

The “History of Emotions” and the Future of Emotion Research

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Abstract

This article focuses on the emergence of a new subfield of emotion research known as “history of emotions.” People’s emotional lives depend on the construals which they impose on events, situations, and human actions. Different cultures and different languages suggest different habitual construals, and since habitual construals change over time, as a result, habitual feelings change, too. But to study construals we need a suitable methodology. The article assumes that such a methodology is provided by the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and it applies the NSM approach to the history of “happiness,” an emotion which is very much at the forefront of current debates across a range of disciplines. The article shows how the “history of emotions” can be combined with cultural semantics and why this combination opens new perspectives before the whole interdisciplinary field of emotion research.

Keywords

cultural semantics, Charles Darwin, ethnocentrism, happiness, history of emotions, natural semantic metalanguage

A New Subdiscipline: History of Emotions

In J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Summertime*, one of the narrators, Julia, is speaking about her lover John Coetzee.

He wanted to prove something to me about the history of feelings, he said. Feelings had natural histories of their own. They came into being within time, flourished for a while or failed to flourish, then died or died out. The kinds of feeling that had flourished in Schubert’s day were by now, most of them, dead. (Coetzee, 2009, p. 69)

I believe Coetzee’s hero is saying something very important here—something that chimes remarkably well with what I see as one of the most exciting developments in emotion research: the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field of studies often described as “the history of emotions” (see e.g., Bourke, 2005; McMahon, 2006; Potkay, 2007; Stearns, 1989, 1994; Stearns & Stearns, 1988). For an area of research which many scholars still view largely through the prism of biology, the growing recognition of the cross-temporal (as well as cross-cultural) dimension of emotions is a major step forward.

The relevance of the cultural dimension of emotions, and the need for a cross-cultural perspective, has been recognized in the study of emotions for some time, although the importance of such a perspective is still often grossly underestimated. But the

historical dimension tends to receive even less attention from biologically-inclined emotion researchers, even though in principle the prospects for a fruitful engagement between the biologically-based “science of emotions” and historically-based approaches should be better, for the following reason: the study of emotions is largely dominated by Anglophone scholars, who often view reports on “exotic words” in “exotic languages” (such as *fago* in Ifaluk, and *liget* in Ilongot, much discussed in the anthropological literature on emotions) with some distrust, and would prefer to brush them aside as only marginally relevant to the main business. But studies in the history of emotions are harder to brush aside, partly because they don’t have to focus on “exotic” and hard-to-access data. It is enough to look at the language of Shakespeare, which is, after all, accessible to Anglophone students of emotion, to see that people’s emotional lives, and shared understandings, have changed.

In this article, I will illustrate such changes with “happiness”—a modern English concept which has been given the status of a “basic human emotion,” with an innate genetic program and a universal facial expression, and which is, arguably, a cornerstone of the whole theory of “basic emotions.”

The connection between the word *happy* and the “smiley face” is so deeply entrenched in modern Anglo culture that the appeal of this idea to many Anglophone psychologists and the wider

Anglophone public is understandable. And once “happiness” is accepted as a “basic human emotion,” with its smiley face as its “natural” expression, then the door is open for the admission of “sadness,” “anger” and, with decreasing consensus, other putative “basic emotions.”

Reading a book like McMahon’s *Happiness: A History* (2006) should be a sobering and an eye-opening experience for any adherents of the theory of “basic emotions.” In the light of historical evidence presented in McMahon’s *Happiness*, it would take a great deal of determination and *parti pris* to hold on to the idea that the raised corners of the mouth, such as those in Harvey Ball’s “smiley face,” represent a universal “emotion of happiness,” with a hard-wired “program.”

McMahon notes that,

in the opening pages of Book One of what is widely regarded as the first work of history in the West—*The History of Herodotus*—we find the quest for happiness bound up in this inaugural record of the “great and wonderful deeds” of human affairs. (2006, p. 1)

But “happiness” in what sense? McMahon answers: “In the understanding of Herodotus and his contemporaries . . . happiness is not a feeling, nor any subjective state. . . . Happiness, rather, is a characterization of an entire life that can be reckoned only at death” (p.7). But if “happiness” in the understanding of Herodotus and his contemporaries was not a feeling or a subjective state, then what right do we have to translate the words they used as “happiness”?

