressions are a means not only of *expressing* what's inside but also of *directing* other people's behavior, of *representing* what the world is like and of *committing* to future courses of action. (p. 165)

We agree with Scarantino that EE can communicate many different things, as has been shown by previous research. For example, Jakobs, Manstead, and Fischer (1999) found that varying both the social audience and the intensity of the emotional stimulus produces different intensities of both Duchenne and

social smiles. Their findings thus support the idea that facial displays can communicate both social motives and a person's feelings. However, we wonder whether "emotional expressions by default perform Expressive_{EE}, Imperative_{EE}, Declarative_{EE}, and Commissive_{EE} communicative moves *jointly* [emphasis added]" (p. 176). On this view, a frown, or a shriek, communicates the signaller's emotion, makes demands to others, represents the world, and commits the sender to a future course of action. We question whether each EE always communicates all this information, because EE can have primary, noncommunicative functions. However, given that emotions are multicomponential, including appraisals, feelings, action tendencies, and physiological states, the question is also whether the four communicative moves can really be meaningfully separated. Core relational themes, for example, are indeed proxies of the meaning of an emotion. Can Declaratives_{EE} then provide us with *more* information than what we already capture with inferring an emotion? Is the inference of anger really different from the inference of goal blockage, other blame, or the tendency to attack? We think that in many cases these components reflect what philosophers would refer to as natural information of anger.

One of Scarantino's aims with proposing a new taxonomy of communicative moves is that this would bridge the gap between the theories of Ekman and Fridlund. However, previous research has already shown that observers can infer a range of information from faces, not only emotions and social intentions. Perceivers can infer both of those (Balsters, Krahmer, Swerts, & Vingerhoets, 2013; Fernández-Dols & Ruiz-Belda, 1995; Hess, Banse, & Kappas, 1995; Jakobs, Manstead & Fischer, 1991, 2001; Parkinson, 2005), but also states of action readiness (Frijda & Tscherkassof, 1997) and appraisals (Hareli & Hess, 2010; Laukka & Elfenbein, 2012). In other words, people can reliably infer multiple components of emotions or emotional situations from prototypical facial expressions. However, here again we raise the question whether TAP's taxonomy is based on what inferences people can draw from nonverbal expressions or on what people emotionally express in different social and emotional contexts?

This lack of clarity is especially apparent in the case of the Imperative_{EE}. There can be a huge discrepancy between the information the signaler wants to get across (e.g., by showing an angry face) and by the effects the expression has on the perceiver. Although one could argue that the demand of any anger expression is to back off, the actual effects may be dramatically different, ranging from sincere apologies to overt aggression. This implies that the anger performance of an Expressive_{EE} can be similar across a great many anger expressions, but the Imperative_{EE} can be very different depending on the context (see also research on facial mimicry; Hess & Fischer, 2014).

A final remark concerns the fourth communicative move, Commissives_{EE}, which implies that a sender is likely to be committed to a certain action. Indeed, tendencies to act have been considered as one of the core components of emotion (Frijda, 1986; Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989), and we can readily infer these action tendencies from facial expressions (Frijda & Tserkassov, 1997). However, the relation between emotions and *actual* behaviors is not straightforward (Zeelenberg & Frijda, 2001). We may show anger in the form of clenched fists, bared teeth, and deep frowns, but whether this leads to hitting,

cursing, slamming the door, or sitting still depends on the context. This disconnection between emotions and behavior is even more applicable to more complex emotions, such as disappointment, humiliation, or hope.

In short, although we can think of situations in which EE does one or even more of these communicative moves, there seems to be considerable overlap between the four moves. In addition, we do not necessarily expect all EEs to always "do" any or all of the things that TAP specifies, mainly because some EE may not be communicative signals.

