



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

Johnny J. R. Fontaine (ed.) et al.

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CHAPTER

20 The conceptualization of despair in Basque, Spanish, and English

Itziar Alonso-Arbiol, Cristina Soriano, Fons J. R. van de Vijver

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Abstract

We examined possible dissimilarities in the English, Basque and Spanish prototypical terms for despair. The GRID instrument was used with samples from four geographical regions and five cultural groups: Spanish speakers from Chile, Spanish speakers from Southern Spain, Spanish speakers from Northern Spain, Basque speakers from Northern Spain, and English speakers from the USA. Agreement of the different versions was examined using multidimensional scaling procedures with the overall scores and with the profiles of several components (Appraisal, Feelings, Bodily reactions, Action tendencies, and Expressions). Non-equivalence of despair terms across languages and cultural groups was observed both at a general and component level. The three words used in different geographical and/or linguistic contexts do not seem to refer to a unitary concept, but rather to two different concepts, where the Spanish ‘*desesperación*’ would convey a specific arousal-active pattern.

Keywords: [cross-cultural differences](#), [construct equivalence](#), [emotion terms](#), [Spanish](#), [Basque](#), [cultural diffusion](#), [multidimensional scaling](#)

Subject: [Developmental Psychology](#), [Social Psychology](#)

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20.1 Introduction

One of the most relevant emotions to the clinical field is despair. When this emotion becomes an enduring emotional state of an individual, it may lead to the development of major depression or other affective disorders. In the Anglo-Saxon clinical literature, despair has been described as an emotion in which an individual is “overcome by a sense of futility or defeat or having an utter lack of hope” (McDougall, Blixen, & Suen, 1997, p. 280). The question we address in this chapter is to what extent the same psychological meaning is covered by the three translation-equivalent terms in English (“despair”), Spanish (“*desesperación*”), and Basque (“*etsipena*”).²

Russell (1991a) noted already that translation equivalence does not imply equivalence of psychological meaning. He asserted that a translation back-translation procedure does not guarantee the exact semantic equivalence of the source and target terms. Some examples have been observed in languages as diverse as Dutch (Fontaine, Poortinga, Setiadi, & Markam, 2002) and Filipino (Church, Katigbak, Reyes, & Jensen, 1998), where a priori equivalent translations of some emotion terms showed semantic dissimilarity using multidimensional scaling procedures.

Several studies have addressed the lack of semantic equivalence between the terms used to refer to despair (or depression, as a closely related concept) in different languages. Thus, Marsella (1980) drew attention to the absence of terms conceptually equivalent to the English “depression” in several non-Western cultural groups, such as Nigerians (Leighton et al., 1963), Chinese (Tseng & Hsu, 1969), and Canadian-American Indians (Termansen & Ryan, 1970). Conceptual non-equivalence has also been found in some Western groups, such as among French Canadians (Benoist, Roussin, Fredette, & Rousseau, 1965), Australians, and Puerto Ricans (Brandt & Boucher, 1986). Similar results were observed by Tanaka-Matsumi and Marsella (1976) among Japanese. Even though the choice of “*yuutsu*” as the closest Japanese term for the American English term “depression” was beyond dispute, differences were found in the description of their meaning by the Japanese and American groups. Generally speaking, presumed equivalent terms do not seem to be expressing the same idea in all cultures. In fact, when words that convey the concept of depression were analyzed in eight different countries, the only pan-cultural similarities obtained by Brandt and Boucher (1986) were the absence of positive affect and an intimate association with sadness. All in all, the above studies suggest that the cross-culturally shared core of the concept of depression (and hence, of despair as a closely related emotion) is limited.

In this chapter, we examine the semantic meaning (conceptualization) of the despair emotion as captured by the Spanish “*desesperación*,” the Basque “*etsipena*,” and the English “despair” terms (the latter is used as a useful comparison reference), which are the most representative terms to designate the target emotion in each language³. We first analyze the meaning of the English term “despair” from both a linguistic and a psychological viewpoint; we briefly describe the studies and theories that have dealt with this emotion. Second, we address the concept of despair in other languages, paying special attention to the terms that best instantiate the category in Spanish and Basque, and introducing two types of despair (active and passive) that may underlie the emotion terms in these two languages. Third, we outline two types of despair (active and passive) that have been identified in historical analyses of European culture, and which may underlie the emotion terms in Basque and Spanish. Fourth, we present empirical findings of a study that compares the conceptualization of despair in Basque, Spanish, and English. Finally, main conclusions about the reported data are summarized.

20.2 The meaning of English “despair”

Etymologically, the English term “despair” derives from old French “*desperer*,” itself derived from Latin “*desperare*” (*de-* “without” + *sperare* “to hope”), which means absence of hope. The New Oxford Dictionary of English (Pearsall, 1998) gives practically the same definition: “the complete loss or absence of hope.” From a psychological point of view, Nesse (1999) also acknowledged the intertwined relationship between hope and despair: both emotions arise from the expectations about future outcomes of a goal. Thus, events that suggest that our efforts will succeed are likely to trigger hope, whereas events suggesting that our efforts are pointless are likely to elicit despair.

