



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

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CHAPTER

27 Comparing the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to emotion and the GRID paradigm

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Abstract

Three important starting points of the GRID paradigm are that (a) the words and expressions ordinary people use to talk about their emotional experience are central to emotion research, (b) emotions are multi-componential phenomena, and (c) the study of the commonalities of human emotion should be firmly grounded in cross-cultural research. All these positions find strong resonance in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to emotion. The aim of this paper is to introduce the NSM approach, compare it with the GRID approach, and explore the possibility of a joint effort between them in the quest for a better understanding of both the universals and the culture-specific aspects of human emotions. The examples discussed in the paper are drawn from English, Chinese, and Ewe, a West African language.

Keywords: [Natural Semantic Metalanguage \(NSM\)](#), [translatability of emotional meaning](#), [emotion labels](#), [emotion and the body](#), [Chinese emotions](#)

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27.1 Introduction

Three important starting points of the GRID paradigm are that (a) the words and expressions ordinary people use to talk about their emotional experience are central to emotion research, (b) emotions are multicomponential phenomena, and (c) the study of the commonalities of human emotion should be firmly grounded in cross-cultural research (e.g., Scherer, 2005a, Fontaine et al., 2007). Each of these positions finds strong resonance in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to emotion (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1972, 1973, 1986, 1990b, 1992a, 1992c, 1994b, 1995b, 1999a, 2004, 2009; Goddard, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2001, 2002a; Harkins & Wierzbicka, 2001; Enfield & Wierzbicka, 2002). The aim of this paper is to compare these two approaches to emotions and explore the possibility of a joint effort between them in the common quest for a better understanding of both the universals and culture-specific aspects of the human emotional experience.

The paper will first introduce the NSM approach to emotion, and then discuss the common ground between the GRID paradigm and the NSM approach, while at the same time pointing out the particular area of emphasis within each of them. This is followed by a discussion of how these two approaches can complement each other in a cross-cultural research setting.

27.2 An overview of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to emotion

The NSM approach to emotion is a linguistic approach. It is “linguistic” in two senses. Firstly, its research object is primarily the words and expressions ordinary people use to describe and talk about their emotional experience. Secondly, it uses a method rooted in linguistic semantics, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory, to address a key methodological issue in cross-cultural emotion research. That is, how meanings and conceptualizations encoded in emotion words and expressions from different languages can be analyzed with both precision and neutrality. NSM theory is able to tackle the issue because it is the only linguistic theory available that offers a set of empirically established lexical and grammatical universals which are intersections of all languages. Thus, when these universals are employed as a descriptive language to specify and represent meanings of emotion words and expressions, not only is the descriptive tool itself culture-independent but also the meaning description can achieve maximum translatability. That is, the meaning of an emotion term of any language specified in NSM terms can be represented not only by words available in that language but also by words of any other language. Over the course of nearly 40 years of cross-linguistic investigation of typologically different and unrelated languages, 65 or so such universals, which constitute the shared lexical-conceptual core of all languages, have been identified (see Table 27.1; see also Wierzbicka, 1972, 1980, 1996; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002; Peeters, 2006). These universals are also semantic primitives—linguistic units whose meaning cannot be further decomposed—which function as the building blocks for all complex meanings. The search for these universals or semantic primitives can be seen as an effort to realize Leibniz’s dream of finding the “alphabet of the human thoughts” (Wierzbicka, 1972, 2001c). Because these 65 or so linguistic universals are instantly taken as conceptual universals, the NSM approach to emotion assumes a similar conceptual stance as does the conceptual metaphor approach to emotion within linguistics (see Chapters 4 and 28), where linguistic analysis is mapped onto conceptual analysis (e.g., Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987; Kövecses, 1990, 2000).

Table 27.1 The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) – English version

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
KIND, PART	relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE	determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY	quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	action, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, possession, specification
LIVE, DIE	life and death
WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
LIKE	similarity

The NSM research program on emotion includes a full-scale study of the language of emotion, which examines how emotions are encoded, described and expressed in languages across cultures. In this process, meaning remains a central issue to an in-depth understanding of any “emotion talk,” and NSM has proven to be an effective tool for exploring the emotional worlds of people across languages and cultures. This point will be expounded upon in Section 27.4.

