

Simplified Speech #162 – What do your facial expressions say about you?

AD-FREE

Episode description

Do you consider yourself an expressive person? Can you usually tell how someone feels by looking at their face? In this Simplified Speech episode, Andrew and Kassy chat about how people communicate with facial expressions.

Simplified Speech is a Culips series designed to help beginner and intermediate English language learners improve their listening skills. In this series, you can listen to native speakers having natural conversations about everyday topics using language that is clear and easy to understand.

Fun fact

How many different facial expressions do you think you can make? You may be surprised to learn that humans have 43 muscles in their face that allow us to make almost 10,000 different facial expressions. Next time you look in a mirror, have some fun by trying to see how many different facial expressions you can make!

Expressions included in the study guide

- To be written all over (one's) face
- Ticked off
- Seething
- RBF (resting bitch face)
- To save face
- To suck up to (someone)



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Simplified Speech episode 162. What do your facial expressions reveal about you? Featuring Andrew and Kassy.

OK, Kassy let's get down to business and jump into our topic for today, which is all about facial expressions. Now facial expressions are a kind of body language or nonverbal communication, right? They pass along so many messages to other people about how we feel or what we think. And in fact, in English, we have an idiomatic expression, which is **to be written all over your face, to be written all over your face**. And this means that your emotions are clearly displayed on your face. So, for example, if you feel angry inside and your face looks angry on the outside, it's really obvious that you're angry, then your emotions **are written all over your face**. You can tell just by looking at your face. Same goes with other emotions, right? If you're sad, it's really obvious that you're sad, then we could say it's **written all over your face**.

And I'm curious about you, Kassy, are you good at controlling your emotions? Or are they **written all over your face** when you feel emotional in one way or the other?

Kassy: Yes, I am not good at controlling my emotions. Everybody can clearly see if I am happy or **ticked off**, which means irritated at something, or bored, or any such emotion that you can show through your face.

Andrew: Yeah. Kassy, I'm curious about your perspective because when we hang out, you can obviously see my face, but I can't, right? I can't see my face when I'm talking. So, what is your opinion of me? From an outsider's perspective, do you think my emotions **are written all over my face**? Or am I kind of stoic and not too expressive emotionally?

Kassy: I don't know how you are in like a private situation. But you and I are both teachers and I feel like teachers are pretty expressive emotionally, because we want to engage our students. And even on Culips, even though we're speaking over the podcast, we want to engage our audience. So I think you and I both tend to show our emotions on our face, it's **written all over our face**.

Andrew: Yeah, I would definitely agree with that assessment. I think it's very obvious to people looking at my face. If I feel happy, it's clear that I'm happy. If I feel worried or stressed out, it's clear that I feel worried or stressed out. These days, I have a new thing that is a tell about my emotional condition. And that is, as I get older, I have this, like, vein in my forehead and if I get angry, it kind of gets bigger. And it's, like, as my heart starts to race or my heartbeat goes up, then that vein kind of like comes out and it's kind of clear. So I'm like, oh my god, this is terrible, I have this like old man vein in my forehead.

Kassy: Hilarious. Do your students or your wife ever notice that and go, "Ooh, I gotta be careful around Andrew."

Andrew: No, but I think, like it is something that I have to be careful about in the classroom because sometimes students do little things that just make me angry. And I'm really careful to not get angry in the classroom, and to not even show that I'm angry even if I feel angry. So, you were saying as teachers we're really expressive, and that's true, but I'm happy to express my positive emotions. But if I feel really angry, because sometimes students, you know, they're not listening or talking—that drives me crazy when I'm trying to teach and maybe some students are in the back of the classroom talking. And I don't care if they don't want to pay attention or don't want to learn, that's their own choice, but when they affect the other students who do want to learn because they're talking during the lesson, that drives me crazy. And I think that's when my vein will start to come out. I'm just kind of **seething** on the inside, boiling on the inside a little bit. But, no, nobody has mentioned it. Nobody has said, "Andrew, you look so angry right now." I haven't had that comment.

Kassy: The vein is popping.

Andrew: Kassy, I'm curious, we're kind of talking about faking emotion or controlling emotion, right? So I said that I want to try and control negative emotion and not let my students or people around me know if I feel upset or if I feel angry. And I think this is probably natural, right? People like, generally like showing their positive emotion, but maybe these negative emotions are ones that we would want to keep private if possible. I'm curious, are you good at faking your emotions? Are you good at maybe, for example, laughing at jokes that aren't funny? Or hiding, you know, if you feel stressed out or worried or something?