In general, the description of despair has been closely linked to the concept of depression. Although clinicians distinguish between both terms (Cowling, 2004, 2008; Manley & Leichner, 2003; Olney & Lomen-Hoerth, 2005), Oatley (2004) identified “despair” as the ordinary term used to refer to the clinical concept of depression. Both emotion theorists and laypeople (when describing their emotions) have sometimes used the label “depression” to refer to a temporary or more general emotional mood instead of to the clinical syndrome (e.g., Hupka, Lenton, & Hutchison, 1999; Russell, 1980). Depression refers in that case to a low activated and negatively evaluated affect (Russell, 1980), precisely where the basic sadness emotion concept would be located. The classification of “depression” and “despair” as subtypes of the sadness domain has been empirically supported in studies employing hierarchical cluster procedures. Using a comprehensive list of 135 English emotion terms rated by American college-students, Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, and O’Connor (1987) were able to map all emotion terms into clusters. The clustering was based on the semantic similarities and differences of the terms as perceived by another sample of students. The authors observed a distinction between positive and negative emotion terms at the superordinate level. At a second, lower level, five basic emotion categories (anger, sadness, fear, happiness, and love) derived from the previous two, while a sixth one—surprise—could have both a positive and negative meaning at the superordinate level. Emotion terms at the lowest, subordinate level were derived from these basic emotions. Emotion terms appeared semantically grouped at this level with other terms. “Despair” was sorted in the cluster of sadness terms, as were “sadness,” “depression,” “hopelessness,” “gloom,” “glumness,” “unhappiness,” “grief,” “sorrow,” “woe,” “misery,” and “melancholy.”

In light of the above (clinical observations, descriptions from emotion theorists, and studies on emotion lexicon), it can be tentatively concluded that the English term “despair,” as an emotion included in the sadness clustering, denotes an emotion of negative value, characterized by low levels of activation. Scherer (2001) made further predictions regarding the appraisal of despair that help understand its distinctiveness, among others, from the more general emotion of sadness. Thus, in terms of NOVELTY, despair would be an emotion with a high level of suddenness, a somewhat lower level of familiarity, and a low level of predictability (as opposed to a higher level of predictability in sadness). The implications would also vary in three aspects. First, while the cause of sadness is open, the cause of despair is natural or comes from another external source. Second, in despair there is a dissonance with previous expectation, which is not the case for sadness. And third, the level of urgency in sadness is low, but it is high for despair. As for the coping potential, while the level of adjustment is medium for sadness, it would be very low for the person experiencing despair. More specific features of “despair,” such as other appraisal elements, feelings, body sensations (physiological features), action tendencies, and expressive behaviors, have not been explored so far. Furthermore, generalizations to other languages, like the ones addressed in the present chapter, have not yet been reported.

But to what extent do these features of English “despair” apply to other languages? Current thinking in cross-cultural psychology suggests that high-level abstract features of psychological functioning are universal and that the closer we get to actual behavior, the more cross-cultural differences are likely to emerge (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). This universality position may hold in the emotion domain. Sadness (and other basic emotions) would then reveal more cultural similarity than variability (e.g., Matsumoto, Nezlek, & Koopmann, 2007; Scherer & Wallbott, 1994), probably because of its biologically rooted nature (Poortinga, 1992). However, by stepping down to the subordinate level (i.e., despair), cultural specificity in antecedents and expression of emotions become more likely (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2006; Shaver et al., 1987), and hence, linguistic equivalence is less likely.

20.3 The concept of despair in other languages

While the meaning of “depression” has been more often investigated in the study of emotion lexicons (e.g., Brandt & Boucher, 1986; Benoist et al., 1965; Hupka et al., 1999; Tanaka-Matsumi & Marsella, 1976), there are also a handful of studies in which “despair” has been considered. Fontaine, Scherer, Roesch, and Ellsworth (2007) examined the dimensional structure underlying several emotion terms in English (UK), Dutch (Belgium), and French (Switzerland) using the GRID instrument. In their four-dimensional solution, dimensions were graphically compared two by two; in the comparison of VALENCE by AROUSAL, “despair” (and the equivalent terms in the other languages) showed the second highest variability out of the 24 investigated emotion terms. Some other studies have also studied the lexicalization of despair across languages. Following Shaver et al.’s (1987) methodology to sort emotion lexicons, possibly equivalent terms of “despair” were observed as subtypes of sadness in Dutch (“*hopeloos*”) (Fontaine et al., 2002), Bahasa Indonesia (“*putus asa*”) (Fontaine et al., 2002; Shaver, Murdaya, & Fraley, 2001), and Basque (“*etsipena*”) (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2006). In the following subsections we discuss the Basque terms in some more detail and introduce the Spanish ones.

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Basque “etsipena” and “desesperazioa”

Before explaining the Basque term for despair, we introduce some explanation of the language and the geographical and cultural context where it is spoken. The Basque language (Basque or *Euskara*) is spoken in the Basque Country (*País Vasco* or *Euskadi*), a region with several provinces in the North of Spain, and in several areas in the South of France. Basque has important differences with respect to Spanish (and to French) from both a semantic and a grammatical viewpoint. As for its origins and relations to other languages, Basque is considered to be a unique non-Indo-European language in Western Europe, with an ancient history and characterized by being genetically isolated from other languages (Trask, 1996). While many words (including emotion names) currently used are of Basque origin and were coined a long time ago, there are some others that have been borrowed from other languages in contact with Basque, such as Latin, Spanish, and French (Alonso-Arbiol et al., 2006). Basque is a co-official language in the Basque Country, where some inhabitants are Spanish monolinguals and some others are Basque–Spanish bilinguals. The language is probably one of the most characteristic expressions of the rich Basque culture, which has some distinct features as compared to the more widely known culture from the south of Spain (often portrayed as the prototypical Spanish culture).

The most widely used and most commonly recognised term to refer to despair in Basque nowadays is the ancient word “*etsipena*.” Alonso-Arbiol et al. (2006) found that “*etsipena*” was closely related to two other terms: “*desesperazioa*” and “*gogogabetasuna*.” The former is a loan word from the Spanish despair term “*desesperación*.” “*Gogogabetasuna*,” on the other hand, means “indifference, lack of will-power” (Morris, 1998) and points to a certain state of apathy or passiveness.

