

What is (an) emotion?

My answer at the third meeting of Travelling Emotions

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Emotion-annotated corpora: recap

By this I mean corpora (which have been compiled for all sorts of other reasons) tagged with

- information that the lexical item mentions/refers/describes an emotion by means of its dictionary meaning
- which emotion(s) based on the assignment of all lexical items to some fields/emotion groups

Both are linguistic tasks that require interpretation, and that can only imprecisely be done automatically. Therefore, one of the points of doing this is precisely to investigate how useful this can be for the study of emotions in language: an **empirical** question.

But this requires that we make precise what an emotion is

*The sociology of emergences replaces the idea of determination with the idea of care. (...) Because of this ethical and political dimension, neither the sociology of absences nor the sociology of emergences is a conventional sociology. But they are not conventional for another reason: their objectivity depends on the quality of their subjective dimension. (...) As Bloch (1995:306) says, **the fundamental concepts are not reachable without a theory of the emotions.** The Not, the Nothing, and the All shed light on such basic emotions as hunger and want, despair and annihilation, and trust and redemption.*

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*, Paradigm Publishers, 2014, p. 184.

But this requires that we make precise what an emotion is

Green with Facebook envy: Changing how you interact with social media may alleviate its negative effects. Empathy is more pronounced when the relationship is closer, so one is more likely to “catch” the happiness of a close friend than a casual acquaintance.

Scientific American MIND, March/April 2016, Social media and the mind, p.8

Emotion definition?

Only what has no history is definable.

Nietzsche, *The genealogy of morals*, p. 453

What is a definition?

Not an aristotelic definition, not an aristotelic category. Because I believe this is impossible (and uninteresting) in the study of natural language. But a definition anyway.

- it has to provide a method to identify an emotion
- it has to be able to reject non-emotions

What we need is an **emotion epistemology**.

How can we know an emotion?

How to proceed?

- I am going to give linguistic criteria.
- The emotions I am interested in are those who can be thought about, talked about, recognized or denied (or at least mislabelled). So, nameless, undiscovered emotions are not emotions for me (or for my purposes). I accept that animals may have emotions, but my concern is human language.
- To be able to analyse or identify emotions/feelings, one needs to detach oneself from them, to be able to talk about them.

What is an emotion?

I believe emotions are our drivers, what makes us work/live. Death is absence of emotions. In order to do something, one has to have some emotion about it (from anger to love, from sense of duty to indignation or self-respect). If you are absolutely indifferent about something or some subject, you won't do it.

- Emotions are closely interconnected with beliefs
- Culture offers us a framework to tame our emotions, to make sense of them

Answer to Minh Khai: I do not claim that one language/culture is homogeneous. There are many subcultures/emotion systems inside one culture/language.

What is an emotion? Semantics

Borrowing from Nora Eggen's reflections on "trust" in Arabic (2016), I define a prototypical emotion as something with several axes:

- S cognitive/physical state
- A attitude
- E ethical perspective
- P action (potentiality or actuality)

The most accomplished (important/central) emotions are those who have strength/information in all those axes, instead of choosing just one axis to define emotion.

What is an emotion? Syntax

- Interestingly, it is known that in most (many? all?) languages emotions display a wide range of syntactic contexts, as opposed to other "things" (events, people, things, abstract qualities, times...).
- One can for example stress the actional part, the patient/experiencer, the cause, the ambience, the consequences, etc. in many ways, as well as present a feeling as sudden, continuous, dispositional, or possible.
 - English: she was worried / she worried
 - Russian: On byl grusten / Emu bylo grustno / On grustil
 - Mbula: N-io an-moto / Kuli-n i-moto / Mot-ma-na i-kam yo
 - Portuguese: tenho medo / estou com medo / fiquei com medo / assustei-me / apanhei um susto

What is an emotion? Some usual metaphors

(Now I focus on Portuguese)

- For temporary states: Fill a person (enchi-me), have or lose (tenho ou perdi), struck by (deu-me ...) [very similar to bodily sensations]
- For properties or dispositions: ser to be/become, to attain, without [very similar to identity, characterizing features]
- For (future and past) possibilities: a relationship [very similar to reasoning]
- As explanations of behaviour, and, last but not least, talk.

What is an emotion? Wierzbicka's model

Preliminaries

- “emotion” is an English-specific cultural word (for example, no counterpart in German or in Russian), as opposed to feelings or FEEL
- one should aim for maximally neutral, maximally culture independent concepts
- There are simple, undefinable terms in natural languages, the ones required by Leibniz, Descartes, etc. One can escape the hermeneutic circle.
- “Lexical exponent” of these concepts can be readily found in every language
- Quotes Geertz for the distinction of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts, which is a cline

Concepts (...) can only be truly useful if they are previously anchored in something more fundamental and more self-explanatory (also to children, and to speakers of other languages) (Wierzbicka, 1999: 10)

