



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

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CHAPTER

38 The meaning of Dutch “schaamte” as a single term for shame and embarrassment

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Abstract

In the Dutch language a single term (*schaamte*) can refer to both feelings of *shame* and of *embarrassment*. In this chapter we explore the consequences of this difference between the Dutch and English emotion vocabularies for differences in the emotional meaning of the terms *shame* and *schaamte*. We found *schaamte* to be less unpleasant and less potent than *shame*. In addition, we found a number of emotion components where *schaamte* was associated more strongly with features that in English would be associated with *embarrassment*, and that *schaamte* was more different from the Dutch equivalent of guilt (*schuld*) than *shame* would be in the US sample.

Keywords: [shame](#), [embarrassment](#), [schaamte](#)

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In the English language a common distinction can be made between the emotions of shame and embarrassment. Such a distinction is not evident in the Dutch language, where a single term (*schaamte*) can refer to both feelings of shame and of embarrassment (Breugelmans, 2009). The translation equivalent for embarrassment in Dutch is *gêne*; however, this term is much less commonly used in Dutch than it is in English and is more often seen as a synonym for shyness (e.g., Den Boon & Geeraerts, 2005). In this chapter, we explore the consequences of this difference in the Dutch and English emotion vocabularies for differences in emotional meaning of the terms *shame* and *schaamte*.

Even in the English language, the extent to which *embarrassment* and *shame* refer to different emotion experiences has been debated. Embarrassment has often been thought of as a milder state of shame (Lewis, 1992). Recently, researchers have started to view embarrassment as a distinct emotion (for an overview see: Keltner & Buswell, 1997). Compared to shame, embarrassment results from more trivial events and more often occurs in front of large audiences (Keltner & Buswell, 1996). Embarrassment is also a less intense and painful emotion than shame (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Shame refers to more unpleasant experiences

than embarrassment. Embarrassment is also more strongly associated with a number of audience-oriented emotion components such as feelings of exposure, blushing, or smiling (Breugelmans, 2009). In both emotions, the “self” is experienced in a negative way, but whereas this is often only the outward appearance of the self in embarrassment, experiences of shame usually involve experiences of the self as being truly flawed, bad, or weak.

The Dutch term *schaamte* can be used to denote both experiences of shame and embarrassment. We explored a number of potential consequences of this distinction for meaning differences between *schaamte* and *shame*. First, we expected *schaamte* to have a less painful and unpleasant meaning than *shame*. Second, we expected *schaamte* to refer to less strong experiences than *shame*.

Third, we expected *schaamte* to be more strongly associated with emotion component items that in English should be more strongly associated with embarrassment than with shame. Fourth, we expected *schaamte* to be more distinct from guilt, another self-conscious emotion that appears ↪ to be more closely related to shame than embarrassment (Tangney et al., 1996). We tested these expectations on data from the Dutch and US samples.

38.1 Method

The US data were provided by the editors of this book (see Chapter 6 for details on the dataset). Therefore, we will only describe the Dutch data in this method section.

Participants

In the study, 178 Dutch students (142 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.76$, $SD = 2.78$), participated voluntarily and received partial fulfilment of course credit in exchange. Four students were excluded from analyses because they provided the same response to at least 100 of the 144 features for a single emotion.

Material

Participants completed the Dutch version of the GRID web-based questionnaire. The Dutch translation was adopted from the version made by the Ghent research team for application in Flemish-speaking Belgium. The Flemish–Dutch version was found to be adequate by the native Dutch authors of this chapter.

Procedure

Students were approached through a mailing list of the Social Psychology research laboratory at Tilburg University. They were requested to participate in a study on “the meaning of emotion words.” Interested students contacted the first author and received an email containing a link to the Dutch version of the web-based GRID questionnaire. They were instructed to fill-out the questionnaire in one session in a place where they would not be disturbed. Filling out the questionnaire took approximately one hour.