The meaning of the two despair terms “*etsipena*” and “*desesperazioa*” is not well distinguished in the dictionaries. The Morris English–Basque Student Plus Dictionary (Morris, 1998) defines “*etsipena*” as “disillusion, resignation, despair, pessimism,” or “consent, acceptance.” “*Desesperazioa*” is not included in this dictionary, but Sarasola’s (2007) *Euskal hiztegia*, one of the most recognised monolingual Basque dictionaries, describes “*desesperazioa*” in terms of “*etsimena*” (another form for “*etsipena*”) and “*ernegazioa*” (translated into English by the Morris dictionary as “curse, swearing”).

An important feature to differentiate between the two is that “*etsipena*” has come to replace two older expressions currently out of use: “*etsi ona*” and “*etsi gaiztoa*” (*ona* meaning “good,” and *gaiztoa* meaning “bad”). According to Sarasola’s (2007) dictionary, “*etsi ona*” (the “good despair”) means to “give up, accept a situation that one does not like” (p. 370, our translation), whereas “*etsi gaiztoa*” (the “bad despair”) means to “despair, situation of having lost hope completely” (p. 370, our translation). An example provided for this latter term is “*etsi gaiztoz oihuka*” (literally, shouting/crying due to bad despair). The meaning of “*etsipena*” could be said to lie between the two (J. K. Igerabide, personal communication, June 11, 2009), but may be closer to the passiveness and melancholy expressed by “*etsi ona*.” In fact, “*etsipena*” involves a lower AROUSAL–activity⁴ profile than “*etsi gaiztoa*,” since the latter more easily brings the person to take an active (and dramatic) action, ↵ such as committing suicide or bombing (J. K. Igerabide, personal communication, June 12, 2009). The active non-conformity implicit in “*etsi gaiztoa*” is better captured by the loanword borrowed from Spanish, “*desesperazioa*,” “*etsipena*,” the most frequent word, does not seem to carry this active profile. The less aroused and less active conception of Basque despair captured by “*etsipena*” would resemble the features described for the English term “despair.”

Two Spanish terms: “*Desesperación*” and “*desesperanza*”

The most common translation equivalent of English “despair” in Spanish is “*desesperación*.” It derives from the verb “*desesperar*” (literally, to “remove hope”), which means “to despair” (intransitive) and “to exasperate” (transitive). Because of the polysemy of the verb, the noun is itself ambiguous. As the two examples below from the Spanish CREA Corpus⁵ illustrate, “*desesperación*” can refer either to hopelessness (1) or hot exasperation (2). Context is key in these cases to understand if the individual is feeling an emotion of high or low activation:

- 1 “Julián a su vez le hablaba de París, de lo difícil que estaba resultando todo, de lo solo y desesperado que se sentía” (Julian in return would tell him about Paris, about how difficult everything was turning out to be, how lonely and “despaired” he felt) (Carlos Ruiz Zafón, 2001, *La Sombra del Viento*. Barcelona, Editorial Planeta, p. 447; emphasis added; our translation).
- 2 “Hay días que algún vecino, desesperado por el bullicio que forman estos jóvenes, tira sobre ellos cubos de agua” (there are days when some neighbor, “despaired” by the noise these youngsters make, throws buckets of water on them) (“El Mundo” newspaper, *El Mundo*, 06/10/1994; emphasis added; our translation).

Another related term is “*desesperanza*” (hopelessness). Unlike “*desesperación*,” it does not derive from a verb, but from the combination of a suffix (*des-*, without) and another noun (“*esperanza*,” hope). It has a more static tone, as it means “lack of hope,” rather than “loss of hope.” Contrary to “*desesperación*,” its current meaning only refers to a low AROUSAL–activity emotion (Real Academia Española, 2003).

If “despair” is characterized by low levels of AROUSAL–activity, one might argue that “*desesperanza*”—rather than the ambiguous “*desesperación*”—may be a better translation equivalent. However, “*desesperación*” is much more frequently used and—unlike “*desesperanza*”—it can be found in adjectival form as well. Therefore, it is the only form available in the language to translate the English adjective “despaired.”

20.4 Aroused–active and deactivated–passive despair

The terms in Basque and Spanish for despair have a duality—AROUSAL–activity and deactivation–passivity—that is not present in English. Where do these markedly different meanings found in dictionaries come from? Are they rooted in a possible dual tradition of understanding the concept of despair?

Some cultural manifestations point in this direction. Barasch (1999) studied the artistic representation of despair in European history. He noticed that at the end of the Middle Ages and in the early modern times, both artists and audiences recognised two kinds of despair: a passive or apathetic type (which he called “melancholy”) and a more active or violent one. The apathetic type of despair was a more commonly applied cultural symbol in the arts, but the active or violent type was also represented. The representation could take two forms: images portraying some exaggerated motion or showing actions of self-destructiveness (i.e., hanging or stabbing oneself). These exaggerated movements may arise from an intense physiological activation, which could lead to specific action tendencies (as previous movements of actual behaviors) and would come to the surface as extreme behaviors. The question that comes to mind immediately is whether there is any reminiscence of this Medieval and Renaissance double vision of despair (passive melancholy vs active violence) in the modern Western European culture. And more explicitly, does the Mediterranean Latin culture, as manifested in the (peninsular) Spanish language, capture this active and high-arousal manifestation of despair?

