Finding Affect: Exploring the Role of Emotion in Cultural Transmission

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Abstract

Popular stories, whether they be fairy tails or non-fiction classics are regularly praised for their ability to be captivating and compelling. One reason why popular stories are popular may be because they consistently illicit high amounts of emotion from numerous individuals. In fact, we suspect when popular stories get retold their emotional structure is often maintained. Here, we construct a linear transmission chain and utilize dictionary-based sentiment analysis to understand these dynamics at the word-level. By extracting sentiment from within a series of chain letters and Dutch Little-Red Riding Hood re-tellings we found words with higher emotional valence are much more likely to be transmitted. We reason this effect is due to words with high emotional valence to be independently encoded, cumulatively recalled, and transmitted and retained with higher fidelity from generation to generation.