



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

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CHAPTER

41 Language family similarity effect: Emotion term semantics in Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, and Polish

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Abstract

This chapter explores the idea that the meanings of emotion words in typologically close languages bear a higher resemblance to each other than to the corresponding words in languages from a different language group. We test this prediction in a case-study of five Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak and Polish) and compare the meaning profiles of emotion words with US and UK varieties of English (Germanic languages). Although the results largely confirm our prediction, additionally highlighting the capacity of GRID to capture yet smaller-scale linguistic and cultural affinities *within* the Slavic group, the observed language family similarity effect is considerably small. This finding contributes to the universality claim in the studies on emotion conceptualization and contradicts previous claims about a remarkable cultural ‘untranslatability’ of Slavic emotion concepts.

Keywords: Slavic emotion concepts, cross-cultural differences, language family similarity effect

Subject: Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology

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41.1 Introduction

The idea explored in this chapter resonates with one of the findings reported in the present volume: namely, the study by Alonso-Arbiol, Soriano, and van de Vijver (see Chapter 20) shows that language similarity effects are very strong and can overrule the effects of cultural affinity in geographically close populations. Specifically, it is found that the meaning profiles of the Spanish word *desesperación* (despair) obtained from three different Spanish-speaking groups (Northern and Southern Spanish, and Chilean) have more in common with one another than they do with the semantic profiles of the equivalent Basque term *etsipena* (the other major language in the Basque Land), and the US English *despair*. Our hypothesis is similar because we expect that the meaning profiles of prototypical emotion words in the languages from the same language group (i.e., the Slavic languages) should be closer to each other than each of them is to the corresponding words in a language from a different language group (English, Germanic languages).

A very popular and recurrent idea in the vast linguistic literature on Slavic emotion term semantics is that the emotion words in these languages (and, thus, the emotion concepts linked to them) encode a specific world-view (cf. Weisgerber, 1943, 1950), which is not penetrable by, or is poorly understandable to the outsiders (e.g., Gladkova, 2005; Levontina & Zaliznyak, 2001; Wierzbicka, 1990a). Moreover, this cultural specificity is assumed to characterize not only allegedly “untranslatable” words like Russian *toska* (see Chapter 23) or Czech *litost* (Kundera, 1980; Russell, 1991a), but also words that have conventional translations in other languages (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1998b).

p. 503 There are three a priori considerations why GRID can be a promising method in this research context. Firstly, GRID allows for the investigation of a wide selection of emotion terms in several languages at a time, and thus can yield systematic, rather than eclectic evidence. This is particularly valuable in the investigation of the Slavic language family, as previous research on Slavic emotion lexis has been largely unsystematic. Indeed, most of previous work has focused on smaller-scale comparisons between individual lexemes: several studies compared translation equivalents within the group of Slavic languages (e.g., Stefanskyy, 2000, 2004, 2007a, b, 2009a, b), some focused on the emotion terms within just one Slavic language (e.g., Kallimulina, 2006; Levontina, 2004; Slaměník & Hurychová, 2006; Solovyev, 2008), yet another group considered how individual lexemes in a Slavic language diverge from their correlates in a Western language, typically English (e.g., Apresjan, 1997; Krasavskyy, 2001; Wierzbicka, 1986, 2001a). A second advantage of the GRID methodology, in contrast to many linguistic approaches, is that it can provide measurable support to a hypothesis, which makes the semantic conclusions provided by it quantifiable. Finally, GRID helps obtain and analyze psychologically realistic data, which favorably distinguishes it from conventionally “prescriptive” linguistic accounts that are too frequently based on introspection, rather than on genuinely empirical evidence.