Kassy: I'm not very good at hiding my annoyance at something, which I wish I was better at because, you know, you want to keep the peace as much as possible when dealing with other people. So if something really annoys me, I tend to just walk away from it, because I don't want to, you know, cause issues between me and another person. But I am pretty good at faking happy if I need to. If I'm, you know, just not feeling it someday but, you know, I gotta be there for my students or my friends or my family then I put on a happy face and try my best to get through a situation, which I think is a good trait to have as long as you're not doing it too often.

Andrew: I think that I am really good at faking laughing. It's just a skill that I've developed over the years. And when people say something, especially during small talk conversations, it's not too funny, I can kind of just try and make, I put myself in the mindset of trying to make the best out of every situation. So maybe even if it isn't really funny, or the person that I'm talking to isn't really fascinating or interesting, just try to find some common ground and find something to laugh about and just be positive. So I think I'm pretty good about that.

But I find it difficult to fake concern. So the emotion of like, caring about other people's problems, especially if they're not really important problems, I can find that difficult. I don't think I'm very good at acting that way and maybe on my face, too, I'm not very good at expressing concern or care for other people.

Kassy: So what you're saying is you wouldn't be a good therapist or psychiatrist.

Andrew: Maybe. Maybe I'd be one of those psychiatrists that's just, like, mmhmm, tell me more, mmhmm. Maybe I'd be really good at that. I don't know. But, yeah, I feel like most emotions, I'm pretty good at faking if I need to, or controlling, but maybe concern is one that I need to practice more.

Kassy: Andrew, do you know Jimmy Fallon?

Andrew: Yeah, of course. The talk show host, late night TV talk show host.

Kassy: Exactly. He is kind of famous for faking laughter and emotions. I love Jimmy Fallon, but every time I watch his YouTube videos, all the comments are like, "Oh my gosh, his laugh is so fake. Why is he overexaggerating everything he does." I like it. It makes the guest speakers and celebrities feel more comfortable, and it raises the mood of the audience, but it is pretty over the top.

Andrew: That's hilarious, Kassy, because I just recently watched a video with the comedian Fred Armisen on the Jimmy Fallon show. And in that video clip, Fred Armisen was doing a kind of musical performance where he went through the history of punk music and played a little sample of what punk music sounds like from decade to decade to decade. And it was kind of cool. But Jimmy Fallon was so over the top with his reactions and jumping in and singing, being very over the top. And when I looked at the comments, they were exactly like you just said. Like, everybody was like, "Oh, Jimmy, shut up. Stop laughing, stop getting in and cutting in. It just ruined the performance."

But I think you're right, like I think probably from the guests' perspective, it makes them less nervous when they're on the show. It makes them feel like somebody at least is really interested in what they're saying and probably puts them at ease and so from the guests' point of view, it's probably nice. Like, everybody likes it when you have somebody listening to your every word, engaged in what you're saying and laughing at your jokes, I think, right?

Kassy: Exactly. I should ignore you right there to prove the point.

Andrew: Kassy, this is maybe a little bit of a rude expression, but it's very relevant to this conversation so I thought we could talk about it. And we have this expression in English that I first heard about maybe about 10 years ago, it just sort of popped out of nowhere and became really popular all of the sudden. And it is **RBF**, **RBF**. That is the polite way to say it, the **RBF**. The rude or original way to say it is **resting bitch face**, **resting bitch face**.

So resting, of course, means relaxed, right? And in this context, we have the curse word in English, bitch. And it is usually used as a kind of derogatory word to refer to women who are grumpy, I guess. Would that be a good way to say it, Kassy, women who are grumpy?

Kassy: Yeah, women who don't care what you think about them or just, like, I only care about myself.

Andrew: OK, and face is their face. OK, so **resting bitch face**. Now, this phenomenon is used to describe women and also men, but I think originally women, who have a face that looks grumpy when they are just relaxed. So it doesn't mean they're in a grumpy mood or in a bad mood. However, their natural face appearance looks grumpy even when they're not, even when they're relaxed. So, Kassy, I'm sure you've heard of this expression before, right?

Kassy: Definitely.

Andrew: Definitely. Has it ever been a problem for you or anyone you know?

Kassy: Not me, but my youngest sister definitely has been told that she has **RBF**.

Andrew: So how has that affected her?

Kassy: She is, not really anymore but when she was younger, she was a little shy. But not in that, like, sweet way. She was really into, like, emo or punk rock music, and she really liked Hot Topic. I don't know if you have that in Canada, but for listeners who may

not know, it's a clothing brand and it's a style of clothing that's, like, black with a lot of metal spikes and neon colours. It looks very edgy and kind of scary.

Andrew: For edgy teens.