Rimé and Giovannini (1986) examined the physiological features associated with different emotions in countries of the north and the south of Europe. The hot-blooded reputed Southerners (including Spaniards), as they were referred to by the authors, showed more blood pressure changes in sadness as compared to people from northern European countries. If we focus specifically on the concept of despair, we may expect that a higher internal activation would also apply to the Spanish “*desesperación*” term. Furthermore, Barasch’s (1999) accounts of active despair may suggest that such emotion concept (to be captured by the Spanish “*desesperación*”) could be associated not only with a more physiological activation, but also with stronger subsequent action tendencies and expression. Therefore, Spanish “*desesperación*” would convey a specific profile of both higher AROUSAL and activity in its expression, when compared to the Basque “*etsipena*” and to the English “despair.”

20.5 The present study

The present study tests the hypothesis that the English, Basque, and Spanish prototypical despair terms have different meanings. A recent work by Alonso-Arbiol, Gorostiaga, and Balluerka (2008) showed that the Spanish and Basque despair terms differ considerably on the AROUSAL dimension (and to a certain extent also on the POWER dimension), which may indicate that they are not completely equivalent in meaning. In an effort to identify this semantic variation, it is interesting to study the use of the Spanish term by Spanish-Basque bilinguals. This group has been exposed to the everyday use of both the Spanish and the Basque despair terms. Their understanding of the Spanish term “*desesperación*” may be more similar to the Basque “*etsipena*” due to the cultural effect of language contact, a phenomenon that has been termed by anthropologists and linguists as lexical acculturation (Brown, 1989; Salzmänn, 1954). For comparative purposes, two other samples from Spanish-speaking regions different from the Basque Country (south of Spain and Chile) were also analyzed. The English term “despair” was used as a standard reference.

Hypotheses

Linguistic equivalence was measured both at a general level (semantic profile of the emotion) and at component level (Appraisal, Feeling, Bodily reaction, Action tendency, and Expression). Regarding linguistic equivalence, and based on the principles of lexical acculturation (Brown, 1989; Salzmänn, 1954) and the definitions of Spanish “*desesperación*” (Real Academia Española, 2003) and Basque “*etsipena*” (Morris, 1998; Sarasola, 2007), we tested the following hypotheses at both general and component level:

- 1 The three Spanish profiles of “*desesperación*” are equivalent.
- 2 Northern Spanish is more similar to Basque than are the other two Spanish varieties.
- 3 Basque and English terms tap equivalent concepts.

p. 317 We relied on the component level to examine the salience of the differential pattern of AROUSAL–activity. Beyond the behavioral aspect, all terms for despair should convey a core concept of appraisal and feelings common to all languages: a negative emotion, caused by feelings of inability to cope with present and future events, in which the individual feels negative and has a pessimistic outlook on what the future holds for her/him. However, the internal and external manifestations of AROUSAL–activity (body responses, action tendencies, and expression) are expected to show cross-language differences, as observed with other emotion terms too in Basque and Spanish (Alonso-Arbiol et al., (2008)). Therefore, we tested the following additional hypothesis:

- 4 High AROUSAL–activity features of Spanish are more salient than those of Basque and English for the Bodily reaction, Action tendency, and Expression components, but not for Appraisal and Feeling.

Finally, at the more general level, we posit a series of hypotheses of the differential pattern of Spanish as related to Basque, as suggested by the meanings of the terms in the dictionaries of each language (Morris, 1998; Real Academia Española, 2003; Sarasola, 2007):

- 5 Basque “*etsipena*” is characterized by a state of apathy or passiveness, with specific features denoting inactivity and low AROUSAL.
- 6 Spanish “*desesperación*” has more aroused–active character than Basque “*etsipena*” and English “despair.”

Methods and analytical procedure

The respondents ($N = 103$) come from five gender-balanced subsamples in four different locations: a sample of native speakers of Basque in the Basque Country ($N = 23$), a sample of native speakers of Spanish in the Basque Country ($N = 26$), a sample of native speakers of Spanish in the south of Spain ($N = 17$), a sample of native speakers of Spanish in the central region of Chile ($N = 13$), and a sample of native speakers of English in the United States of America ($N = 24$). All participants had at least completed secondary studies. Their ages ranged between 18 and 64; mean ages (and SDs) for the subsamples were as follows: 23.0 (3.07) (Basque); 24.2 (7.50) for “North,” native Spanish-speakers in the Basque region of Spain; 32.06 (13.90) for “South,” native Spanish-speakers in the south of Spain; 20.4 (1.45) for Chilean speakers; and 18.6 (0.68) for US English speakers. There was a significant effect of the age of participants on the linguistic group [$F(4, 96) = 10.17, p < 0.001, \omega^2 = 0.27$]. Post-hoc analyses (Tukey) revealed that the participants’ age was higher in the Spanish-speaking group from the South than in the other groups. We inspected whether this difference may have affected the results in the direction of observing significantly less aroused–active features in the South group than in the other Spanish-speaking groups, but this was not the case. Neither main effects of age nor interaction effects between group and age were observed. Therefore, the age difference was not addressed in the remaining analyses. Participants completed the online version of the GRID questionnaire (see Chapter 5) in their own language, describing the likelihood of each of the 144 emotion features of despair (and three other emotion words not studied here) to be prototypical in their cultural group according to a nine-point Likert scale, where 1 = “Extremely unlikely” and 9 = “Extremely likely.” The items (features) belonged to five semantic components (Appraisal, Bodily reaction, Expression, Action tendency, and Feeling) and regulation strategies. Three additional items inquired about other aspects, such as frequency and social acceptability. Further information about the instrument, the back-translation process, and the data collection procedure is provided in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Linguistic (dis)similarity and area differences of despair terms

In order to examine the equivalence of despair terms (Hypotheses 1 to 3), we calculated the correlations between their profiles in each of the four samples (composed by the mean scores on the 142 features). The rule of thumb of having correlations above 0.80 has been employed as indicative of equivalent emotion profiles. Yet, because the question of equivalence was central in the present study, we also calculated the correlations along with their confidence intervals following Fisher's *z* transformation procedures. This procedure enables us to make (statistical) inferences about the similarity/dissimilarity of the various despair terms. From this approach, we consider that two correlations are similar when the *z* comparing them is statistically non-significant.