38.2 Results

Differences on VALENCE and POWER dimensions

Scores of shame on the four emotion dimensions (Dimension1 = VALENCE, Dimension2 = POWER, Dimension3 = AROUSAL, and Dimension4 = NOVELTY) were compared across the two samples. The VARIMAX rotated factor scores of shame from the US and Dutch samples showed large differences on the POWER dimension; $\text{Dimension2}_{\text{Dutch}} = 1.75$, $\text{Dimension2}_{\text{US}} = -1.33$. Whereas the Dutch associate *schaamte* with powerlessness, *shame* in US English was associated with powerfulness. Because these scores were standardized, this result can be interpreted as a large difference, confirming our second expectation. We also found some evidence for our first expectation, in the sense that *schaamte* referred to a less negative emotion than *shame* ($\text{Dimension1}_{\text{Dutch}} = 0.04$, $\text{Dimension1}_{\text{US}} = -0.35$), although the difference is not very large. Other dimensions showed less variation across samples. ($\text{Dimension3}_{\text{Dutch}} = 0.90$, $\text{Dimension3}_{\text{US}} = 0.63$, $\text{Dimension4}_{\text{Dutch}} = -1.40$, $\text{Dimension4}_{\text{US}} = -1.18$).

Differences on emotion features

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We compared all 144 emotion features between the Dutch and US data on *schaamte* and *shame* using Visual Hypothesis Testing with Confidence Intervals as described in Chapter 5. Five features in the Appraisal component were different: Dutch subjects were less likely to describe shame events in terms of “familiar events,” “events that confirmed the expectations of the person,” “events that were caused intentionally,” “of which the consequences were predictable,” and “in which the person had sufficient resources to cope with the event,” than would US subjects. Two features of the Bodily reaction component differed: Dutch subjects reported less “stomach troubles,” but also indicated that *schaamte* was less associated with “no bodily symptoms at all.” Large differences were found on the features of the Expression component: US participants reported that *shame* was more associated with “raised eyebrows,” “tears,” “moving against people or things,” “short utterances” and “long utterances,” “frowning,” “loud voice,” and a more “assertive voice.” For the last four items, the confidence intervals of the Dutch and US data did not overlap at all. The Dutch were more inclined to associate *schaamte* with “soft speech,” and “falling silent.” Interestingly, the US participants associated *shame* more with both “short utterances” and “long utterances” than did Dutch participants, suggesting that *schaamte* in the Netherlands is less accompanied by speech than in the US.

Eleven features of Action tendency component differed between the Dutch and the US data. US participants associated *shame* more with “wanting the situation to last longer,” “taking initiative,” “urge to be attentive,” “wanting to damage, hit, or say something that hurts,” “wanting to be seen,” “tackle the situation,” “take care of others,” “wanting to destroy whatever was close,” and “wanting to sing and dance.” They also reported more “wanting to move,” and “wanting to be close to others.” For these last two items, the confidence intervals of the Dutch and US data did not overlap at all.

Eight features of the Feeling component differed. US participants associated *shame* more with “feeling at ease,” “feeling in control,” “feeling powerful,” “feeling positive,” “feeling calm,” “feeling alert,” and “feeling dominant,” than did Dutch participants. For the latter item, the confidence intervals of the Dutch and US data did not overlap at all. In contrast, the Dutch associated *schaamte* more with “feelings of submission” than did Americans. No differences between the samples were found on any of the regulation features.

Differences in the relationship with the meaning of guilt

To answer the question whether *schaamte* and guilt (in Dutch: *schuld*) would be more differentiated in Dutch than *shame* and guilt would be in US English, we compared shame and guilt on the 144 emotion features. The Dutch data revealed 44 features that differed between *schaamte* and *schuld*, of which there were nine with no overlap of the confidence intervals for both means. The US data, however, revealed only 19 features that differed between *shame* and *guilt* and for all of these the confidence intervals were overlapping. The most salient differences between *schaamte* and *schuld* in Dutch were that *schaamte* was more associated with “feeling warm,” “running away,” “feelings of submission,” and “showing the emotion than actually felt,” and that *schuld* was more associated with a “loud voice” and a “assertive voice,” “the urge to be attentive to what is going on,” “take care of another person,” and “feeling dominant.” There was little overlap with the items that were found to differ between *shame* and *guilt* in the US data; only the item “felt warm” was more associated with shame than with guilt in both languages. These results clearly suggest that the terms *guilt* and *shame* are more closely related than the Dutch terms *schuld* and *schaamte*.