Examples: *joy*: X felt joy

- 1 X felt something because X thought something
- 2 sometimes a person thinks:
- 3 “something very good is happening
- 4 I want this to be hapening”
- 5 when this person thinks this, this person feels something very good
- 6 X felt something like this
- 7 because X thought something like this

Examples: *omoiyari*: A kind of Japanese empathy

X-wa omoiyar ga aru (X has omoiyari)

- 1 X often thinks something like this of people
- 2 “I think I can know what this person feels/wants/thinks
- 3 if this person does not say it to me
- 4 I can do good things to this person because of this”
- 5 because of this, X does something

Emotional universals: working proposal in 1999

- ① All languages have a word for FEEL
- ② in all languages some feelings can be described as good and some can be described as bad (and possibly others are neutral)
- ③ words comparable with CRY and SMILE [bodily expression of good and bad feelings)
- ④ mouth corners up or down, wrinkled nose are universally connected to good or bad feelings
- ⑤ emotive interjections
- ⑥ “emotion terms” (cognitively based feelings)
- ⑦ feelings related to
 - something bad can happen to me
 - I want to do something
 - people can think something bad about me
- ⑧ described by (a) bodily symptoms, and (b) bodily sensations, and (c) figurative bodily images
- ⑨ alternative grammatical constructions to describe cognitively based feelings



Corpus-based emotion study: preliminaries

Being more precise about my work, the kind of corpora I use, using authentic texts people have written in all sorts of situations, it

- only concerns talk about emotions (so already cognized)
 - recognition in others, as causes or consequences of actions
 - self-avowal, as justification or mere expression
 - fictional creation by authors
- suffers from all problems of corpus-based studies in that the corpora cannot be said to be representative, and that they encompass too much variation, etc.



Corpus-based emotion study: examples

Still, it uses vast amounts of text, written by many distinct people in several different genres and with different goals, so it may help us to understand the framework of talking about emotions in Portuguese.

- how is emotion presented/named? *sentimento* vs. *emoção* (thrill)
- how is emotion categorized? which words/concepts?
- how is emotion valued? *sentimentalista*, *sentimentalão*, *sentimentalóide*...
- who are the bearers/causers of emotion or attitude?
- how to cluster emotion words?

Corpus-based emotion study: examples

In Portuguese, emotions are things that fill us (in the CHAVE corpus): *coragem, orgulho, respeito, alegria, brio, esperança, contentamento, tristeza, satisfação, felicidade, furor, júbilo, expectativa, indignação, confiança, espanto, nojo, remorso, gozo, mágoa, revolta, ânimo, angústia, inquietação, entusiasmo, ternura, otimismo, saudade, nostalgia, terror, confusão, complexos, ódio, suspeitas, pânico, preocupação, amor, (vontade de...), emoção, raiva, fé, dignidade, rancor, cumplicidade, sentimentos X..., convicções, pena, interesse, amargura, cautela, curiosidade, ambição, cuidado, antagonismo, bonomia, reticência, pudor, ressentimento, “garra”, humanidade, paixão, simpatia, vergonha, sofrimento, culpa, afecto, contrição, prurido, gratidão, fervor, melancolia, melindre, ventura, ira, horror, desprezo, inveja, receio, nervos, ansiedade, ousadia, perplexidade, temor, paciência, emotividade, autopiedade, desdém, picardia, benevolência*

It may not give YOU the ultimate answer, but it gives us all a fair idea of the frames of the culture, the emotional topoi, that one needs for intercultural translation (BSS, 2015).

Cultural norms?

- My operational definition of culture is the ranking of values (and emotional values). While emotions may be “universal”, the way they are socially and linguistically apprehended and accepted or restrained is a major cultural difference, even among cultures so “similar” as Norwegian and Portuguese.
- Therefore, I am interested in finding evidence (empirical linguistic evidence) for different rankings involving the “same” emotions, as well as different attention to different parts of the (?) emotional spectrum/spectra.

emotions relate to feelings the same way as smell relates to taste: there are only a handful of different tastes, the rest are really smells.

Lauri Carlson

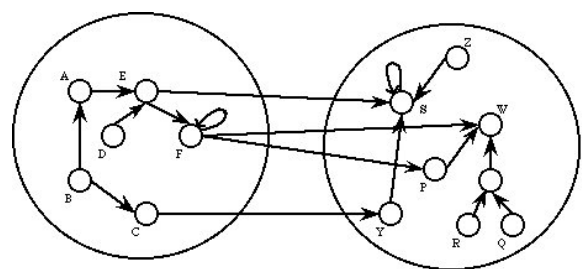
Intercultural translation

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue... We seek answers to our own questions in [the foreign culture]; and [it] responds to us by revealing to us new aspects and new semantic depths...

(Bakhtin, 1986:7, apud BSS, 2015:220)

The translation network (TN) applied to emotions:

- Using translation to see better, while at the same time getting some distance
- Translation data is informative because it is not conscious
- The TN model does not assume equivalence!



What is an emotion?

Something that people talk about (and think about), and

- that I find in corpora
- that I find through translation