The comparison of the general profiles by means of correlations (see Table 20.1) shows that the three Spanish-speaking groups are more alike, and they seem to refer to the same concept of despair, hence confirming Hypothesis 1. Moreover, when the *z* statistics are computed, these values are statistically significant for the comparison pairs of Basque-North and Basque with other Spanish-speaking samples, supporting the hypothesis that Northern Spanish is more similar to Basque than the other two Spanish varieties (Hypothesis 2) (all the results regarding the Fishers' *z* differences between correlation coefficients of the samples can be obtained from the first author).

Table 20.1 Correlations of the despair overall profile among different samples (N = 144) and coordinates in the one-dimensional space

Languages and location of participants	1	2	3	4	Coordinates
Spanish					
1. Chile					1.02
2. South Spain	0.89** (0.85–0.92)				1.01
3. North Spain (Basque Country)	0.87** (0.82–0.90)	0.90** (0.86–0.93)			0.22
Non-Spanish					
4. American English (USA)	0.70** (0.61–0.77)	0.67** (0.57–0.75)	0.85** (0.80–0.89)		–0.71
5. Basque (Basque Country)	0.50** (0.37–0.61)	0.48** (0.34–0.60)	0.70** (0.61–0.77)	0.82** (0.76–0.87)	–1.54

Note: confidence intervals for the correlations are provided in parentheses. The correlations whose intervals are below 0.80 are shown in italics. ** *p* < 0.01, two-tailed.

In order to get a more accurate picture of the (dis)similarity of the despair concepts in the different language groups, we used weighted multidimensional scaling (WMDS) procedures. In general, multidimensional scaling procedures are techniques for data analysis that allow us to explain similarities or dissimilarities (distances) between the objects under study in a low-dimensional space with meaningful underlying dimensions. Using the correlation matrices of Table 20.1, the WMDS analysis (INDSCAL) yielded a one-dimensional solution with a relatively good fit (Kruskal's stress = 0.12). This means that the dissimilarities between the pairs of individuals (cultural groups) are best explained as points across a single dimension. The coordinates for each language group along that dimension are shown in Table 20.1. The Spanish-speaking sample from the north of Spain was in between the other two Spanish-speaking samples (south of Spain and Chile) at one end, and the Basque sample at the other (a new confirmation of Hypotheses 1 and 2 using a different statistical analysis). The greater closeness of the concept described in the North Spanish-speaking sample to the Basque concept of despair might be a consequence of the cultural diffusion or lexical acculturation effect of the Spanish "*desesperación*" in the Basque region. In fact, 17 out of 24 participants of the north sample declared having some knowledge of Basque, and four of them even spoke the language on a daily basis. Moreover, Hypothesis 3 was also supported. The Basque "*etsipena*" and Northern Spanish "*desesperación*" are more similar to American "despair" than the other two Spanish varieties, which suggests that the concepts as captured in the Basque and Northern Spain samples are fairly similar. Our three hypotheses were, therefore, confirmed at this (general) level: as expected, we found linguistic similarity in Spanish-speaking samples, more similarity between Basque and North than between Basque and other Spanish-speaking samples, and equivalence between the English and the Basque concepts of despair.

This general picture was examined in more detail at the component level. We compared the profiles for the Appraisal, Feeling, Bodily reaction, Action tendency, and Expression components (control/regulation was not analyzed at this level because only four items measured this aspect of emotion). We calculated the correlations between the component features for the different despair terms (see Table 20.2). In this case, the z statistics of the differences between two r values were not calculated, due to the smaller number of items (from 18 to 40). The three Spanish-speaking samples showed again the highest rate of agreement among them for all components. In this regard, the criterion of language similarity seems to prevail over the cultural distance.

Table 20.2 Correlations of despair components among different samples

Languages and Location of Participants	Appraisal (<i>N</i> = 31)				Feeling (<i>N</i> = 22)				Bodily reaction (<i>N</i> = 18)				Action tendency (<i>N</i> = 40)			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Spanish																
1. Chile																
2. South Spain	0.90**				0.98**				0.92**				0.84**			
3. North Spain	0.85**	0.93**			0.95**	0.95**			0.94**	0.96**			0.91**	0.82**		
Non-Spanish																
4. US English	0.87**	0.90**	0.95**		0.83**	0.84**	0.95**		0.74**	0.64**	0.75**		0.78**	0.61**	0.90**	
5. Basque	0.63**	0.75**	0.83**	0.82**	0.80**	0.80**	0.90**	0.93**	−0.06	−0.18	−0.05	0.37	0.63**	0.47**	0.79**	0.89

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

The most similar component across the examined languages and cultures involves feelings. Feeling was the only component that showed equivalence across all cultures (all correlations are above 0.80). These results indicate that all three terms seem to have a common pattern of feelings, despite the lack of full equivalence of the Spanish “*desesperación*” with the Basque and English counterparts.