The Greeks lived in a different conceptual and emotional world from speakers of modern English. Indeed, Shakespeare and his contemporaries also lived in a different conceptual and emotional world. If we seek to penetrate those worlds, modern concepts like “happy” and “happiness” obscure rather than illuminate our targets. They impose on those distant worlds a perspective that is alien to them—and one that is not only modern but also thoroughly Anglocentric.

Strictly speaking, it is not possible to write a study of a subject like “a history of happiness” because “happiness” is itself a concept located in time (the modern meaning of the English word *happiness* belongs to the modern English language). It is possible, on the other hand, to study the changes in meaning that the word *happiness* underwent in the history of English, and on this basis reconstruct some aspects of the history of ideas related to this word in English-speaking countries, and consequently some aspects of emotional lives shaped by those ideas at different times of history.

What I am suggesting, then, is that a historical perspective on human emotions needs to be combined with a linguistic one. To fully understand the attitudes and emotions of earlier generations we need to understand the meaning of words in which those earlier generations crystalized their own understandings. In fact, historians of emotions like McMahon and Potkay would be the last to deny that. For example, McMahon, who refers in this context to my own earlier work on “happiness,” writes:

much of the material examined in this book deserves to be studied in further detail and treated in other ways: . . . from “the perspective of the growing subdiscipline known as the History of Emotions”. . . . In the

study of happiness, as in the study of most things, methodological pluralism is only to be encouraged. (McMahon, 2006, p. xv)

In the name of such a methodological pluralism, I will seek to make a case here, by means of examples, for the method of linguistic and conceptual analysis known under the acronym NSM, from the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. Very briefly, the use of NSM as a system of conceptual analysis depends on breaking down complex language-specific meanings and ideas into extended explanatory paraphrases (explications) which are readily cross-translatable into any language, because they rely on simple and universal human concepts, present as words in all languages, such as DO and HAPPEN, WANT, SAY and FEEL, SOMEONE and SOMETHING, and 60 or so others (see e.g., Goddard, 2008; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Wierzbicka, 1996, 2006).

The NSM approach to semantic and cultural analysis has been employed in hundreds of studies across many languages and cultures. A large bibliography is available at the NSM Homepage: www.une.edu.au/bcss/linguistics/nsm/ As these studies demonstrate, the mini-language of universal conceptual primes can be used for discussing ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and speaking, and for doing it without cultural or linguistic biases and in a unified framework. In the rest of this article, I will apply the NSM method of analysis to the history of “happiness.” (For earlier work on “happiness” in an NSM framework, see Wierzbicka, 1999, 2004).

The Semantic History of “Happiness”

The story of “happiness” in English begins with something like unexpected good fortune. One 17th century example from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online: “This also . . . was a part of her happiness that she was never overlaid with two great worries at once” (1614).

Using NSM, we can represent this meaning of *happiness* (*happiness*,) (as used in 16th, 17th and 18th century texts) as follows:

[A] *happiness*₁
it can be like this:

some very good things happen to someone at some time not
because this someone does something
things like this don’t often happen to people
this someone can feel something very good because of this

This is really a prehistory of *happiness* as a term of emotion. But over the same period, roughly the 16th to 18th century, the words *happy* and *happiness* were also used in a very different way and could be used to refer to a person’s state of mind, as in the following examples: “Full as an egg was I with glee, and happy as a king” (OED, 1732); “There is an hour wherein a man might be happy all his life, could he find it” (George Herbert, 1593–1633, quoted in Stevenson, 1958). As both these quotes illustrate, “being happy” in that sense was something rare and unusual: perhaps only one hour in one’s whole life, perhaps something that only kings rather than ordinary folk could expect to experience for an extended period. The noun *happiness* had similar implications. One example: “Like beast [that]

hath no hope of happiness or bliss" (OED, 1591). We can explicate this meaning of *happiness* (*happiness*₂) as follows:

[B] *happiness*₂

it can be like this:

someone feels something for some time because this someone thinks like this at that time:

