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## 54 Cross-cultural conceptualisations of happiness

- 1 Overview
- 2 Global happiness studies: a new science
- 3 The critical role of self-reporting in global “happiness” research
- 4 Methodological issues in happiness studies
- 5 Case studies: English, Danish, and Chinese
- 6 Cross-linguistic conceptualisations of “happiness”: the role of culture
- 7 Concluding remarks
- 8 References

**Abstract:** This chapter provides an overview of the linguistic studies of cross-cultural conceptualisations of “happiness”, focussing on methodological issues and research findings. It first gives a general, contextual account of recent multidisciplinary approaches to global happiness studies and how this field of research has become a new science. It then discusses the critical role of language and self-reporting in “happiness” research, and examines methodological problems arising from cross-linguistic studies of “happiness”, and from studies of the universals and culture-specificity of emotion in general. The chapter also discusses possible solutions. In this context, the culture-independent Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach is introduced, with illustrative examples drawn from English and Chinese. Commonalities and differences between the NSM approach and the Conceptual Metaphor Approach to emotion are also discussed. Three detailed NSM-based case studies of conceptualisations of “happiness” in English, Chinese, and Danish are discussed, as well as the role of culture in such conceptualisations. The conclusion stresses the role of language and metalanguage in discovering people’s beliefs about “happiness”.

### 1 Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the linguistic studies of cross-cultural conceptualisations of “happiness”, focussing on methodological issues and research findings. Section 2 gives a general, contextual account of recent multidisciplinary approaches to the global happiness studies and how this field of research has become a new science. Section 3 discusses the critical role of language and self-reporting in happiness research. Section 4 deals with the methodological problems arising from cross-linguistic studies of “happiness”, and from studies of the universals and culture-specific aspects of emotion in general. It also discusses possible solutions. In this context, the culture-independent Natural Se-

semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach is introduced, with illustrative examples drawn from English and Mandarin Chinese (hereafter Chinese). Commonalities and differences between the NSM approach and the Conceptual Metaphor Approach to emotion are also discussed. Section 5 details NSM-based case studies of “happiness” concepts in a number of languages, with a particular focus on English, Chinese, and Danish. Section 6 discusses the role of culture in these conceptualisations. The conclusion stresses the role of language and metalanguage in discovering people’s beliefs about “happiness”.

## 2 Global happiness studies: a new science

Over the last three decades, happiness studies has become one of the fastest-growing fields of research, attracting scholars from disciplines as diverse as psychology, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology and economics. The emergence of this new discipline is, for example, reflected in the creation of the interdisciplinary *Journal of Happiness Studies* in 2000, the publication of the special issue on “Happiness” in *Daedalus*, the flagship journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2004), and an explosion in the number of scholarly books and articles devoted to the topic on “happiness” and subjective well-being (SWB) (e.g. Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 2001; Diener and Suh 2002; Layard 2003, 2005; McMahon 2006; Frey 2008, 2018; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008; Bok 2010).

In their (2001) paper entitled “Subjective well-being: the science of happiness and life satisfaction”, the comparative social psychologist Ed Diener and his colleagues remark: “the scientific study of subjective well-being is now poised to grow into a major scholarly and applied discipline” (Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 2001: 64). What they call “the scientific study of subjective well-being” is no longer a prediction but now reflects how many scholars conceptualise the field. By 2005, for instance, the economist Richard Layard expounded what he called a “new science” in his seminal book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (Layard 2005). Undoubtedly, the linking of happiness to a nation’s growth and productivity has attracted many economists to this field (e.g. Helliwell, Layard, and Sacks’ *World Happiness Report* [2013, 2019]). Happiness studies has been incorporated into the broad field of the social sciences.

## 3 The critical role of self-reporting in global “happiness” research

Since language provides direct access to the subjective experience of people, interpreting and assessing the quality of other people’s subjective experience necessarily depends on self-reports of one kind or another. As David Myers states plainly in his book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, “if you can’t tell someone whether you’re happy or miserable, who can?” (Myers 1992: 27). Therefore, despite the attempt to make it a science and call it the “scientific study of happiness”, psychologists, sociologists and economists have no other means but self-reports to access people’s subjective experience and their inner life. For example,

Layard writes: “The most obvious way to find out whether people are happy in general is to survey individuals in a random sample of households and ask them. A typical question is, ‘Taking all things together, would you say are you very happy, quite happy, or not very happy?’” (Layard 2005: 14).