38.3 Discussion

The Dutch emotion word *schaamte* can be used to refer to experiences that would be labeled *shame* as well as *embarrassment* in the English language. In this chapter, we found a number of consequences of this difference between Dutch and US English for the meanings of *schaamte* and *shame*. This is an important finding for researchers comparing emotion studies across these two languages.

p. 489 We found *schaamte* to be less unpleasant than *shame* on a dimensional level (expectation 1). However, the evidence for our first expectation is somewhat mixed, since on item-level, *shame* was found to be more related to feeling at ease and positive than *schaamte*. This effect could be caused by the fact that *shame* is experienced with substantially more control than *schaamte*. We found *schaamte* to be less potent than *shame* (expectation 2). In addition, we found a number of emotion components where *schaamte* was associated more strongly with features that in English would be associated with embarrassment (expectation 3). For example, *schaamte* was found to be more associated with events that were unintentional, unexpected, and unfamiliar, that were predictable, and for which enough coping potential was available. This is clearly in line with the violations of social conventional standards that are more often associated with embarrassment than the violations of moral standards that are associated with shame (Keltner & Buswell, 1996). In addition, *schaamte* was associated more with physiological symptoms that tend to most strongly differentiate shame from guilt (see Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006; Fontaine et al., 2006).

On the other hand, there were also a number of emotion features where *shame* was rated higher than *schaamte*. In general, *shame* was associated more with being strong, being expressive, being assertive, and being vocally present. The meaning of these differences in terms of shame and embarrassment are not clear. However, they could point to the fact that *schaamte* is seen as less potent in Dutch than it is in US English. This is in line with differences between shame and embarrassment in terms of intensity, because *shame* was associated with more positive feelings in the US than *schaamte* was in the Netherlands.

Finally, we found quite some evidence for our fourth expectation that *schaamte* would be more different from the Dutch equivalent of guilt (*schuld*) than *shame* would be in the US sample. The number of emotion features differing between these emotions in the Netherlands clearly surpassed that of the US. We interpret this as evidence for our assumption that *schaamte* is more distant from guilt (*schuld*) than *shame* in the US due to the inclusion of experiences that in English are denoted by *embarrassment*.

Our chapter shows how the GRID data can be successfully used to explore possible differences in the meaning of emotion words, even in languages that are as closely related as English and Dutch. The potential implications

of these findings are large. Researchers need to take into account the potential differences in meaning between *schaamte* and *shame* when interpreting findings from studies done in these different languages. When only emotion words are used to measure emotion experiences researchers may be prone to biases in their findings because of the stronger association of *schaamte* with embarrassment. An easy solution would be to measure emotion features from various emotion components in addition to the emotion words, which would allow for testing the equivalence of experiences prior to comparison.

In our view, the findings in this chapter indicate a difference in the meaning of emotion words, not differences in the underlying experiences. Cross-cultural research has shown that emotion experiences can be similar even if different lexical categories are available across languages (e.g., Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). In addition, the same emotion word can be used to refer to different types of experiences within the same language (e.g., Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2008, on the difference between regret and guilt). Differences in the meaning of emotion words are important because they may guide participants into different interpretations of the same events, leading to differences in responses that do not necessarily indicate differences in emotion experience. In view of the observation that a single term for embarrassment and shame can also be found in various other languages besides Dutch (e.g., Spanish, Malay; Breugelmans, 2009), the generalizability of data gathered with the English words *shame* and *embarrassment* should be empirically verified.

Notes

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