p. 504 Our hypothesis about a higher degree of similarity between the meaning profiles of Slavic emotion words as compared to their correlates in English is underpinned by two factors: a linguistic and a cultural one. The linguistic factor derives from the phylogenetic affinity between the languages at stake. The five Slavic languages considered in the study belong to two subdivisions of the same Slavic family: Eastern (Russian and Ukrainian), and Western (Polish, Czech, and Slovak). Within the Western subfamily, Czech forms a group with the Slovak language, whereas Polish (together with Pomeranian and Silesian) belongs to the Lechitic subgroup. Furthermore, among the 24 prototypical emotion terms included in GRID, six terms (correlates of English *happiness*, *joy*, *fear*, *hate*, *guilt*, and *stress*) are mutual cognates in all five Slavic languages (e.g., happiness: Ru *schast'ye*, Ukr *schastya*, Pl *szczęście*, Cz *štěstí*, and Sl *šťastie*). In addition, 19 terms are mutual cognates in Russian and Ukrainian, 20 terms are cognates in Czech and Slovak, and 14 Polish terms are cognate with at least one word in the other Slavic languages (for details, see Table 41.1).

Table 41.1 English and Slavic emotion terms used in GRID

English	Ukrainian	Russian	Polish	Czech	Slovak
being hurt	obraza	obida	poczucie krzywdy	ublížení	ranené city
sadness	<i>smutok</i>	grust'	<i>smutek</i>	<i>smutek</i>	<i>smútok</i>
shame	sorom	<i>styd</i>	<i>wstyd</i>	<u>hanba</u>	<u>hanba</u>
guilt	<i>provyna</i>	<i>vina</i>	<i>poczucie winy</i>	<i>vina</i>	<i>pocit viny</i>
compassion	<i>spivchuttya</i>	<i>socuvstvie</i>	<i>współczucie</i>	<u>slitování</u>	<u>zl'utovanie</u>
disappointment	shkoda	dosada	rozczarowanie	zklamání	sklamanie
love	<i>lubov</i>	<i>lubov'</i>	miłos'ć	<u>láska</u>	<u>láska</u>
contentment	<i>zadowolennya</i>	<i>udovletvorennost</i>	<i>zadowolenie</i>	spokojenost	opovrhutie
happiness	<i>schastya</i>	<i>schast'ye</i>	<i>szczęście</i>	štěstí	šťastie
pride	<i>gordist'</i>	<i>gordost'</i>	duma	pýcha	hrdost'
pleasure	nasoloda	udovol'stvie	przyjemność	potešení	potešenie
joy	<i>radist'</i>	<i>radost'</i>	<i>rados'ć</i>	<i>radost</i>	<i>radost'</i>
interest	<i>interes</i>	<i>interes</i>	<i>zainteresowanie</i>	<u>zájem</u>	<u>záujem</u>
surprise	<i>podyv</i>	<i>udivlenie</i>	<i>zdziwienie</i>	<u>pr'ekvapení</u>	<u>prekvapenie</u>
despair	<i>vidchaj</i>	<i>otchayanie</i>	rozpacz	<u>beznadej</u>	<u>beznádej</u>
stress	<i>stres</i>	<i>stress</i>	<i>stres</i>	<i>stres</i>	<i>stres</i>
anxiety	<i>tryvoga</i>	<i>trevoga</i>	<u>nepokój</u>	<u>nepokoj</u>	úzkost'
fear	<i>strah</i>	<i>strah</i>	<i>strach</i>	<i>strach</i>	<i>strach</i>
jealousy	<i>revnoschi</i>	<i>revnost'</i>	<i>zazdros'ć</i>	<u>žárlivost</u>	<u>žiarlivost'</u>
hate	<i>nenavyst'</i>	<i>nenavist'</i>	<i>nienawis'ć</i>	<i>nenávist</i>	<i>nenávist</i>
irritation	<i>rozdratuvannya</i>	<i>razdrazhenie</i>	irytacja	<i>podrážděnost</i>	<i>podráždenie</i>
anger	<i>zlist'</i>	<i>zlost'</i>	<i>złos'ć</i>	<u>hnev</u>	<u>hnev</u>
disgust	<i>vidraza</i>	<i>otvraschenie</i>	<i>obrzydzenie</i>	<u>odpor</u>	<u>odpor</u>
contempt	<i>prezyrstvo</i>	<i>prezrenie</i>	pogarda	<u>opovrzení</u>	<u>opovrhnutie</u>

Note: Cognate terms are in *italics*, the cases where English terms have two sets of cognate terms in the Slavic languages, the second set is underlined. For better readability, Russian and Ukrainian emotion terms are transliterated from Cyrillic into Latin letters.

