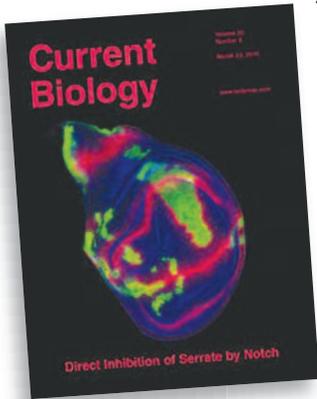


## A possible challenge for international collaboration? Facial expressions may get lost in translation

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People from East Asia read facial expressions differently than people from Europe.



That's according to findings of research I helped conduct in 2008. The research, published in the Cell Press journal *Current Biology*, indicates that human communication of emotion is more complex than experts had believed. Led by Roberto Caldara at the University of Glasgow, our research team found that facial expressions that had been considered universally recognizable cannot be used to reliably convey emotion in cross-cultural situations.

We showed that Easterners and Westerners look at different facial features to read facial expressions. Westerners look at the eyes and the mouth in equal measure, whereas Easterners favor the eyes and neglect the mouth. This means Easterners have difficulty distinguishing facial expressions that look similar around the eye region.

How did our research team study cultural differences in the recognition of facial expressions? We recorded the eye movements of 13 Western Caucasian and 13 East Asian people while they observed pictures of expressive faces and put them into categories: happy, sad, surprised, fearful, disgusted, angry or neutral. The pictures of faces were standardized according to the Facial Action Coding System (FACS), so each expression displayed a specific combination of facial muscles typically associated with a specific emotion. We then compared how accurately, according to their particular eye-movement strategies, participants read those pictures of facial expressions.

Easterners focused greater attention on the eyes and made significantly more errors than Westerners did. The cultural specificity in eye movements likely reflects cultural specificity in facial expressions. The data suggest that while Westerners use the whole face to convey emotion, Easterners use the eyes more and mouth less.

### Facial expressions that had been considered universally recognizable cannot be used to reliably convey emotion in cross-cultural situations.

A survey of Eastern versus Western emoticons supports that idea. As they are the iconic representation of facial expressions, emoticons are used in cyberspace to convey different emotions. Looking at the difference in use of emoticons in the West and the East, we find that:

- Western emoticons primarily use the mouth to convey emotional states, e.g., “:)” for happy and “:(” for sad.
- Eastern emoticons use the eyes, e.g., “^\_^” for happy and “;\_;” for sad.

	West	East
Happy	: )	^_^
Sad	: (	;_;

*Western emoticons primarily use the mouth to convey emotional states, whereas Eastern emoticons use the eyes. (Image courtesy of Alison Bert, Senior Writer/Editor, Elsevier, NY, NY, USA.)*

As my fellow researchers and I wrote in our 2009 ScienceDirect article, "In sum, our data demonstrate genuine perceptual differences between Western Caucasian and East Asian observers and show that FACS-coded facial expressions are not universal signals of human emotion. From here on, examining how the different facets of cultural ideologies and concepts have diversified these basic social skills will elevate knowledge of human emotion processing from a reductionist to a more authentic representation.

"Otherwise, when it comes to communicating emotions across cultures, Easterners and Westerners will find themselves 'lost in translation.'" **LC**

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### Reference

Jack, R. E., Blais, C., Scheepers, C., Schyns, P. G., & Caldara, R. (2009, September). Cultural confusions show that facial expressions are not universal. *Current Biology*, 19(18): 1543-1548. [www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09609822](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09609822)

## ... remind librarians to be aware of cultural differences when helping customers.

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Also, when providing customer service, the selection of the language to use is very important. Some Chinese students may want to practice their English as long as there is the chance, so we should speak English to them and thus not just help them but help support the university's aim to develop students'

English skills. For those who only wish to speak Chinese, speaking a foreign language to them may not only lower the efficiency of problem solving but may create a mental barrier between these customers and librarians. Also, if a customer is not fluent in English, if you try your best to speak in her or his native language, even trying to speak

in her or his home accent, then the customer will feel closer to you, which is a good start between you and your customers. **LC**

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