- p. 401 In the actual meaning description, apart from using a culture-independent metalanguage, the NSM approach to emotion also involves explicating the “prototypical cognitive scenario,” a script-like narrative slot that serves as a standard conceptual reference point linking an emotion with prototypical thoughts and wants associated with this emotion. For example, the meaning of the English emotion term *sad* is explained by reference to the following cognitive scenario (reproduced here from Goddard & Schalley, 2010: 108, modified on the basis of Wierzbicka, 1999a: 60–4):

[A] *Someone X felt sad*

a. someone X felt something bad

like someone can feel when they think like this:

b. “I know that something bad happened

I don't want things like this to happen

I can't think like this: I will do something because of it now

I know that I can't do anything"

In contrast, the cognitive scenario of the English emotion word *unhappy* can be spelt out as follows (ibid):

[B] *Someone X felt unhappy*

a. someone X felt something bad

like someone can feel when they think like this:

b. "some bad things happened to me

I wanted things like this not to happen to me

I can't not think about it"

c. this someone felt something like this, because this someone thought like this

In both of the explications, the first component (a) sets up a prototypical cognitive scenario where the frame indicates that to feel a certain emotion means to feel like a person does who has certain specifiable thoughts (Wierzbicka, 1972, 1973).

The specific thoughts and wants spelt out in component (b) of each explication not only define each emotion term but also distinguish one term from another. At the same time, they show the connections with other related emotions. For example, the conceptual element "something bad happened" present in the explications of both *sad* and *unhappy* shows how these, and other "sad-like" emotion terms, are related. Compared to *sad*, the thought of *unhappy* is personal ("some bad things happen *to me*"). This is supported by linguistic evidence that, unlike *sad*, one cannot feel *unhappy* on account of things that happen to other people. *Unhappy* focuses on thwarted desires ("I wanted things like this not to happen to me"), and as a result, the thought encoded is more active ("I can't not think about it") compared with that of *sad*. It is more about dissatisfaction, rather than resignation ("I know that I can't do anything") (Goddard & Schalley, 2010:18). The absence of the final component in *sad* is meant to account for the implications that *sad* can be "free-floating," whereas *unhappy* actually had some thoughts like this, as is reflected in the language—one can say *I feel sad, I don't know why*, while it would be odd to say *I feel unhappy, I don't know why* (see also Ortony & Clore, 1989).

It is clear from the above comparison that the cognitive scenario provides a kind of standard reference point by which the nature of the associated emotion can be identified and compared. That is, the cognitive scenario, which portrays how the experiencer construes the event, defines the meaning of an emotion and provides a conceptual link permitting shared understanding of that emotion within a speech community.

p. 402 The specific content of the prototypical cognitive scenario of each emotion term is arrived at through careful examination of the linguistic evidence surrounding the use of the term by ordinary speakers and through a painstaking experimentation process of trial and error. One can test its validity by substituting each component into the term's context of use, owing to the fact that the metalanguage in which the cognitive scenario is written is derived from natural language. In this regard, while what is captured in the cognitive scenario reflects the folk knowledge and understanding of the emotion term in question, it nonetheless can be subject to further experimental tests.

The use of semantic primitives to describe meaning means that there can only be overlaps in components between emotion terms, but no circularity in definitions. Any native English speaker would feel inadequate

when describing their *sad* feeling via *unhappy*, or vice versa, due to the slightly different cognitive scenario each emotion is associated with. As succinctly put by Wierzbicka (1992a:292), “To compare concepts with any degree of precision we need to have definitions, which, if they are to have any explanatory POWER, cannot be, directly or indirectly, circular. This in turn requires that they are based on a set of listed indefinables or primitives.”

As a universal metalanguage, the NSM is essentially a *tertium comparationis*, a common yardstick that allows meaning to be compared within a language and across languages on some common basis. In the context of emotion research, cross-cultural similarities and differences can therefore be explained via the extent to which the cognitive scenarios overlap and differ from each other. What follows illustrates this point by focusing on two sad-like emotions in Chinese *bēi* (“tragic fatalistic sadness”) and *kǔ* (“anguish”) (Ye, 2001, 2007a).