The cultural factor underpinning our hypothesis derives from the evidence on two cultural dimensions where the Slavic cultures are closer to each other than they are to Anglo-Saxon cultures (US American and British). The most pronounced difference between US American and British, on the one hand, and the Slavic cultural

groups, on the other, is found on the individualism/collectivism dimension, where the latter groups are reported to be more collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). A less clear but still noticeable difference is found on the POWER Distance dimension. This dimension conceptualizes the extent to which a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. Relevant indices suggest that in the Slavic cultures societal inequality is comparatively more readily acknowledged (Hofstede, 2001).

41.2 Results

The meaning profiles of 24 prototypical emotion words were obtained from 166 Russian-speaking (102 females, mean age 23.7), 147 Ukrainian-speaking (89 females, mean age 22.3), 187 Polish (131 females, mean age 24.5), 120 Czech (43 females, mean age 19.28), and 128 Slovak-speaking participants (107 females, mean age 22.2).² The Anglo-Saxon data come from two samples: a British English sample (201 participants, 124 females; mean age 21.51) and US American students (182 participants, 129 females; mean age 18.51).

A confirmation of our hypothesis on the overall distinctiveness of the meaning profiles of the emotion words in the Slavic languages compared to those from UK and US English required that the five Slavic samples would correlate with one another higher than they did with the two English samples. However, given that the Slavic samples were generally less reliable than the English ones, a straightforward comparison was not possible, because a higher correlation of a Slavic sample with English could be due to the overall higher reliability of the English samples.

To resolve this problem of unreliability, we computed the Anglo-Saxon mean value and five mean values for each of the Slavic samples, each time based on the remaining four Slavic languages (i.e., leaving out the Slavic language focused on). Our initial prediction would thus be confirmed if the correlation of each of the Slavic languages with the English average was much lower than with the Slavic average (the language at stake excluded). Pearson correlations indeed showed that for each of the Slavic languages the correlation with the Slavic average was higher than the correlation with the English average, although these differences range from 0.02 to 0.07 and thus are relatively small (see Table 41.2).

Table 41.2 Bivariate correlations of Ukrainian, Russian, Czech, Slovak, and Polish samples with Slavic and Anglo-Saxon mean values across the 24 emotion terms

Language	Slavic mean	Anglo-Saxon mean	Difference
Ukrainian	0.89	0.82	0.07
Russian	0.88	0.83	0.05
Czech	0.77	0.74	0.03
Slovak	0.78	0.76	0.02
Polish	0.89	0.86	0.03

p. 505

↳

p. 506 However, additional confirmatory evidence for our hypothesis was obtained from computing the partial correlations between each of the Slavic samples and the Slavic pattern (the language at stake excluded) controlling for the Anglo-Saxon pattern, and, vice versa, between each of the Slavic language samples and the Anglo-Saxon pattern, controlling for the Slavic pattern. These analyses were done for the five Slavic languages

both across the entire inventory of GRID terms, and for each emotion term separately (see Table 41.3). These results suggest that the overall partial correlations are always considerably higher for the Slavic languages with their family than with English. A very similar picture emerges also at the term level: in Ukrainian and Russian, the higher similarity effect to the Slavic pattern holds for all the emotion terms; in Czech, Slovak, and Polish, the partial correlations with the Slavic pattern are higher in the majority of cases, from 70% in Polish to 83% of cases in Czech (see Table 41.3 for further details).

Table 41.3 Partial correlations of Slavic samples with the Slavic and the Anglo-Saxon patterns