"something very good is happening to me now
this is very good
things like this don't often happen to people
I can't want anything more now"

when this someone thinks like this, this someone feels something very good,

like people can feel when they think like this

it is good for this someone if it is like this

The OED doesn't clearly distinguish the meaning of *happy* which it defines as "having a feeling of great pleasure" from what it calls "a weakened sense: glad, pleased," and it puts the two in the same category. In fact, however, the shift from *happy* as a rare and intense state to *happy* as a common and moderate one and a matter of more or less, was a phenomenon of great cultural and historical significance (Wierzbicka, 2010). The new quantitative language of "happiness" became epitomized in Bentham's tenet that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (quoted in McMahon, 2006, p. 212). When "happiness" came to be seen as quantifiable, the concept underwent a profound transformation, one aspect of which involved the conceptual shift from "feeling something very good" to "feeling something good." Furthermore, as "happiness" (or at least a certain amount of it) came to be seen as widely accessible (indeed, as "the natural human condition," McMahon, 2006, p. 218), there was no longer room for the component "things like this don't often happen to people." At the same time, the notion of "being filled to the brim" (or as full as an egg) also lost its justification: "happiness" was no longer conceived of in the extreme sense of "I can't want anything more now" (comparable to *bliss*, or French *bonheur*, or German *Glück*), but rather, in terms closer to *contentment*: "I don't want anything more now."

Taking all these interrelated developments into account, we can present the new meaning of *happy* and *happiness* which established itself in 18th century English as follows:

[C] *happiness*₃

it can be like this:

someone can feel something good for some time because this someone can think like this for some time:

"something good is happening to me now
this is good
I don't want anything more now"

when this someone thinks like this, this someone feels something good,

like people can feel when they think like this

it is good for this someone if it is like this

This "weakened" sense of *happiness* made the English concept significantly different from those embedded in words like *bonheur* and *Glück* in other European languages (Wierzbicka, in

press) and attracted the attention of critics like Nietzsche, who said famously that "man doesn't strive after happiness, only an Englishman does that" (quoted in McMahon, 2006). It was also this "weakened" sense of *happiness* which became transported from England to America, where it underwent further conceptual and semantic developments (see Wierzbicka, 2010). Apparently, these developments were triggered, initially, by Thomas Jefferson's phrase "the pursuit of happiness," which next to "liberty" can be seen as the cornerstone of the American Declaration of Independence, and is widely regarded as having had an extraordinary impact on the history and ethos of America. It seems clear that the thinking crystallized in this phrase led to a new concept of "happiness" and a new meaning of this key word (*happiness*₄)—first, apparently, in American English and then in Anglo English in general.

[D] *happiness*₄

it can be like this:

someone can feel something good for some time

because this someone can think like this for some time:

"some good things are happening to me now as I want
I can do many things now as I want
this is good"

when this someone thinks like this, this someone feels something good,

like people can feel when they think like this

it is good for this someone if it is like this

According to this explication, the "Jeffersonian" concept of *happiness*₄ differs from the "Benthamian" concept of *happiness*₃ in three main respects. First, it implies a degree of control over events, over and above reliance on good fortune ("as I want"); second, it carries with it an "active" component "I can do many things as I want," and third, it does not include the component of, roughly speaking, "contentment" ("I don't want anything more now").

The more active character of *happiness*₄ is suggested, to some extent, by the phrase *the pursuit of happiness* itself. While this phrase originated in early 18th century England and can be found, for example, in Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, it is only in America that it became a catchword.

Moving now to the other differences between *happiness*₃ (epitomized by Bentham and Benthamian English discourse) and *happiness*₄ (epitomized by Jefferson's phrase "the pursuit of happiness"), evidence suggests that in America, "happiness" was no longer thought of as something that one may seek and hope to find, but rather, as something that one can freely, and relentlessly, pursue (as a hunter may actively pursue some game).

The component "I don't want anything more now," included here in the cognitive scenario of *happiness*₃, has not been included in that of *happiness*₄, partly because it does not seem fully consistent with the idea of a relentless pursuit. Furthermore, the new components "many good things happen to me as I want" and "I can do many things now as I want" invite an expectation of further wants, which can also be freely pursued: I can do many things now and I *will* do many things now, because I do want more things to happen according to my wishes.

The next stage in the semantic development of *happiness* appears to have been influenced by the writings of Charles Darwin. In his *The Descent of Man* (1871/1989) Darwin wrote: "The lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals, such as puppies, kittens, lambs, etc, when playing together, like our children" (Darwin, 1871/1989, p. 73). When one compares this quote with the 16th century one adduced earlier: "Like beast [that] hath no hope of happiness or bliss," one can appreciate the long and winding path from *happiness*, understood as a rare and quintessentially human experience inaccessible to beasts, to Darwin's *happiness* (*happiness*) which is best manifested in young animals.