Bēi appears in different lists of “basic emotions” proposed in the traditional Chinese texts. It is a momentary feeling that carries a tragic and fatalistic tone, suggesting powerlessness before the laws of nature (“when things like this happen, no one can do anything about it”). *Bēi* has long been linked in Chinese literature and poetry with the season of *qiū* (“autumn”), with *bēiqiū* (lit. “*bēi*-autumn”), which is a lexicalized item, being one of the most enduring themes in Chinese literature. The prototypical cognitive scenario of *bēi* is represented as follows:

[C] *Someone X felt bēi*

a. someone X felt something very bad

like someone can feel when they think like this:

b. “something bad happened now

I know that after this good things will not happen anymore

I don’t want things like this to happen

I want to do something if I can

I know that I can’t do anything because I know that no one can do anything when things like this happen”

c. this someone felt something like this, because this someone thought like this

Once the meaning of *bēi* is decomposed in NSM, one can see clearly the exact ways in which this Chinese “basic” emotion resembles and departs from its English counterpart *sad*, which is often argued to be a pan-culture basic emotion (e.g., Ekman, 1992).

The ability of NSM to explain seemingly inexplicable culture-specific emotion terms and concepts is demonstrated further in the explication of *kǔ* (anguish; lit. “bitter”), another culturally salient emotion concept in Chinese that is sad-like. The use of *kǔ* reflects a habitual way of describing emotions in Chinese—via tastes (Ye, 2007b). *Kǔ* is an intense and pent-up feeling, which is kept deep inside and which has a distinct facial expression to accompany it, as if one cannot contain such an emotion in one’s heart. Many *kǔ*-related words, such as *kǔmèn* (bitterness, pain, suffering, agony, anguish; lit. “bitter-sealed”), *kǔtòng* (acute mental suffering, tormented; lit. “bitter-pain”), and *kǔnǎo* (troubled, don’t know what to do; lit. “bitter-vexed”), share some of the core semantic features: mental suffering of a person, facing an ongoing situation that they find difficult to speak about or extract themselves from. The explication of *kǔ* can be read as follows:

[D] *Someone X felt something kǔ*

a. someone X felt something very bad

like someone can feel when they think like this:

b. “something bad has been happening to me for a long time

I feel something very bad because of this

I don’t want to say this to other people because I don’t know how I can say this to other people

if I say it, I don’t think that they will know how I feel

they cannot know because something like this is not happening to them”

c. this person felt something like this, because this someone thought like this

d. often, people know how this person feels when they see this person’s *liǎn* (“face”)

Kǔ is an ineffable feeling (“I don’t want to say this to other people”). Note that it is not that one *cannot* actively verbalize their feeling, but rather that one chooses not to. Linguistic evidence shows that the experiencer *will* talk about their mental sufferings if they trust the other person or when the other person has had a similar experience (Ye, 2007a). It is not difficult to see that this attitude toward emotion expression has huge implications for psychotherapy practice in the Chinese context (e.g. Leung & Lee, 1996; see also Tsai et al., 2004). Here, undoubtedly, a revelation of the cognitive scenario can inform researchers of the distinct cultural values and attitudes attached to the communication of emotion.

Scherer (2000c:152) points out that “cultural values can strongly affect appraisal.” This point is evident from the thoughts revealed in the cognitive scenarios of the above two Chinese emotions. The explications of the typical thought patterns that are linked with a feeling allows researchers to get as close as possible to how people within a culture conceptualize their own experience and to reveal the underlying values and worldviews that shape the culturally distinct ways of conceptualizing emotions. The implication of this strength of the NSM approach for the GRID paradigm will be discussed in Section 27.4.

27.3 Comparing the NSM and the GRID approaches to emotion

Having introduced the NSM approach to emotion and illustrated how it works in practice, it is not difficult to see that the NSM and the GRID approaches share some fundamental assumptions about emotions, especially with regard to the role of ordinary language in emotion research, the nature of emotion, the common goal of uncovering the universal and culture-specific aspects of human emotions, and the need for a culture-sensitive measurement tool in cross-cultural research. The fundamental difference between the two approaches, however, appears to lie chiefly in how they actually go about cross-cultural research, with the NSM approach aiming for what Geertz (1973:5–6, 9–10) calls “thick description” and provision of a culture-internal perspective, and the GRID paradigm for a systematic comparison of the full profile of each emotion. In this regard, the methods that the NSM and the GRID approaches use can be seen as complementary. In order to explore ways that can combine these two approaches, the following discussion will focus on the common ground and the particular emphasis of each approach, as well as the correlations between NSM findings and the componential approach.