Kassy: Yeah. So even though my sister was shy, because she wore this kind of edgy clothing and listened to this edgy kind of scary music, everybody just said, "Ah, she has **resting bitch face**" when really, she just didn't smile much because she was nervous.

Andrew: I see, yeah. So this is why this condition is really unfair, I think, right? Like, I personally don't think I have **RBF** and I've never been told that I have. But if I did, I think that would be a really unfair characterization of me. And I really don't like it when people use this expression to describe other people because something that you can't control at all, right? Like, if your face is just relaxed and you're not in a bad mood, for somebody to pre-judge you and just assume that you're a grumpy person or you're in a bad mood, just by the way that your face is relaxing, I think is just not very fair and pretty mean.

Kassy: Totally agree.

Andrew: Kassy, I've got one final question for you about this topic, which I think is really interesting and we could probably go on for hours but I'll cut it down to just one more question, OK? And I think you and I are in a good position to answer this question because we both live in cultures that are very different from our own culture. So we're living abroad in foreign countries that have a culture that's very different from the North American culture that we grew up in. So I'm wondering here, do you think people from different cultures express or read facial emotions differently? Do you think there's some cultural differences at play or is it universal? What do you think?

Kassy: 100% yes. I think culture plays a big part in how you read facial expressions. The biggest thing I can think of is in work culture situations, especially in Asian countries. It's all about **saving face**, not making yourself look bad or your boss look bad or your colleagues look bad. So even if you don't agree with something said or even if you want to express

your emotions, I think people are more reluctant to show their true emotions here in Asia than they might be in Western countries.

Andrew: You know, we were talking earlier about faking laughter and faking positive reactions and emotions. I think, from my experience in Korea, people will be very friendly to like a boss to their face. And then as soon as the boss leaves, they're like, "Oh my god, that guy drives me crazy." "But you were just laughing and smiling with him a minute ago?" "Oh, no, he drives me crazy." And that's not to say that that doesn't exist in North America, too. People are, you know, we **suck up to the boss** often to make a good impression. But I do think it's a little bit stronger maybe here in Asia. I think you're right about that, Kassy.

I know, personally, that over the last few years, during the COVID pandemic, when we're wearing masks, I find it a little bit difficult to judge people's emotions just by only seeing their eyes. And I found communicating to be really difficult during COVID because, first of all, speaking while wearing a mask is tough, because you have to speak at a louder volume that's comfortable. I can't see my conversation partner's mouth, so I learned that, actually, when I'm speaking in Korean I rely on looking at people's mouths and hearing their words at the same time to help me understand a message. So when that was taken away, that was difficult. And also just only looking at people's eyes, I couldn't really see their full facial expressions. And, yeah, so I found that it was difficult during COVID to communicate because of masking.

Kassy: Yeah, I felt the same way. I also felt like, for myself, I had to overexaggerate my, what would you even call that? Eye expressions? Because I couldn't use the rest of my face.

Andrew: Totally, totally. I noticed, you know, now here in Korea, we don't have to wear masks outside. For a long time, we had to wear masks outside. That has been removed. So now communicating outside is, you know, back to normal, but still inside we have to wear a mask. And I noticed when I communicate with my students at the university, I'm really expressive with my eyes, because they can't see me smiling. They can't see my mouth because it's behind a mask. So, like, I'm really smiling with my eyes, making my eyebrows go up really high when I'm happy and being extra expressive. So I don't know, this will either be good for my skin in 10 years, like maybe I'm working out all of the muscles in my forehead and I won't have any wrinkles in the future. Or it will be the opposite and I'll have lots of wrinkles because I've loosened up the muscles too much or something. I'm not sure.

Kassy: I'm pretty sure it's the second one, unfortunately.

Andrew: Darn. Darn.

That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time. Bye.

Detailed Explanations

To be written all over (one's) face

Phrase

In this episode, Andrew and Kassy introduce the idiom to have (one's) emotions **written all over (one's) face**. This expression is used to describe when a person's feelings are clearly visible to others through their facial expressions. It can be used to talk about a range of emotions, such as happiness, sadness, guilt, or surprise.

For instance, if someone tells a lie to their parents and appears guilty or ashamed, you could say that the guilt is **written all over their face**. Similarly, if someone is extremely happy and has a big smile on their face, you could say that their joy **is written all over their face**. Essentially, this idiom is a way to describe when a person's emotions are clearly communicated through their facial expressions.

Here are a couple more examples with **to be written all over (one's) face**:

James: You won't believe what I saw when I went downstairs last night.

Susan: What did you see?

James: Our son snuck into the kitchen and was eating ice cream straight out of the container.