The Role of Context

More often than not, an EE in itself does not provide sufficient natural information for an observer to infer their emotion. Therefore we agree with Scarantino that we rely on contextual information in order to reliably infer natural information (e.g., Parkinson, 2011; Russell & Fernández-Dols, 1997). Assume that someone bares his teeth. We could infer from his face that this person is angry. But what does that mean? Information about emotions is inherently rich, because emotions are multicomponential phenomena. The natural information about a person being angry is arguably that he perceives a goal obstacle, maybe even perceiving the world as unfair, blaming another person who is considered responsible for this goal blockage, and will likely seek confrontation. In other words, inferring an emotion often tells us something about the emotional situation the person is in, at least in terms of appraisals, core relational themes, and action tendencies.

We think that perceivers are able to infer much of the information that they use to understand EE from a combination of EE with contextual information, rather than from merely the EE itself. We thus question whether the proposed separate communicative moves for EE can be established independently of one another, unless context is taken into account. Let's take crying as an example: The communicative moves of crying can differ depending on the context. One can cry in various emotional circumstances, out of relief after times of distress, by the loss of one's dearest friend, in sheer exuberance because one's soccer team has finally won, or when being moved by the first performance of one's child. These different emotional contexts may all produce tears, and they have one common theme: feeling overwhelmed and powerless. Depending on the social circumstances, the tears in each of these contexts would differ in their communicative moves, but the communicative moves can hardly be understood if based only on the presence of tears. Similarly, a frown can reflect effort, concentration, anger, sadness, or worry, depending on the context. Obviously, Scarantino acknowledges this the role of context and emphasizes its importance at various places in the article, emphasizing the parallel with speech acts. There is a question left unanswered, however: To what extent can an EE have any meaning separately from the context? Is there natural information carried by an EE without taking context into account? If so, which EE is so intrinsically emotional that its meaning does not depend on context? In other words, there is lots of evidence and reasoning on the importance of context, and TAP is unclear about the way and the extent to which context plays a role in interpreting the information that communicative moves carry.

Conclusion

Scarantino (this issue) asks the question, “could speech act theory help us articulate the range of possible social motives associated with emotional expressions?” (p. 174). Then he goes on to suggest that all nonverbal modalities of communication, including not only EE but also spatial positioning, gestures, orientation, direction of gaze, and bodily contact, be considered in terms of the Speech Act Analogs they can perform, if any. However, the conclusion of Scarantino’s speech act theory exercise for EE is that EE are “much less powerful communicative tools than speech acts” (p. 165). Perhaps spatial positioning, gestures, orientation, direction of gaze, and bodily contact are also precursors to (and now poor versions of) language? May it then be informative to lay out the ways in which these behavioral domains differ and what they do on their own terms? But this requires an open mind as to whether these behaviors are communicative, and if so, what they communicate and in what context. For example, applying speech act theory analysis to interpretative dance would lead to the conclusion that dance is essentially an impoverished form of linguistic communication. That seems a poor way to understand both expression and communication in dance.

In one insightful analysis contrasting nonverbal vocal expressions of emotions with spoken language, Owren, Amoss, and Rendall (2011) proposed distinguishing production-first from reception-first vocal development. They pointed to key differences between the development of spoken language as compared to primate vocal development (with the latter they included human emotional vocalisation, such as screams and laughs). Spoken language development relies on extensive auditory experience and motor practice, and reception (understanding others’ speech) develops before production (the ability to speak). In contrast, for primate vocal development and human emotional vocalizations, extensive auditory experience and motor practice are relatively unimportant, and for nonverbal human and animal vocalizations, production (producing vocalizations like screams) develops before reception (understanding others’ nonverbal vocalizations). It would be interesting to hear how TAP considers the role that learning might play in relation to communicative moves.

In sum, we are not (yet) convinced that speech act theory can help us articulate a more insightful theory of emotion expressions, or a taxonomy of communicative moves. TAP should make explicit whether it departs from the expresser or perceiver, whether it aims to create a taxonomy of motives or effects, or both. In any case, we doubt whether every EE can be seen as a communicative move, and we argue that some emotions have the function of individual adaptation to changes in the environment.