Emotion labels and emotion worlds

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Both the GRID paradigm and the NSM approach recognize the important role that language plays in emotion research. They both firmly hold the view that ordinary language concepts—the ways in which people think and talk about their emotional experience—are the bedrock of the scientific study of emotion. This is because the study of the psychology of emotion, to a large extent, has to rely on language to access the “raw experience” and its interpretation. The legitimacy of building emotion theory on the basis of folk knowledge has not been unquestioned (e.g., Griffiths, 1997). However, as Scherer (2005a:696) argues compellingly, “the need of much of social science to work with layperson’s self-report . . . makes it mandatory to employ lay or native concepts.” Furthermore, to be able to empirically test and distinguish emotions, researchers have no other means but “recourse to the study of folk concepts of emotion in order to make headway on the question of the number and nature of discriminable types of emotions” (ibid:707). This view is also widely shared by (other) emotion researchers of various theoretical persuasions (e.g., Davitz, 1969; Averill, 1975; de Rivera, 1977; Frijda, 1986; Russell, 1983; Ortony et al., 1988; Frijda et al., 1995).

For NSM researchers, emotion labels and, in general, the language used to describe experience are probably the most direct and only reliable means researchers have to approach and understand the inner world, which is otherwise not readily accessible to an “outsider.” In Wierzbicka’s (1999a:26) words, “the way people interpret their own emotions depends, to some extent at least, on the lexical grid provided by their native language.” (One may *infer* certain emotions and states of mind of other people from bodily symptoms. But to be able to interpret and fully understand what is going on in others’ hearts and minds, one has to have recourse to verbal explanation.) This of course does not mean that when a language does not have an emotion term or label its speakers lack corresponding experiences. Rather, the experiences or aspects of experiences that are given linguistic labels are those that are regarded by people of a given culture as relevant, salient or important enough to single out and talk about (Wierzbicka, 1992a, 1995b). As such, folk labels in effect reveal what Jurij Apresjan, the noted Russian lexicographer, calls “a naïve picture of the world” and “a naïve picture of the human being” (Apresjan, 2000:102–4).

Furthermore, in the view of NSM researchers, the clear-cut demarcation made between the folk and the scientific theory appears largely untenable. It is not only difficult for scientific theories to be fully free from the “naïve picture” created by any natural language researchers use, but also a scientific theory about human emotion yet with little folk knowledge as its theoretical basis ultimately lacks a “human face” (Wierzbicka, 1992a, 1999a; Goddard, 1997b; Ye, 2004; see also Kövecses, 2000). Goddard & Schalley (2010: 94) point out that, within semantics, an important current thinking on language holds that “ordinary language use involves more or less a seamless integration of linguistic knowledge, cultural conventions, and real world knowledge.” Following this insight, it may not be an exaggeration to say that an emotion theory dissociated from ordinary language use runs the risk of being divorced from much of the social reality and cultural contexts where people’s emotional life actually takes place and which give rise to the incredible richness of human emotional life.

Multi-componential nature of emotion

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The GRID paradigm is based on the assumption that emotion is a multi-componential process (Scherer, 1984b, 2005a). That is, emotion can be conceptualized as encompassing a set of components including (a) appraisal of the emotion-eliciting event, (b) psychophysiological changes (bodily sensations), (c) motor expressions (face, voice, gestures), (d) action tendencies, (e) subjective experiences (feelings), and (f) emotion regulation (Fontaine et al., 2007:1050). These components constitute a comprehensive process model of emotion incorporating a diverse range of emotion theories, such as “the appraisal theory of Scherer (2001), the psychophysiological emotion literature (Stemmler, 2003), the action-tendency theory of Frijda (Frijda et al., 1989), the current-affect theory of Russell (Yik et al., 1999), and the expression-regulation theory of Ekman and Friesen (1969)” (Fontaine et al., 2007:1051) (cf. also Chapter 5). This component definition of emotion thus allows researchers to establish a detailed “semantic profile” (Scherer, 2005a:695) for each folk concept of emotion named by a natural language, a profile which relates to all of the six process components. By this measure, the multicomponential approach represents one of the most comprehensive approach to emotion, and the GRID is like a rich archive where all of the related information about each named emotion is stored. Based on the cross-linguistic study of a number of European languages and prior findings in emotion literature, the GRID paradigm has identified 24 prototypical emotion terms and 144 features relevant to them (such as “in itself unpleasant for the person,” “felt shivers,” “frowned,” “felt the urge to stop what he or she was doing,” “felt bad,” “showed the emotion to others more than he or she felt it”). These features belong to different process components and serve as the basis for comparison of “semantic profiles” of named emotions across languages and cultures, and for uncovering the pan-cultural dimensions underlying all emotions (Fontaine et al., 2007, see also Chapter 5).