	Ukrainian		Russian		Czech		Slovak		Polish	
	Slavic	AS	Slavic	AS	Slavic	AS	Slavic	AS	Slavic	AS
total	0.60	0.12	0.57	0.19	0.35	0.20	0.34	0.25	0.49	0.39
being hurt	0.48	0.09	0.55	0.16	0.41	0.18	0.34	0.38	0.37	0.42
sadness	0.67	-0.08	0.59	-0.16	0.37	0.23	0.19	0.58	0.55	0.44
shame	0.59	0.14	0.48	0.19	0.41	0.21	0.32	0.37	0.43	0.32
guilt	0.63	0.11	0.59	0.07	0.43	0.15	0.49	0.39	0.45	0.38
compassion	0.73	-0.23	0.71	0.27	-0.10	0.66	0.68	-0.30	0.72	-0.36
disappointment	0.39	0.01	0.47	0.21	0.28	0.31	0.39	0.44	0.46	0.38
love	0.63	0.36	0.71	0.11	0.53	0.13	0.56	0.15	0.54	0.23
contentment	0.78	0.07	0.69	0.48	0.39	0.47	-0.17	-0.36	0.64	0.42
happiness	0.73	-0.02	0.72	0.05	0.46	0.17	0.52	0.27	0.55	0.43
pride	0.55	0.38	0.62	0.21	0.30	0.07	0.37	0.06	0.38	0.61
pleasure	0.46	0.22	0.59	0.16	0.36	0.09	0.31	0.36	0.38	0.45
joy	0.66	0.13	0.61	0.25	0.53	-0.01	0.43	0.34	0.49	0.41
interest	0.58	0.41	0.61	0.19	0.39	0.10	0.49	0.09	0.53	0.42
surprise	0.65	-0.18	0.59	-0.08	0.54	0.19	0.34	0.39	0.37	0.54
despair	0.67	-0.00	0.53	0.17	0.31	0.31	0.47	0.39	0.51	0.24
stress	0.54	0.33	0.43	0.29	0.45	0.00	0.51	0.29	0.51	0.35
anxiety	0.42	0.25	0.52	0.15	0.32	0.13	0.32	0.36	0.41	0.47
fear	0.63	0.12	0.45	0.29	0.44	0.02	0.5	0.28	0.58	0.49
jealousy	0.69	0.24	0.60	0.28	0.63	-0.21	0.59	0.13	0.48	0.49
hate	0.57	0.13	0.52	0.38	0.46	-0.07	0.34	0.27	0.46	0.48
irritation	0.57	0.09	0.44	0.35	0.33	0.19	0.42	0.13	0.53	0.46
anger	0.53	0.22	0.59	0.30	0.47	0.02	0.42	0.22	0.48	0.38
disgust	0.56	0.29	0.60	0.14	0.39	0.07	0.22	0.39	0.45	0.35
contempt	0.55	0.19	0.44	0.06	0.39	0.05	0.15	0.54	0.48	0.45

Note: AS, Anglo-Saxon mean value. Correlations where a Slavic language correlates higher with the Anglo-Saxon mean value than with the Slavic one are in **bold**.

41.3 Discussion

This study explored the hypothesis that the meaning profiles of prototypical emotion words in languages from the same language group are closer to each other than each of them is to the corresponding words in a language from a different language group. The hypothesis was generally confirmed, suggesting that there is indeed evidence for particular information that is shared by the Slavic languages but is not captured by the meanings of UK and US English emotion words. The Slavic family similarity effect was found to be stronger for Russian and Ukrainian than for Czech, Slovak, and Polish. This finding may highlight the historical and the present-day developments in the Slavic societies where Czech, Slovak, and Polish can be seen as more “Westernized” European societies (members of European Union), whereas Ukraine (where the Russian and Ukrainian samples were collected) still remains largely a state of post-Soviet historical heritage. Future studies are however needed to determine which terms, features, emotion components, and dimensions contribute most prominently to the observed pattern of results.

Alongside with the confirmatory evidence for our hypothesis, the results also suggest that the observed effect is relatively small. Thus, the emotion domains (represented by a set of prototypical emotion words) can be said to be fairly similar across languages from two language families considered in the present study (Slavic and Germanic). This finding contributes to the universality claim in the studies on emotion lexicons and contradicts previous claims about a remarkable cultural “untranslatability” of Slavic emotion concepts.

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Notes

- 1 Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Anna Ogarkova, Swiss Center for the Affective Sciences, 7 Rue des Batoirs, CH-1205, Geneva, Switzerland, e-mail: Anna.Ogarkova@unige.ch
- 2 The numbers in the Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish samples include both the participants who rated the standard set of 24 GRID words, and another group who rated an extra set of words.