Susan: He knows he's not supposed to eat dessert after his bedtime!

James: I know. The guilt **was written all over his face**. I told him he won't get any dessert for a week as punishment.

Beth: My friends threw a surprise birthday party for me yesterday. It was the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for my birthday.

Frank: Wow, that must have been such a fun time. Did all your friends jump out and yell "surprise!" when you walked in the room?

Beth: Yeah, my roommate invited everyone to our house before I got off work, and then they hid until I walked in. I was so shocked. I'm sure the surprise **was written all over my face**.

Ticked off Phrasal verb

In this episode, Kassy mentions that she has a difficult time hiding her emotions and that it is easy for others to see when she is happy or **ticked off**. The phrase **ticked off** means to be frustrated or annoyed, and is often used in less serious situations such as when someone cuts in line or forgets to do something they were asked to do. For example, you might say, “I was really **ticked off** when my friend showed up an hour late to meet me” to express your frustration.

Another expression with a similar meaning is **pissed off**, which is a stronger and ruder way of saying that someone is angry or annoyed. It is important to note that **pissed off** is considered a curse word and is therefore less appropriate than **ticked off** in most settings. For example, a sentence like, “I was so **pissed off** when I found out that I had been overcharged on my phone bill” is a very strong way to express your anger at being overcharged. So, be careful with this expression.

Here are a couple more examples with **ticked off**:

Eve: You look really upset. What’s wrong?

Seth: I was trying to study in the library, but some guy kept listening to music without headphones in. I couldn’t focus at all.

Eve: Really? Libraries are supposed to be quite places to study. That guy was so inconsiderate.

Seth: I know. I got so **ticked off** that I almost yelled at him. I decided it would be better to just leave and study at home, though.

Eve: That was probably the right choice.

Gail: Oh my gosh! I’m so **ticked off**!

Robert: Why? What happened?

Gail: My coworker agreed to cover my shift at work tomorrow so I could attend my cousin’s graduation, but the coworker just called and told me he can’t cover my shift.

Robert: That’s too bad. Did he give any reason why he had to cancel?

Gail: He said he can’t cover my shift because he got tickets to a concert!

Seething Adjective

In this episode, Andrew used the word **seething** to describe his anger towards his disruptive students. **Seething** refers to a strong, controlled feeling of anger. It is often used to describe a situation where a person is quietly angry, rather than expressing their anger through loud outbursts.

Some similar expressions to describe this type of anger include “boiling inside” or “fuming.” For example, if you have a disagreement with a colleague at work and return to your desk without making a scene, you might still be feeling very angry and could say that you are **seething** or boiling inside. The verb to be is frequently used with **seething**, as in **I am seething** or **he was seething**.

Here are a couple more examples with **seething**:

Joanne: You won’t believe what happened today. Someone broke into my car and stole my wallet and laptop.

Aaron: Are you serious? You seem so calm about it. I would be furious.

Joanne: I’m **seething** on the inside, but I already reported it to the police, so right now there is nothing else I can do.

Aaron: Hopefully the police find the person who did it.

Axel: Today was terrible! I woke up late and got stuck in traffic, so I missed a meeting with an important client at work.

Hope: What did your boss say about it?

Axel: He was **seething**. I’ve never seen his face get so red. I thought he was going to shout, but he just marched out of the room.

Hope: Wow. Hopefully you don’t get fired.

Axel: I hope not!

RBF (resting bitch face)

Slang

In this episode, Andrew and Kassy introduced the term **RBF**, or **resting bitch face**, which refers to a person's facial expression that appears grumpy or upset when they are not actively expressing any emotion. The term is often used to describe someone who appears unhappy or unapproachable, even when they are not feeling that way. For example, if someone has a naturally serious or straight-faced expression, they might be accused of having **resting bitch face**, even if they are actually feeling happy or content.

It is important to note that the word bitch is a curse word in English and this term should be avoided in most professional or formal settings. Instead, this expression is more commonly used in casual conversations between close friends or in media such as movies and television shows. Some people may find this term to be offensive or inappropriate, so it is important to be mindful of the language you use and to choose words that are appropriate for the situation.

Here are a couple more examples with **RBF (resting bitch face)**:

Bella: Are you OK? You look really ticked off.

Austin: I hear that a lot. I'm fine, though—I just have **RBF**.

Bella: What's **RBF**?

Austin: You know, **resting bitch face**. I'm not upset, but my resting face just looks like I'm upset.

Bella: Oh, that's good to know. I thought I had done something to irritate you!

Izzy: I think Professor Williamson hates me.

Neil: What? Why do you think that? He is such a kind person. I don't think he would hate any of his students.