It is perhaps not difficult to discern conceptual similarities between the semantic primitives of the NSM and the components of the GRID and how this multicomponential model of emotion is reflected in and supported by the NSM explications of emotion terms. In particular, the correspondence between the GRID components and the NSM semantic primitives can be paired as follows: “appraisal”–“think,” “psychophysiological changes”–“body,” “motor expressions”–“do something with part of one’s body,” “action tendencies”–“(not) want to do something,” “subjective experiences”–“feel.” Arguably, in light of the GRID, what is specified in the prototypical cognitive scenario seems to concern mostly the Appraisal, Action tendency, and Feeling components, whereas the roles of the body and motor expressions and emotion regulation are often not immediately visible in the explications. However, it should be borne in mind that the semantic primitive “feel” encompasses both bodily and psychological feelings. Empirical investigation has shown that, across languages, physical and psychological feelings do not appear to be differentiated linguistically (e.g., Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994). In other words, when someone says something like “I feel something now,” it can refer to either bodily or psychological feeling or a combination of both.

Furthermore, the components relating to the body, the motor expressions, and emotion regulation in the GRID paradigm are reflected in another two parallel lines of NSM research on emotion: the study of the language of emotion, that is, how emotions are encoded, described and expressed in language (e.g. Ameka, 1990, 1992; Wierzbicka, 1999a; Harkins & Wierzbicka, 2001; Ye, 2004) and “emotional scripts” (i.e., “cultural norms for emotion expression”; e.g., Wierzbicka, 1994b, 1999a; Ye, 2006b). The related literature is extensive and cannot be detailed here. The examples given here relate to those linguistic descriptions concerning the body. Cross-linguistic investigation using the NSM framework has shown that information about the body appears to be universally encoded in the language of emotion (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1999a; Amberber, 2001; Enfield & Wierzbicka, 2002; Junker & Blacksmith, 2006). In particular, three modes of emotion descriptions involving body part terms are identified to be universal. Emotions can be talked about (in terms of body features) via (a) externally observable (involuntary) bodily changes, (b) sensations, and (c) figurative bodily images. The first two modes of descriptions correspond directly to the “Bodily symptom” component in the GRID paradigm and distinguish the physiology that others can see from that one can feel even if others cannot see it.

In Chinese (Ye, 2002), for example, one can find descriptions of bodily change in facial colour, and bodily processes associated with bones and tendons, trembling and sweating, erection of head and body hairs, and *qì* (“essence of life force and energy/breath”) as commonly used references in relation to bodily processes that are understood as signals of inner feelings; whereas conventionally used references in descriptions of bodily sensation include fast heartbeat or the skipping of a heartbeat, feeling hot in the face, in the ears and in the heart, feeling cold, feeling numbness, feeling muscle movement, and feeling pain, dizziness, and impairment of vision. In terms of description involving an imaginary or figurative bodily event, this is typically done in Chinese through a counterfactual grammatical construction *xiàng . . . side* or *rú* (“as if”) or a conventional metaphorical phrase involving bodily images which have references to internal organs, such as the “heart,” “gallbladder,” “soul,” “intestine,” and “stomach.” The prominent role that the body plays in the language of emotions across languages shows the intrinsic link between emotions and the bodily experience, and points to the important place of the “Bodily symptom” component in the process model of emotion. In general, cross-linguistic investigations have shown that all of the six major emotion process components are presented or encoded in language.

