

# Semantic analysis of emotion-label synonyms: A corpus-based account of SYMPATHY, COMPASSION and EMPATHY

Jiangling Yu  
Sichuan International Studies University/ BUPT  
yujiangling@bupt.edu.cn

Shan Gao  
University of Electronic Science and Technology  
gaoshan@uestc.edu.cn

Renqiang Wang  
Sichuan International Studies University  
richardwang71@163.com

**Keywords:** Emotion-label synonyms, Profile-based studies, Noun collocates, Sympathy

SYMPATHY, COMPASSION and EMPATHY are concepts frequently developed in the literature of psychotherapy, philosophy, sociology, ethics and religious studies. Linguistically, this synonymous set refer to emotions that involve intricate cognitive appraisal of and response to others' personal plight. However, linguistic variation in the conceptualization of the three emotion-label words have not been fully examined. Recent developments in cognitive linguistics-guided corpus research offer tools that help to explicate semantic structure of the three synonymous words and disambiguate their conceptual confusion.

Using the one-billion-word genre-balanced online Corpus of Contemporary American English(COCA) as data and applying a multifactorial usage-feature and profile-based methodology, this paper attempts to excavate semantic demarcation of SYMPATHY, COMPASSION, and EMPATHY by investigating primarily into their noun collocates and their role in establishing conceptual scenarios for the emotion lexicon. The study focuses on retrieving, annotating and categorizing semantic features of the noun collocates with complementary reading into the concordance lines that facilitate identification of conceptual salience.

The corpus-based Hierarchical Configurational Frequency Analysis results based on the semantic features of their noun co-occurrences reveal distinctive socio-psychological scenarios. Namely, SYMPATHY conveys expressions of sorrow for community members in personal distress, which indicates a socializing response but a lesser degree of emotional engagement than COMPASSION and EMPATHY. COMPASSION co-occurs with words of virtue and indicates a moral benevolence and altruistic behavior to alleviate humanity from suffering. EMPATHY is frequently used in medical texts in recent decades as a cognitive ability to acknowledge, identify, and understand various human feelings. The findings suggest that nuanced conceptual structure of the emotion-label synonyms can be efficiently mapped on the basis of semantic analysis of the noun collocates as they reflect emotional arousal, emotional response, bodily sensation and spiritual engagement. The findings are also indicative of observing such linguistic features as prosodic polarities of the emotion lexicon.

## References

- Dixon, R.M.W. 2005. *A Semantic Approach to English Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gladkova, A. 2010. Sympathy, compassion, and empathy in English and Russian: A linguistic and cultural analysis. *Culture & Psychology*. 16(2), 267-285.
- Glynn, D. 2014. The social nature of ANGER: Multivariate corpus evidence for context effects upon conceptual structure. *Emotions in Discourse*, 69-82.
- Glynn, D. & Biryukova, A. 2022. Death, enemies, and illness: How English and Russian metaphorically conceptualise boredom. *Yearbook of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association*, 10 (1), 33-59.
- Gries, S. Th. 2010. Behavioral profiles: A fine-grained and quantitative approach in corpus-based lexical semantics. *The Mental Lexicon*. 5(3), 323-346.
- Peneva, D. 2020. The communicative acts of sympathy and condolence in English and Bulgarian-pragmalinguistic aspects. *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*. 8(3), 23-35.
- Soares da Silva. 2020. Exploring cultural conceptualization of emotions across national language varieties: A multifactorial profile-based account of PRIDE in European and Brazilian Portuguese. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*. 18 (1), 42-74.