References

Balsters, M. J., Kraemer, E. J., Swerts, M. G., & Vingerhoets, A. J. (2013). Emotional tears facilitate the recognition of sadness and the

- perceived need for social support. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 11(1), 147470491301100114.
- Berkowitz, L. (1990). On the formation and regulation of anger and aggression: A cognitive-neoassociationistic analysis. *American Psychologist*, 45(4), 494.
- Ekman, P. (1992). An argument for basic emotions. *Cognition and Emotion*, 6(3), 169–200.
- Fernández-Dols, J. M., & Ruiz-Belda, M. A. (1995). Are smiles a sign of happiness? Gold medal winners at the Olympic games. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(6), 1113.
- Fridlund, A. J. (1991). Sociality of solitary smiling: Potentiation by an implicit audience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(2), 229.
- Fridlund, A. J. (1994). *Human facial expression: An evolutionary view*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Frijda, N. H. (1986). *The emotions: Studies in emotion and social interaction*. Paris, France: Maison de Sciences de l’Homme.
- Frijda, N. H., Kuipers, P., & Ter Schure, E. (1989). Relations among emotion, appraisal, and emotional action readiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(2), 212.
- Frijda, N. H., & Tcherkassof, A. (1997). Facial expressions as modes of action readiness. In J. A. Russell & J. M. Fernández-Dols (Eds.), *The psychology of facial expression* (pp. 78–102). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hareli, S., & Hess, U. (2010). What emotional reactions can tell us about the nature of others: An appraisal perspective on person perception. *Cognition and Emotion*, 24(1), 128–140.
- Hess, U., Banse, R., & Kappas, A. (1995). The intensity of facial expression is determined by underlying affective state and social situation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(2), 280.
- Hess, U., & Fischer, A. (2014). Emotional mimicry: Why and when we mimic emotions. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 8(2), 45–57.
- Horstmann, G. (2003). What do facial expressions convey: Feeling states, behavioral intentions, or actions requests? *Emotion*, 3(2), 150–166.
- Jakobs, E., Manstead, A. S., & Fischer, A. H. (1999). Social motives, emotional feelings, and smiling. *Cognition & Emotion*, 13(4), 321–345.
- Jakobs, E., Manstead, A. S., & Fischer, A. H. (1999). Social motives and emotional feelings as determinants of facial displays: The case of smiling. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(4), 424–435.
- Jakobs, E., Manstead, A. S., & Fischer, A. H. (2001). Social context effects on facial activity in a negative emotional setting. *Emotion*, 1(1), 51–69.
- Laukka, P., & Elfenbein, H. A. (2012). Emotion appraisal dimensions can be inferred from vocal expressions. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3(5), 529–536.
- Owren, M. J., Amoss, R. T., & Rendall, D. (2011). Two organizing principles of vocal production: Implications for nonhuman and human primates. *American Journal of Primatology*, 73(6), 530–544.
- Parkinson, B. (2005). Do facial movements express emotions or communicate motives? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 9(4), 278–331.
- Parkinson, B. (2011). Interpersonal emotion transfer: Contagion and social appraisal. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(7), 428–439.
- Reisenzein, R., Bördgen, S., Holtbernd, T., & Matz, D. (2006). Evidence for strong dissociation between emotion and facial displays: The case of surprise. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(2), 295–315.
- Russell, J. A., & Fernández-Dols, J. M. (1997). *The psychology of facial expression*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sauter, D. A., Eisner, F., Ekman, P., & Scott, S. K. (2010). Cross-cultural recognition of basic emotions through nonverbal emotional vocalizations. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 107(6), 2408–2412.
- Soltysik, S., & Jelen, P. (2005). In rats, sighs correlate with relief. *Physiology & Behavior*, 85(5), 598–602.
- Susskind, J. M., Lee, D. H., Cusi, A., Feiman, R., Grabski, W., & Anderson, A. K. (2008). Expressing fear enhances sensory acquisition. *Nature Neuroscience*, 11(7), 843–850.