The search for commonality and variations in human emotions: the common goal

At the heart of both the GRID paradigm and the NSM approach is the goal of uncovering the commonality and culture-specificity of the human emotional experience. Both approaches believe that this cannot be achieved from one single linguistic or cultural perspective, and that the search for what Franz Boas and others have called “the psychic unity of humankind” can only be achieved through cross-linguistic and cross-cultural investigation. Both approaches also recognize the challenges presented in researching emotions in a cross-cultural setting, especially with regard to the issues of translatability and comparability of the instrument. (e.g., Fontaine et al., 2002; Scherer, 2005a). The GRID paradigm attempts to overcome these problems by systematically measuring and comparing responses to semantic grid profiles. Only when the full semantic profiles of two emotions match can they be said to be equivalent. The NSM approach uses a simple and universal metalanguage to model the associated thoughts of a feeling felt by the experiencer. In an intuitively accessible representation that is simultaneously translatable across languages, the NSM approach also provides a culture-internal perspective on the shared understanding of named emotional experiences within a culture. Therefore, it allows researchers to enter into the subjective experience of the other, assess meaning equivalence between languages, and pinpoint the similarities and variations between ways of conceptualization. Undoubtedly, a joint effort between the GRID and the NSM approach that combines perception of meaning with conceptualization of experience can further deepen our understanding of human emotional experience from outside and from within. The next section will explore the potential for such an effort.

27.4 Combining the GRID and NSM approaches

In many ways, the GRID and NSM methods are complementary in nature. The strength of the GRID paradigm lies in its comprehensiveness and quantitative analysis. One can gain a broad picture of all the information about a named emotion by examining the responses to the proposed 144 features that encompass the six process components ranging from appraisal to physiological changes. One can also gain a general picture of the extent to which the variations of similar emotion concepts across cultures are based on statistical information gathered from responses to questionnaires concerning the features. In contrast, the NSM approach is especially appropriate for conducting fine-tuning, in-depth conceptual analysis and for revealing the conceptualizations encapsulated in an emotion concept—be it in the form of words, phrases, or grammatical constructions. In view of this strength, the NSM can be applied to the GRID paradigm in two ways. Firstly, it can help make sense of culture-specific ways of speaking, which the GRID program would inevitably encounter in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural context when gathering information from its subjects, and to do so from a culture-internal perspective. Secondly, the conceptual content spelt out in the prototypical cognitive scenarios can be tapped by the GRID paradigm in questionnaire design. In particular, it can provide cues with regard to the “Appraisal,” “Feeling,” and “Action tendency” components. In Section 27.2, the ways in which the NSM can be used to explain culture-specific emotion terms were demonstrated. What follows will illustrate how it can be applied to make sense of meanings and conceptualizations of “emotion talk” in general and how it can contribute to an accurate understanding of certain nuanced ways of talking about emotions that may be lacking in a researcher’s own language. The first example relates to bodily descriptions while the second relates to the “experiencer construction.”

In Section 27.3, the topic of bodily description was touched upon. A key question emerging from an examination of the language relating to the body is how one can determine the correlation between a particular bodily description and the specific emotional state that it refers to and how one can interpret the embodied meaning accurately. The explication of the associated cognitive scenarios of these bodily descriptions holds the key to the answer. Laying out the specific thoughts associated with the bodily description is especially important because similar bodily descriptions in different languages and cultures can have different emotional meaning. For example, “feeling cold in the body” as suggested in the Chinese phrase *liángle bànjié* (“cold over half of one’s body”) describes the feeling of experiencers who are suddenly made aware of a misfortune that they least expected to happen. It is associated with the following prototypical thoughts: something very bad is happening to me; because of this, I now know what will happen to me; I didn’t know before this would happen to me; I didn’t know before this that something like this would happen; I wanted something else to happen; I know now that I can’t do much. In English, “feeling cold in the body” as reflected in the phrase “sending a shiver down one’s spine” is typically linked with the thought that “something bad is happening to someone.” It does not have to happen to the experiencer himself. It is clear that the NSM approach can help to decipher the culture-specific interpretations of the link between bodily events and emotions.