On the other hand, the Bodily reaction component shows the most dissimilar profile for the Basque-speaking group. There is no equivalence between Basque and the rest of samples, as evidenced by the low or lack of correlation between Basque and the other four groups, including the North Spanish sample ($r = -0.05$). This confirms our predictions regarding the non-equivalence of Basque “*etsipena*” and Spanish “*desesperación*,” especially when it comes to physiological activation.

Weighted multidimensional scaling (INDSCAL) was again used to analyse the distances (similarities/dissimilarities) among the language groups. The matrices of correlations shown in Table 20.2 were independently examined for each component, and in all five cases the analyses yielded one-dimensional solutions with a very good fit (values of Kruskal’s stress were between 0.00 and 0.05). The coordinates for each language group along that dimension, as well as the stress values, are displayed in Table 20.3. As we found for the general profile, Hypotheses 1 to 3 were also confirmed at the component level. The Spanish-speaking sample from the north of Spain is again placed between the other two Spanish-speaking samples (south of Spain and Chile) and the Basque sample. Furthermore, the American English group is positioned near the Basque-speaking group, and the nearest Spanish-speaking group is the one from the north of Spain. This pattern of results lends additional support to the equivalence of the Basque “*etsipena*” and the English “despair” terms.

Table 20.3 Coordinates of samples for the despair components on the one-dimensional space

Language Groups and Location	Coordinates				
	Appraisal ($S^2 = 0.01$)	Feeling ($S^2 = 0.01$)	Bodily reaction ($S^2 = 0.00$)	Action tendency ($S^2 = 0.01$)	Expression ($S^2 = 0.05$)
Spanish					
1. Chile	-1.33	-1.03	1.38	-0.67	-1.08
2. South Spain	-0.59	-1.03	0.39	-1.44	-0.89
3. North Spain	0.12	-0.17	0.39	-0.02	-0.37
Non-Spanish					
4. US English	0.10	0.70	-0.59	0.73	0.90
5. Basque	1.70	1.53	-1.57	1.40	1.45

Note: S^2 = Kruskal stress for the one-dimensional solution in each component.

In sum, both at a general and at a component level, analyses revealed three major findings, which are in line with our expectations: (1) the three culturally-distinct Spanish-speaking groups are alike and refer to the same concept when using the term “*desesperación*”; (2) the Spanish-speaking group from the north of Spain shares more similarities with the Basque “*etsipena*” than the other

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two Spanish-speaking groups, which provides an interesting demonstration of lexical acculturation; and (3) Basque “*etsipena*” and English “despair” seem to be equivalent terms, as evidenced by the similarity of their profiles. Finally, an important prediction about the components was also borne out; whereas a similar affective pattern of feelings could be traced for all terms, there are marked differences in the physiological concomitants of the varieties of despair across languages, with the Basque and Spanish terms in the opposite poles of the continuum, and the English term between them.

Defining features of despair terms

The correlational profile discussed in the previous section provided us with a measure of semantic distance between the three despair terms, but a more nuanced picture can be obtained by analyzing the most salient features in their profiles (note that a comparison of the scores of specific features across samples is not intended here; instead, we wanted to see the general profile of the despair words in each sample). The most salient features were defined as those whose confidence interval fell above six or below four on the nine-point Likert scale; an overview is presented in Table 20.4. The cutoff values offer valuable information about which features are most relevant (salient) to define the concept of despair in the different linguistic groups. These boundary values were chosen, as the values of 4 and 6 have anchors in the response scale that point to a low and high likelihood of occurrence. Those in the upper end of the scale, marked by a positive sign, are positive salient features (i.e., likely to occur). Negative salient features, marked by a negative sign, are those least likely to occur. Features salient across all three Spanish varieties are marked by gray cells. Shared saliency in the English-Basque semantic cluster is also marked this way.

Table 20.4 Characteristic features of despair in different samples

	Item	Spanish		Non-Spanish		
		Chile	South	North	USA	Basque
Appraisal	Pleasing for self		–	–	–	–
	Consequences positivefor self			–	–	–
	Consequences negativefor self		+	+		
	Needing immediate response		+			
	Treated unjustly			+	+	
	In danger	+	+	+	+	
	Irrevocable loss		+	+		
Bodily reaction	Feeling shivers					–
	Feeling weak limbs	+			+	
	Getting pale				+	
	Lump in throat			+	+	
	Stomach troubles		+		+	
	Heartbeat faster	+	+	+		
	Muscles relax			–		
	Muscles tense		+			
	Breathing slows		–	–		
	Breathing faster	+	+			
	Feeling warm	+	+			
	Perspiring		+			
	Sweat	+	+			
	Feeling hot		+			
Expression	Smiling		–	–	–	–
	Pressing lips		+			
	Frown				–	
	Showing tears	+	+	+	+	+
	Not changing face		–	–	–	
	Abrupt body move	+	+			
	Not changing gestures	–		–		
	Loud voice	+	+			

	Trembling voice	+				
	Falling silent	+				
	Speech disturb	+		+		
	Speaking faster	+	+			
	Speaking slower	-				
	Not changing vocal	-				
Action tendency	Continuing what one was doing	-		-		
	Wanting situation to last	-	-	-	-	-
	Stopping what one was doing	+		+		+
	Undoing what is happening	+	+		+	
	Feeling inhibited	+	+		+	
	Accepting situation as it is	-				
	Needing help or support	+	+		+	
	Urge to be active	+				
	Wanting to move	+				
	Lack motivation				+	+
	Doing nothing	+				
	No motivation to pay attention	+				
	Wanting to flee	+	+		+	
	Pushing things away			+	+	+
	Stopping sensory contact	+				
	Hiding from others	+	+		+	
	Withdrawing into self			+	+	
	Avoiding hurt	+		+		
	Damage or hurt	+				
	Breaking contact with others	+				
	Tackling situation	+				
	Being tender, kind	-				
	Running away	+	+	+	+	
	Destroying close things	+		+		+
	Singing and dancing	-		-		-
	Feeling	Intense emotional state	+		+	