The critical role of self-reports in happiness studies means that understanding the meaning of words and expressions people use to talk about their subjective experience is of vital importance, and *a priori*, to meaningful “happiness” research and the study of human conceptualisation of subjective experience.

## 4 Methodological issues in happiness studies

Since global “happiness” research involves consultants from many nations and countries, researchers must also be able to fully understand the “happiness” talk in a given culture, and adequately deal with the issues of translation and meaning equivalence. These issues are discussed in Section 4.1, followed by a general exposition of the need for a metalanguage which can serve as a common measure for the comparison of meaning across languages (Section 4.2). In that context, the NSM approach to the happiness studies is introduced and illustrated with examples from English and Chinese.

### 4.1 The issue of meaning comparison

Global happiness research necessarily involves translation. This translation comes in two forms: one is the translation of local terms and expressions into English, the lingua franca of the international science community; the other is the translation of English-based questionnaires into local languages. In either form, it often comes down to the question of whether the word “happy” means the same thing in different languages. If not, it obviously points to different conceptions of “happiness”, which then need to be articulated, and whose nuances must also be fully understood. Only in this way can researchers gain a genuine picture of what “happiness” means to a local speech community, and meaningfully compare interview data and statistics.

Researchers generally recognise that cross-linguistic comparability of happiness vocabulary can be a problem. For example, Layard (2003) writes: “Of course, one could question whether the word ‘happy’ means the same thing in different languages. If it does not, we can learn nothing by comparing different countries” (Layard 2003: 16).

Although the issue of meaning equivalence is often acknowledged by scholars, the solution they offer is simply back translation. For example, Diener et al. (1995) has this to say: “[i]n South Korea and PRC, the questionnaires were translated into the vernacular by bilingual speakers who were native speakers of those languages. In the case of certain SWB measures, a translation and back translation method was used” (Diener et al. 1995: 16). However, from a semantic point of view, back translation does not guarantee meaning equivalence (e.g. Wierzbicka 2004; Ye 2016). True equivalence in meaning has to be established on empirical grounds, on the basis of delicate and detailed meaning comparison.

Without such careful investigation of meaning, a given translation or back translation is merely a *supposed* equivalent.

4.2
The need for cross-translatable words in global happiness studies

The issue of meaning equivalence pertains not just to global happiness studies. It is critical to cross-linguistic investigation of subjective experience in general. Without self-reports, researchers can know little about people’s own experience and their attitudes towards it. As Barrett et al. aptly put it, self-reports are “essential for revealing the ontological structure of consciousness” (Barrett et al. 2007: 377). In order to ascertain the extent of similarities and differences in the meanings of words across different languages, one needs a culture-independent metalanguage for speaking about human feelings and associated thoughts. Researchers need a culturally neutral semantic metalanguage which not only is capable of unpacking meanings but also serves as a common yardstick for comparing those meanings.

One can turn to the field of linguistics, particularly semantics, to look for such a metalanguage. So far, what is known as the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), developed by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard and their colleagues, is the only available metalanguage that can meet both of the needs mentioned above (e.g. Wierzbicka 1972, 1996; Goddard 2011). This is because the metalanguage, which is made up of 65 semantic primes, represents the most basic level of meaning, and at the same time, is translatable across languages. These semantic primes can be thought of as intersections of all languages. Table 54.1 lists the exponents of the 65 semantic primes in English.

**Tab. 54.1:** Semantic primes (English exponents), grouped into related categories (after Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014).

|                                                                                 |                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY                                  | substantives                       |
| KINDS, PARTS                                                                    | relational substantives            |
| THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE                                                      | determiners                        |
| ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW                                      | quantifiers                        |
| GOOD, BAD                                                                       | evaluators                         |
| BIG, SMALL                                                                      | descriptors                        |
| KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR                                  | mental predicates                  |
| SAY, WORDS, TRUE                                                                | speech                             |
| DO, HAPPEN, MOVE                                                                | actions, events, movement          |
| BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)                                | location, existence, specification |
| (IS) MINE                                                                       | possession                         |
| 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, TOUCH                 | place                              |
| NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF                                                    | logical concepts                   |
| VERY, MORE                                                                      | augmentor, intensifier             |
| LIKE                                                                            | similarity                         |

The 65 primes have been identified through extensive empirical investigations of typologically different languages over five decades (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1972, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Peeters 2006). In theory, there is a sub-set of every language that matches in meaning across all languages; and this mini-language within each language is also governed by a universal grammar.