The usefulness of the NSM approach for a paradigm like the GRID in understanding the meanings of culture-specific emotion talk can be further demonstrated in the following case where the NSM can be applied to elucidate nuanced meanings of experiencer constructions. It has been found that a wide range of languages have a special set of grammatical structures called “experiencer constructions,” which especially encode subjective experience of feeling and convey the particular perspective the experiencer takes when conceptualizing their emotions and sensations, that is, whether the feeling or emotion in question is controllable, wanted or unwanted, or whether it is externally caused or self-generated (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1986, 1999; Ameka, 1990; Bugenhagen, 1990; see also Reh, 1998). For example, according to Ameka (1990), the Ewe language (a Kwa language of West Africa) offers a number of alternatives for saying something like “X was happy,” including the following (all from Ameka, 1990:140–1; transcriptions have been slightly modified):

(1a) *me kpo dzidzo*.

1SG see happiness “I was happy.”

(1b) *dzi dzo m*.

heart straight 1SG “I was happy.”

(1c) *é- dzo dzi ná-m*.

3SG straight heart to 1SG “It pleased me”

(1d) *é- dzo dzidzo ná-m*.

3SG cause happiness to 1SG “It made me happy.”

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Each of these ways of saying “I was happy” conveys a slightly different view of the emotional experience and affective situation on the part of the experiencer. In (1a), the experiencer is coded as the subject and is perceived to be an “active” agent who can control his or her feelings; whereas in (1b), the coding of the experiencer as the object reflects the conceptualization of the experiencer that he or she is a “passive” participant in the situation. In (1c), the experiencer is marked as the object of the dative marker *ná-*. The emphasis of this construction is that the experiencer is the “recipient” of the affective state, which has the stimulus (*é-*) in the subject position. The emphasis of (1d) is placed on the causer—the thing, event or person that is responsible for bringing about the “happiness.”² Such terms as “active” and “passive” are quite vague and do not say much about the exact ways of viewing one’s subjective experiences. The different perspectives on how the experiencer comes to have, and view, the feeling in question, as encoded in each of the constructions, can be explained and represented in the following schema:

(1a’) The meaning of the Ewe “subject experiencer” construction:

X felt something

X could do something not to feel like this if X wanted to

(1b’) The meaning of the Ewe “object experiencer” construction:

X felt something

not because X wanted it

X couldn’t not feel this

(1c’) The meaning of the Ewe “emotional stimulus” construction:

X felt something

because X thought something about S (“stimulus”)

not because X wanted to feel this

(1d’) The meaning of the Ewe “emotional causer” construction:

X felt something

because S (“person responsible”) did something

not because of anything else

The “experiencer construction” strongly suggests the presence of the “Feeling (subjective experiences)” and “Appraisal” components in the process model of emotion, and reflects the attention people commonly give to aspects of their private experiences. When researchers study the emotional experience of people from a given speech community, the “experiencer construction” itself can tell them a great deal about the aspects of the conceptualization of emotions in question. This is made clear with the aid of a culture-independent metalanguage consisting of semantic primitives.

More than four decades ago, Davitz in his pioneer book *The Language of Emotion* wrote:

What does a person mean when he says someone is happy or angry or sad? . . . Our question, however, requires a descriptive or definitional answer about how people use language in referring to emotion states (Davitz, 1969:1–2).

The question posed by Davitz must be an *a priori* assumption in any cross-cultural emotion research. It is in its descriptive and definitional strength that the NSM approach can best complement the GRID paradigm, which in turn creates a platform on which NSM researchers can test explications empirically, further informing NSM research in order to fine-tune its analysis. For example, on the one hand, the subtle but important difference made between “I *don’t* want to say this to other people” and “I *can’t* say this to other people” in the explication of *kǔ* (anguish; lit. “bitterness”), which was discussed in Section 27.2, has bearings on the appraisal-related feature content. On the other, NSM researchers can verify the proposed meaning component to do with willingness to verbalize one’s emotions by testing it against the intuitions of a large number of native speakers.

It is clear that there is much scope for the two approaches to cooperate. Such an effort can not only benefit each approach but ultimately contribute to a better and deeper understanding of both the universals and culture-specific aspects of the human emotional experiences.

Notes

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- 2 According to Ameka (1990), these different constructions are not available to all emotions and sensations. Some predicates, by virtue of their meaning, can only select one single construction. For example, the predicates describing uncontrollable physiological experiences such as *dowuo* (“be hungry”) are only compatible with the “object experiencer” construction.