	Feeling good	-	-	-	-	-
	Feeling tired	+				
	Feeling submissive	+				
	Feeling at ease	-	-	-		-
	Feeling POWERless		+	+	+	+
	Feeling negative	+			+	+
	Feeling energetic	-			-	-
	Feeling in control	-	-	-	-	-
	Feeling restless	+	+			
	Feeling powerful	-	-	-		
	Feeling positive	-	-	-	-	-
	Feeling exhausted	+			+	+
	Feeling strong	-		-	-	-
	Feeling calm	-	-	-		
	Feeling out of control	+	+	+		
	Feeling bad		+	+	+	+
	Feeling dominant	-	-	-		-
	Feeling nervous	+	+	+		
	Feeling weak				+	+
Other	How frequently experienced	+				
Total number of characteristic features		32	53	45	39	23

In line with Hypothesis 4, a more salient AROUSAL–activity profile was observed for Spanish “*desesperación*,” whereas fewer salient AROUSAL–activity features were mentioned by English speakers, and even fewer by Basque speakers (see Table 20.4). Regarding the specific components, this pattern of AROUSAL–activity can be seen in the Bodily reaction component; here the Basque language did not exhibit a marked profile, whereas the three varieties of Spanish showed various AROUSAL–activity features (e.g., heartbeat faster, not breathing slower, and breathing faster) that were absent in Basque and English. The Expression component also reflected a quantitative difference in AROUSAL–activity salient features in Spanish (especially in the South group) in

p. 322 comparison ↵

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to Basque, but not in comparison to the American English group. Likewise, the number of salient AROUSAL–activity features in the Action tendency component was higher in the Spanish groups (again much more evident in the South one) than in the Basque group. Also in line with our expectations, the Feeling and Appraisal components (less related to the AROUSAL–activity nature of the emotion in the latter case) did not show divergent patterns in the salience of this aspect for the five groups.

The following results were obtained for the specific defining features in the various linguistic groups. We first analyze the English term, which has been used as an (arbitrary) standard or starting point for comparison. As could be expected from theoretical descriptions made in the literature, the English “despair” is characterized by

p. 325 negative VALENCE and low AROUSAL–activity. Defining ↵ elements with a clear negative VALENCE included the experience of an irrevocable loss, being in danger, being treated unjustly, not feeling good, not feeling positive, and feeling bad. Defining elements suggesting low AROUSAL–activity were a desire to do nothing, lacking motivation to react, and not feeling energetic.

Basque shows a similar profile, therefore confirming Hypothesis 5. The characteristic elements of “*etsipena*” refer to the Feeling component (feeling powerless, negative, bad, weak, and exhausted; not feeling good, at ease, energetic, in control, strong, or dominant) and to the Action tendencies (lacking motivation, pushing things away, stopping what one was doing, and not wanting the situation to last). Many of these features are common to the English “despair,” and as in English, they reflect a more passive and deactivated experience of despair, as well as a more intimate and calm way of suffering.

In contrast, the features in the three Spanish-speaking groups compose a very activity-like profile for “*desesperación*,” which gives support to Hypothesis 6. This higher activity and also higher AROUSAL is reflected in specific signs of agitation in the Feeling component (not feeling calm, feeling out of control, and feeling nervous), and some revealing Action tendencies that oppose passivity (wanting to run away in whatever direction and wanting to undo what is happening). Moreover, the defining body sensations or physiological changes that imply high AROUSAL in “*desesperación*” are not only more numerous in Spanish than in Basque or English, but in most cases also more intense (higher intensity of fast heartbeat, fast breathing, tense muscles, feeling warm, and feeling hot). This suggests more similarity of “*desesperación*” to anger (or fear) than to sadness.

The profile of defining features provides an additional intralinguistic insight; the emotion in the south of Spain seems to be generally more intense than in the other two Spanish samples. Although participants did not explicitly report feeling a more intense emotion, the specific pattern of body sensations, action tendencies and expressive behaviors in the Southern group tells a different story. There are several characteristics that only show up clearly in this sample, such as stomach troubles, tense muscles, perspiration, and feeling hot (Bodily reaction features); an urge to be active, wanting to move, avoiding being hurt, desire to damage or hurt, breaking contact with others, and wanting to tackle the situation (Action tendency); and pressed lips, trembling voice, changing one's vocal expression, and not speaking slower (Expression features). The salience in intensity of the Southern sample is fully in line with the Mediterranean stereotype of more exaggerated experiences and expressions of emotions.

But is this higher activity and AROUSAL only characteristic of “*desesperación*” or can it also be found in other Spanish emotions? At least three studies (Moltó et al., 1998; Redondo, Fraga, Padrón, & Comesaña, 2007; Vila et al., 2001) have provided supportive evidence for the latter position with Spanish populations. Thus, Redondo et al. (2007) compared the responses given by Spaniards to those of Americans to 1,034 words of a wide nature (the complete list of the Affective Norms for English Words). Rated by participants according to three emotional dimensions (VALENCE, AROUSAL, and dominance), these authors found that the Spanish words were evaluated as being more arousing than those of the (American) English version. Moltó and colleagues (1998) and Vila and colleagues (2001) also obtained a similar pattern of higher AROUSAL for Spaniards using the images of the International Affective Picture System (IAPS). Apart from the data obtained from Spanish populations, similar results can be mentioned regarding other Southern Europeans. In fact, comparable data have been found for Italians in the IAPS; their AROUSAL ratings for the pictures were significantly higher than those of Germans (similar to Americans), whereas Swedish ratings of AROUSAL were lower than those of any other group (Bradley, Greenwald, & Hamm, 1993). These data match the general cultural stereotype commonly attributed to Southern Europeans (e.g., Italians and Spaniards), who are perceived to be more “hot blooded,” as Rimé and Giovannini (1986) already suggested in their study. Nevertheless, extant data are not sufficient and/or convincing enough to unquestionably confirm or reject this admittedly tentative line of thinking.