McMahon (2006, p. 410) quotes Darwin's remark scrawled in his notebook in 1838, that "He who understands [a] baboon [will] do more towards metaphysics than Locke," and he comments that "the field of happiness would be profoundly altered by his speculation." Arguably, so would the meaning of the word *happiness* itself.

[E] *happiness*, (e.g., the "happiness" shown in someone's face, or in the behavior of some kittens).

it can be like this:

someone feels something good at some time,
like people can feel when they think like this:

"something good is happening to me now, as I want,
I can do something now as I want
this is good"

There is no reference in this explication to any actual thoughts but only to feelings *like* those of someone who has certain thoughts; there is no evaluative component, and there is no over-all evaluation (no "it is good for this someone if it is like this").

Broader Perspectives: Diversity and/or Universals

I have focused here on the "history of emotions" not only because it is an important new subfield in the broad field of emotion research, but also because it brings important lessons for that broader area. The main lesson is that "different emotions" can only be distinguished from one another through different appraisals. To say this does not mean reducing emotions to appraisals (i.e., essentially, thoughts). The very meaning of the word *emotion* guarantees that there are no emotions without feelings, so in a sense, feelings are even more central to emotions than thoughts. But feelings cannot be sorted out and interpersonally pinned down without a reference to certain prototypical thoughts (see Wierzbicka, 2009).

People's emotional lives depend on the construals which they impose on events, situations, and human actions. Different cultures and different languages suggest to those who live in them different construals, and these construals affect how people feel, and how they think about how they feel. Habitual construals, embedded in a society's ways of speaking, change in time (in response to other historical and cultural changes), and as a result

habitual feelings change too, together with shared ways of thinking and feeling.

This is the main insight for emotion research arising from studies in "the history of emotions." But the experience of this new field indicates that to realize its full potential, history of emotions needs to take into account insights arising from cultural semantics. It is increasingly recognized that language is a key issue in understanding human emotions and that treating English emotion terms as analytical tools is a major obstacle to progress and understanding. As Richard Shweder and his colleagues put it in their recent chapter in *The Handbook of Emotions*, in writing about human emotions there is a constant danger of "assimilating them in misleading ways to an a priori set of lexical items available in the language of the researcher" (Shweder, Haidt, Horton, & Joseph, 2008).

There are no emotion terms which recur with the same meaning, across languages, cultures, and epochs. There are, on the other hand, certain recurrent themes, associated, for the most part, with good or bad feelings (for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka, 1999). Arguably, they include the following six:

- A. something good is happening to me now
I want this
I feel something good now
- B. something good is happening here now
I want this
I feel something good now
- C. something bad is happening to me now
I don't want this
I feel something bad now
- D. something bad can happen to me now
I don't want this
I feel something bad now
- E. this someone is doing something bad now
I don't want this
I want to do something because of this
I feel something bad now
- F. people can think something bad about me
I don't want this
I feel something bad now

These six themes are not associated with any cross-translatable emotion terms, but they do appear to be correlated with certain universally recognizable features of facial and vocal behavior: theme A, with raising the corners of the mouth; theme B, with a partially opened mouth, raised corners of the mouth, and characteristic vocal behavior described in English as "laughter"; theme C, with tears and with vocal "crying"; theme D, with wide-open eyes (with the whites visible above the irises) combined with immobile eyebrows and forehead; theme E, with "frowning" and baring one's (closed) teeth; and theme F, with lower eyelids and a "blush."

Both the recurring themes and the endless variations on the themes can be articulated in a clear, precise, and non-Anglocentric way through the mini-language of universal semantic primes.

As I see it, the future of emotion research depends to a considerable extent on the will of emotion researchers to free themselves from the "shackles" (Barrett, 2006; Goddard, 2007) of English psychological terms and the ethnocentrism which goes with them.

There is a growing recognition in emotion research of a need for a multidisciplinary approach and dialogue. In my view, linguistics needs to be a partner in this dialogue. I hope and expect that in the decades to come, the rapprochement between psychology and linguistics, which is already noticeable, will continue and will bear fruit, in particular, in emotion research.

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