Izzy: Every time I visit him in his office, he looks so grumpy. I think he's annoyed to see me.

Neil: No way. Professor Williamson just has **RBF**. He always looks annoyed. I doubt it's because he dislikes you.

Izzy: Maybe you're right. Perhaps I'm overthinking it.

To save face Idiom

In this episode, Kassy talks about the concept of face and how it is an important concept in some Asian countries.

To save face is an idiomatic expression used to describe actions taken in order to protect someone's pride or reputation. It is commonly used in cultures where social status is highly valued. An example of using this expression in a sentence might be: "After realizing he had made a mistake at work, John worked late every night for a week to **save face** in front of his colleagues." In other words, by working hard and showing dedication to his job, John is trying to **save face** and protect his reputation among his coworkers

On the other hand, to lose face refers to the experience of public shame or embarrassment due to breaking social norms. An example of using this expression in a sentence might be: "Tara was mortified when she accidentally tripped and fell in front of a crowd of people, causing her to lose face in front of her friends and coworkers."

Here are a couple more examples with **to save face**:

Julie: My coworker and I were supposed to present our business idea at a meeting, but he forgot to prepare his section of the presentation.

Mario: Wow, that's quite unprofessional. I bet he felt embarrassed at the meeting.

Julie: I tried to help him **save face** by adding a few slides right before the meeting started. I also let him present a couple of my slides.

Mario: That's really generous of you.

Julie: We're a team, so if he looks bad, I look bad too.

Matt: I just found out that my boss announced his resignation last week.

Celeste: Was there any reason for it?

Matt: I had heard rumours about issues in management, so they were letting him resign instead of firing him so he could **save face**. But today I learned that he had been stealing money from the company, so now it has become a huge scandal.

Celeste: Oh, no. That sounds terrible.

Matt: Yeah, it shocked everyone.

To suck up to (someone)

Idiom

In this episode, Andrew mentions that some people may try to be excessively nice to their boss in order to make a good impression. This is called **sucking up**. For example, you might say in conversation, “I can’t believe how much Sarah has been **sucking up to the new manager** lately. She’s always agreeing with everything the new manager says and bringing her coffee.” In this example, **sucking up** means that Sarah is being super friendly towards the manager so that the manager will like Sarah.

Here’s another example. A student might try **to suck up to his teacher** by constantly complimenting her, offering to help with tasks, or going above and beyond on assignments. The student might do this in the hope that the teacher will have a positive view of him and give him a good grade.

Here are a couple more examples with **to suck up to (someone)**:

Symone: Did you see Rebecca give the professor a gift after class today?

Jacob: Yeah, today is the professor’s birthday. That’s why she gave her the gift.

Symone: I think she was trying **to suck up to the professor** because she is failing the class.

Jacob: I don’t think that would work on our professor. Even if a student **sucks up to her**, she is still going to give them the grade they earn.

Ashley: Since I signed with a record label and my songs have been playing on the radio, a lot of my old musician friends have been calling me.

Xavier: Are they calling to congratulate you on your success?

Ashley: Some of them have called to congratulate me, but I think some of them are trying **to suck up to me** because they think I can help them get a record deal.

Xavier: That’s too bad.

Ashely: Yeah, but my manager warned me about it in advance.

Xavier: Hopefully your close friends don’t start **sucking up to you** to get favours.

Quiz

1. **If someone is being excessively friendly so they can get something in return, they are:**
 - a) making friends
 - b) hedging their bets
 - c) saving face
 - d) sucking up to someone

2. **Someone who has RBF (resting bitch face) looks ____ when their face is relaxed.**
 - a) sad
 - b) confused
 - c) upset
 - d) tired

3. **Which of the following means very angry?**
 - a) seething
 - b) obtuse
 - c) RBF (resting bitch face)
 - d) to be written all over one's face

4. **If an emotion is written all over someone's face, it means the emotion is ____.**
 - a) hard to read
 - b) positive and happy
 - c) clear and obvious
 - d) the colour of pen ink

5. **Ticked off means that someone is trying to avoid feeling embarrassment or shame.**
 - a) true
 - b) false

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. What is something that makes you feel ticked off?
2. Talk about a time you saw someone sucking up to another person to gain a favour.
3. Describe an experience where you tried to save face. What was the situation that made you worried about losing face? What did you do to try to save face?
4. Are you good at concealing your emotions or are your feelings usually written all over your face? Do you think it's good to have facial expressions that are easy to read, or is it better to keep a neutral expression most of the time?
5. How do you usually cope with anger? Have you ever struggled to cope when you were seething?

Quiz Answers

1.d 2.c 3.a 4.c 5.b

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