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20.6 Conclusions

We have provided evidence for the confirmation of hypotheses regarding: (1) (in)equivalence of despair terms across languages and cultural groups, both at a general and a component level, and (2) the specific AROUSAL – active pattern of the Spanish “*desesperación*.” The most salient finding of the present study is that it is impossible to compose a coherent portrait of despair by combining the three linguistically most comparable terms in English (“despair”), Spanish (“*desesperación*”), and Basque (“*etsipena*”). A single combined profile would only have five features in common (showing tears, not wanting the situation to last, not feeling good, not feeling in control, and not feeling positive), which are not much more than the broad picture of a negative emotion. Our analysis suggests that the three words do not refer to a unitary concept, but rather to two different ones. The English and Basque could be considered to be equivalent terms and instances of a more general sadness category, whereas the Spanish “*desesperación*” differs from the other two in a consistent way across all emotion components, except for Feeling. Our study does not imply that despair is a fundamentally different emotion among speakers of Spanish, Basque, and English. However, we assert that the most common word in these languages denoting despair show important differences, both in terms of general meaning of the emotion word and in terms of components associated with the word. Moreover, our study cannot address the question whether the two different types of despair that we found can be identified in all cultures or is a more indigenous concept that can be found in one or a few cultures.

Spanish “*desesperación*” is not just a subtype of sadness (as English and Basque despair terms seem to be), but rather a combination of sadness and the anger elements of frustration/exasperation. The cross-cultural and cross-linguistic divergence is not surprising. It has been argued that basic emotions have clearer adaptive functions, not susceptible to cultural variation, than non-basic emotions (e.g., Poortinga, 1992). Therefore, the cultural influence would be more pronounced in non-basic emotions, where we would include despair, but also depression, an emotion in which despair is a key characteristic and whose meaning has been observed to vary across cultures. The expected larger variability of despair has already been observed in English, Dutch, and French (Fontaine et al., 2007). We tentatively propose that this is also the case for Spanish, as the meaning of the term seems to reflect a cultural tendency to experience and/or express emotions in a more activated manner. Such tendency appears common to other Mediterranean societies as well (Rimé & Giovannini, 1986), where higher AROUSAL levels have been obtained, for example, in the emotionality ratings of pictures (Bradley et al., 1993). Further study of the underlying dimensions and emotion features relevant to the meaning of despair terms in French (“*désespoir*”) or Italian (“*disperazione*”) may help to shed light on the topic, as well as a systematic study involving more than one emotion.

Another important finding is that the three Spanish cultural groups have more in common with one another than with the speakers of the other two languages, despite the cultural differences in psychological functioning or any other domain there may be. Therefore, it could be asserted that in this case the linguistic similarity effect prevails over the possible cultural differences. Yet, the imprint of lexical acculturation or cultural diffusion is evident here in the greater similarity found between Basque and the Spanish spoken in the Basque region (Northern Spain). A similar effect has been noticed by Davitz (1969), Levy (1973), or Pavlenko (2008), who observed that bilingual individuals applied the characteristics of one emotion in a language when they spoke in the second language, even though the meaning differed slightly between them.

p. 327 Translation issues arise in the cross-cultural communication of emotion if the terms chosen in the second language do not yield the same concepts expressed in the first one. However, in the back-translation procedure, we run the risk of selecting terms that do not capture the essence of the emotional representation in the target language or cultural context. Efforts to obtain linguistic similarity may lead to a content-biased outcome; studies from an indigenous perspective help to identify this bias (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). By choosing “*desesperación*” as a translation equivalent for “despair,” the native Spanish-speaking linguists and psychologists involved in the GRID back-translation process adopted this indigenous perspective. Our study showed that if we want to maximize comparability of scores, we can only use a limited part of the construct. If, on the other hand, we want to maximize the ecological validity, comparability of scores cannot be achieved. There is no preferred solution to this dilemma. What in the end will constitute a better choice will depend on the aim of the study.

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Notes

- 1 Corresponding author: Itziar Alonso-Arbiol, Faculty of Psychology, University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU, E-20018 San Sebastián, Spain. E-mail: itziar.alonso@ehu.es
- 2 There are three other language groups in Finno-Ugric family, one being Ugric, in which the biggest language is Hungarian.
- 3 The term “depression” is also found in every day use to refer to an intense form of sadness, rather than a true clinical state. In this sense the meaning of “depression” is very close to that of “despair,” and both terms could have been chosen for the questionnaire. However, it is likely that “despair” was preferred over “depression” because some of the intended participants (psychology students) may be more likely to understand the term “depression” from a clinical perspective.
- 4 In this chapter, when we refer to an “AROUSAL–activity” pattern, we imply not only the more physiological aspect of AROUSAL, but other active behaviors as well. To refer to mere physiological activation (as in the Bodily reaction component factor AUTONOMIC AROUSAL described in Chapter 9), we use the terms “AROUSAL,” or “aroused.”
- 5 Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA). Real Academia Española. Available online at <http://corpus.rae.es/creanet.html>. Retrieved on August, 10, 2009.