As indefinables (lexemes whose meaning cannot be further defined), the semantic primes function as building blocks of complex meanings in that any complex ideas can be decomposed into, and represented by, primes through paraphrases. For example, the meanings of the English emotion terms *pleased* and *delighted* can be paraphrased as follows (based on Wierzbicka [1999: 56–57] and Goddard [2018: 73, 75], with modification):

[A] semantic explication of English *pleased*

She was pleased (at that time):

- (a) this someone (=she) thought like this (at that time):
- (b) “something good happened  
I wanted this”
- (c) because of this, she felt something good  
like people can feel when they think like this

[B] semantic explication of English *delighted*

She was delighted (at that time):

- (a) this someone (=she) thought like this (at that time)
- (b) “I know now that something very good happened  
I didn’t know before that it would happen”
- (c) because of this, she felt something very good  
like people can feel when they think like this

These explications achieve two things. First, they spell out the typical thought processes associated with the respective feelings of *pleased* and *delighted*. Second, they make it clear where the differences lie between the two. While both are positive emotions in response to a particular event, *delighted* implies much stronger “arousal” (“feel something very good”) stemming from the thought that the event is “very good” and unexpected (“I didn’t know before that it would happen”).

Take the Chinese emotion terms *xǐ* and *lè* as another example. Both terms are regarded as expressing basic emotions in Chinese culture and philosophical tradition. Their meanings can be paraphrased as follows (based on Ye [2006] with modification):

[C] semantic explication of Chinese *xǐ* (‘festival joy’)

- (a) someone X felt something very good at this time, like people can feel when they think like this:
- (b) “something very good is happening to me now  
because something good happened now  
I did not know that something like this would happen to me  
I want this to be happening to me  
I want to do something now because of this  
I want to do something with some part of my body now”

- [D] semantic explication of Chinese *lè* ('attainable enjoyment/contentment')
- (a) someone X felt something for some time, like people can feel when they think like this:
  - (b) "something very good is happening to me now  
because someone is doing something  
I wanted this to be happening  
I want this to be happening for some more time  
because of this, I want to do something  
I don't want to think about other things now"

As Ye (2006: 76) points out, these two Chinese basic emotion terms seem to suggest that in Chinese people's conceptualisation of human emotional experience in relation to good events, there are two complementary aspects: one is due to an external force, somewhat mysterious, to which the experiencer actively responds, experiencing a momentary, intense feeling "stirred" by external stimuli; and the other is rooted in human effort. Each aspect is culturally salient, and deserves a place in the small set of Chinese "basic emotions".

Once the meanings of these Chinese emotion terms are stated in NSM, not only can they be made accessible to people from other languages and cultures, but cross-linguistic comparison can be carried out by using a common yardstick.

It is clear from the explications that *xǐ* and *lè* are emotional responses to very positive *personal* events ("something very good is happening *to me*"), an element absent in either *pleased* or *delighted*. Despite the fact that *xǐ* is glossed as 'festive joy' here, one would hesitate to equate it with the "surprise-free", impersonal *joy*.

Explications [C] and [D] show that *xǐ* differs from English *pleased* also in that it doesn't involve a pre-mediated goal ("I wanted this"). *Delighted* may be closer in meaning to *xǐ*, especially given that both contain an element of "surprise". However, *delighted* lacks a strong "personal interest" ("to me") and "action tendency" ("I want to do something now"), which renders it a "lighter" and less jubilant emotion than *xǐ*.

*Lè* seems to have components which overlap with many "happy"-related words in English, such as *pleased*, *enjoyment*, and *contented*. However, the differences between *lè* and these terms are also striking. *Lè* is more than just being pleased with what one wanted to happen. It contains the thought of not wanting the event to stop and wanting to do something to keep it going. It is true that *lè* is closely associated with 'contentment' and being 'carefree'. But in it, the "contentedness" hinges on "thinking" ("I don't want to think about other things"), whereas in English the word *contented* places its emphasis on the "volitional" aspect – "I do not *want* other things now". The "contentedness" of *lè* results from one's enjoyment, not from what one has or what happens to oneself as in the case of *contented* (see Explication [F] in Section 4 for the meaning of English *contented*). The element of "do" is reminiscent of *enjoyment/enjoy*, but its meaning is much narrower than *lè*.

