

Verbal descriptions of experience and the conceptualization of emotion across cultures

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Language provides a window onto how individuals or peoples conceptualize the contexts and events they encounter. For this reason, it is often used in cross cultural studies of subjective experience, including emotion. In many cases, the analysis of 'emotion language' focuses on the words that are used to label and thus categorize different types of experiences, and in doing so sheds light onto the structure of emotion concepts across languages (Jackson et al. 2019). While words are convenient shortcut to emotional meaning, language is more than just a collection of labels. It indicates which features of experience are foregrounded (e.g., whether speakers attend to bodily sensations, cognitive processes, or the actions and perspectives of others; Boyd & Schwartz 2021), and how speakers position themselves in relation to events (e.g., shifts in verb tense and pronoun use suggest changes in psychological functioning; Nook, Schleider & Somerville 2017). To gain access to various dimensions of emotional meaning, linguistic analyses that go beyond emotion words are necessary.

In the present study, we explored cross-cultural differences in the conceptualization of emotion using verbal descriptions of experience, as spontaneous and unconstrained narrations that unfold in context may better approximate how speakers conceptualize emotion in everyday life. We conducted semi-structured interviews in which speakers of Belgian Dutch and North American (US) English (100 for each) described recent emotional events. These groups share linguistic and historical similarities (Majid, Jordan & Dunn 2015), yet previous research has also demonstrated subtle differences in emotion concepts (Boiger, Deyne & Mesquita 2013), granting a direct and meaningful comparison. We analyzed the interview transcripts both qualitatively and quantitatively. First, we characterized their contents using topic models (Blei, Ng & Jordan 2003). Second, we coded them for various grammatical (e.g., personal pronouns) and semantic categories (e.g., emotion- vs. cognition-related language; Pennebaker et al. 2015). Finally, we conducted an inductive analysis of the occurrent themes (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Using this multi-method approach, we observed that US English and Belgian Dutch speakers described similar types of emotional events; however, they used different linguistic resources, suggesting corresponding differences in conceptualization of emotion. Speakers often reported feeling good about helping others or being with friends and family, and bad about conflicts at work or navigating daily hassles. Despite these overall similarities, US English speakers used more emotion-related language and first-person singular ('I') pronouns, whereas Belgian Dutch speakers used more cognition-related language and second-person singular ('you') pronouns (both in the overall transcripts and concordances for specific emotion words). Results were further corroborated by the inductive thematic analysis: while US English speakers highlighted the emotional intensity and personal impact of events; Belgian Dutch speakers more often describe their reasoning and general approach to life. Taken together, our observations are consistent with previous psychological research on US and Belgian culture and echo the conceptual distinctions uncovered between English and Dutch in other domains. We evaluate our approach against other means of exploring the conceptualization of emotion across cultures and discuss plans for analyses of interviews conducted in Turkish and Central American Spanish.

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