Explications [A] to [D] all employ a particular technique to describe the meaning of emotion words. They all centre on portraying the prototypical thought scenarios with which the relevant emotions are typically associated. This semantic technique, developed in the 1970s by Anna Wierzbicka, offers a linguistic solution to articulating seemingly inexplicable emotional meaning encoded in words and expressions, and avoids circularity in meaning explanation (that is, glossing a term with its synonyms) (see Wierzbicka 1972, 1973, 1999, 2009). This means that, in the NSM approach to emotion studies, the important

tasks for researchers are to identify the prototypical cognitive scenario encoded in a given emotion term by examining the range of its use, and to state it in simple and universal semantic primes. The universality of the semantic primes and their combinatorial behaviour ensure maximum translatability of emotion concepts between languages while ensuring that cross-linguistic comparisons are carried out on a common basis.

It should be pointed out that the clearly stated explications are the results of a long experimentation process, during which meaning components are proposed on the basis of a careful examination of the usages and collocational patterns of a given word in corpora. Acceptability tests are then conducted to check the validity of each component. Substitutability tests are also conducted to make sure that each component is compatible with the given context. The explications should be seen as approximations of meaning. They can be refined and revised subject to new data and contexts. The explications should also be well-formed and coherent as stand-alone texts.

The concern for a common measure in cross-linguistic study of emotions, and in cross-linguistic study of conceptual domains in general, distinguishes the Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 1990, 2000). On the one hand, both theories take a cognitive stance to meaning, that is, they both are interested in uncovering the conceptualisations embodied in words and conventionalised expressions, and they both take meaning analysis as conceptual analysis. On the other hand, the aim of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is to identify the underlying conceptual metaphors that enable the mapping between the physical source domains and the abstract target domain, as a means to explain the conceptual formation of the latter. For example, Zoltán Kövecses (1991) identifies the following metaphors for the concept of happiness:

HAPPINESS IS LIGHT (e.g. “Look on the bright side.” “He radiates joy.” “She brought a ray of sunshine into the room.”)

HAPPINESS IS DISEASE (e.g. “Her good mood was contagious.” “His laughter was infectious.”)

BRIGHT EYES STAND FOR HAPPINESS (e.g. ‘His eyes glinted when he saw the money.’ “Amusement gleamed in his eyes.”)

BEING HAPPY IS BEING OFF THE GROUND (e.g. “She was on cloud nine.” “We were on top of the world.”)

BEING HAPPY IS BEING IN HEAVEN (e.g. “That was heaven on earth.” “It was paradise on earth.”)

HAPPINESS IS UP (e.g. “They were in high spirits.” “We had to cheer him up.”)

HAPPINESS IS A (DESIRED) HIDDEN OBJECT (e.g. “The pursuit of happiness is our inalienable right.” “He is striving for happiness.”)

HAPPINESS IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY (e.g. “He received a great deal of happiness from their relationship.” “Buy happiness.”)

Based on these metaphors, Kövecses (1995) offers the following list of features which he believes reflect folk knowledge of the concept of happiness:

Happiness is a state that lasts a long time.

It is associated with a positive value.



It is a desired state.

It is pleasurable.

It gives you a feeling of harmony with the world.

It is something that you can “spread” to others.

It exists separately from you and is outside you.

It is not readily available: it either requires an effort to achieve it or comes to you from external sources.

It takes a long time to achieve it.

It is just as difficult to maintain it as it is to attain it.

(Kövesces 1995: 39)

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory approach represents one way of probing the conceptualisation of *happiness*. It is reasonable to assume that, given that the examples are all in English, the listed metaphors and features are about the English word and concept *happiness* (Kövesces doesn't specify in the paper whether the conceptual metaphors he outlines and the features he summarises are for English *happiness* or intended as universal; he simply used the word “happiness”).

From the perspective of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory, two problems are still unresolved when happiness is described via metaphors and features. First, the target domain subsumes many related words – such as *happiness*, *joy*, and *in high spirits* – all under one label, *happiness*, although there are qualitative differences in the meanings of all these emotion words (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1999: 50–59). Second, the issue of translatability in cross-linguistic study of happiness is not addressed. The target domain, in this case *happiness*, is represented by a word specific to the English language. This word is culturally laden and, therefore, does not meet the requirement of a culture-independent metalanguage for cross-linguistic investigation.

In Section 5, the NSM approach to happiness studies is discussed, with illustrative case studies from English, Danish and Chinese.

## 5 Case studies: English, Danish, and Chinese

NSM remains the only linguistic theory that has engaged with the multidisciplinary study of global “happiness” and subjective well-being. By so doing, it is able to offer a linguistic perspective on the subject, and reveal different conceptualisations of “happiness” reflected in different languages and speech communities. Drawing on its well-established methods as applied to the study of the language and semantics of emotion (e.g. Wierzbicka 1972, 1973, 1992, 1999, 2004, 2009; Harkins and Wierzbicka 2001; Enfield and Wierzbicka 2002; Ye 2013), NSM scholars take a two-pronged approach to this topic. On the one hand, they place English *happy* and *happiness* under scrutiny by undertaking an intensive analysis of their meanings, contemporary or historical. On the other hand, they systematically attempt to unpack the meanings of the words' closest counterparts in non-Anglophone linguacultures in order to discover the similarities and differences in how humans conceptualise



their experience of good events and evaluate their lives. These non-Anglophone linguacultures include Ancient Greek, Chinese, Danish, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Tibetan (see Wierzbicka 2004, 2011; Levisen 2012; 2016, Goddard and Ye 2016; Ye 2016). In this section, I will draw on Wierzbicka (2004), Levisen (2016) and Ye (2016) to illustrate the different conceptions of “happiness” reflected in English, Danish and Chinese.

## 5.1 *Happy and happiness in contemporary English*

The adjective *happy* has a very high frequency of use in present-day English. It is often the base word upon which survey questions concerning subjective well-being rest. In NSM terms, the meaning of *happy* can be portrayed as follows (based on Goddard and Wierzbicka [2014: 103]):

### [E] semantic explication of English *happy*

He was happy (at that time):

(a) this someone (=he) thought like this for some time at that time:

(b) “many good things are happening to me now as I want

I can do many things now as I want

this is good”

(c) because of this, he felt something good at that time

like people can feel when they think like this

Explication [E] captures three characteristic features of *happy*. First, it is personal and self-oriented, about things that happen “to me”. Second, the attention of the experiencer is not focussed on one particular event but is directed at an overall evaluation of one’s current situation, whereby “many good things are happening to me as I want; this is good”. Third, it conveys a sense of agency and freedom, and suggests an individual can freely pursue further wants and needs – “I can do many things now as I want”. All these components contribute to a good feeling, and distinguish *happy* from *pleased* and *delighted*, and from many other emotions in English which generate good feelings, such as *joy*, a feeling that can be more publicly displayed.

The English *contented* may be closer in meaning to *happy* than other positive emotion terms, but the thoughts associated with it are not directed at one’s positive evaluation of one’s current situation but at “not wanting other things now”.

The meaning of *contented* is spelt out in [F] for comparison (cf. Wierzbicka 1999: 54–55; Goddard 2018: 73).

### [F] Semantic explication of English *contented*

She was contented (at that time):

(a) this someone (=she) thought like this (at that time):

(b) “something good is happening to me now

I want this

I don’t want other things now”

(c) because of this, she felt something good

like people can feel when they think like this

Clearly, the meaning of *happy* is qualitatively different from that of *content*.

The meaning of the noun *happiness* can be explicated in NSM terms as follows (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014: 105):

*Happiness* (as in “money doesn’t bring happiness”)

- (a) it can be like this:
- (b) someone thinks like this for some time at that time:  
     “some good things are happening to me now as I want  
     I can do many things now as I want  
     this is good”
- (c) because of this, this someone feels something good at that time  
     like people feel at many times when they think like this for some time
- (d) it is good for this someone if it is like this

*Happiness* shares an identical thought configuration with *happy*. The main differences lie in components (a) and (d). The component “it can be like this” in *happiness* indicates the nominal status of the word and that it is about a person’s state of mind. Component (d) reflects the positive value associated with *happiness* – “it is good for this someone if it is like this”.

It is worth emphasising that Explication [E] describes the contemporary meaning of *happy*, a meaning in which the adjective is gradable and does not represent an absolute state as it did in its older meanings (e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014: 133–139; see also McMahon 2004). Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014: 119) explain that components such as “I can’t want anything more” or “I don’t want anything more”, which are central to the older meanings of *happiness*, are replaced by “I can do many things as I want”, which is more compatible with the idea of the relentless pursuit of happiness in contemporary Anglophone societies.

Now that the meanings of *happy* and *happiness* are fully stated, they can serve as reference points for cross-linguistic and cross-temporal comparison.

## 5.2 Danish *lykke* (‘everyday well-being’)

Danes are often referred to as the happiest people on earth, and Denmark the “happiest nation on earth” (e.g. Helliwell, Layard, and Sacks 2013). But is this, as the Danish semanticist Carsten Levisen questions, “a fact of life”? (Levisen 2016: 46). Levisen turns to the Danish language to look for answers. According to him, Danes were never asked about their levels of happiness; rather, they were asked about their levels of *lykke*. The word *lykke* is polysemous and open to two different interpretations – (a) the gradable *lykke* of ‘everyday well-being’ and (b) the non-gradable *lykke* of ‘extreme positive emotion’, depending on the syntactic frame in which it occurs. As Levisen writes:

When people are asked to grade their *lykke* (How *lykkelig* are you?), they only have one frame available, namely the *lykke* of ‘everyday well-being’, because this is the only concept that allows for gradation. If, however, they are asked the question ‘were you *lykkelig* yesterday?’, the linguistic prediction will be that the ‘the extreme positive emotion frame’ will be activated. In this case, the sentence almost reads like ‘Did anything fantastic happen to you yesterday?’ (Levisen 2016: 51)

Levisen describes *lykke* as being “earth-bound”, in which “a person is thankful for the small things in life, such as *kaffe* (‘coffee’) and *ostemad* (‘slice of bread with cheese’)” (Levisen 2016: 53).

The meaning of *lykke*, as in the sense of “everyday *lykke*”, can be explicated as follows:

[G] semantic explication of Danish *lykke*

- (a) it can be like this:
- (b) someone thinks like this:
  - “I have lived for some time
  - when I think about it now, I can say something like this about it:
  - ‘many good things happened to me during this time,
  - not many bad things happened to me during this time’
  - this is good, I know that it can be not like this”
- (c) when someone thinks like this, this someone can feel something good because of this
- (d) it is good for someone if this someone can think like this
  - it is bad for someone if this someone can’t think like this

While both Danish *lykke* and English *happiness* include an assessment of one’s life, the former is general, extending to one’s life as a whole, and involves thoughts about both good things and the absence of many bad things that could have happened to the experiencer. The “contentment” also comes from experiencers’ acute awareness that they can be “not like what they are”. Levisen (2016) points out that this way of thinking bears connection to the older meaning of *lykke* as ‘luck’ and ‘good fortune’. In contrast, experiencers of *happiness* do not simply see themselves as the recipient of their good life. They focus their attention on their current situation and give an overall positive evaluation (“this is good”). The thought that the experiencer’s current state of being is special does not enter the meaning of *happiness*, in which the emphasis is that the experiencer’s goals have been achieved and one has control over one’s activities.

### 5.3 Chinese *xìngfú* (‘the belief that one is loved and cared for’)

The word *xìngfú* is central to “happiness discourse” in contemporary China. It appears not only in the official translations of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the National Happiness Index (NHI), but also in the titles of numerous films, TV series and songs. It is an ideal that Chinese people aspire to in life. Ye (2016) conducts a detailed semantic analysis of this term based on textual examples drawn from five Chinese corpora, and compares its meaning with that of *happy/happiness* in English. She finds that beyond positive feeling, *xìngfú* and *happy/happiness* have little in common. The former is a relational concept, implying a deep sense of connection with family members or with someone with whom one is in love; whereas the latter focuses on the agency and freedom of the individual. While one’s *xìngfú* is literally “out of one’s hands”, *happiness* can be actively pursued.

Her analysis also shows that *xìngfú* implies mutuality and expectations of what the other party should do for the experiencer. For example, people feel *xìngfú* when their parents, spouse, or children care for them.

The full meaning of *xìngfú*, roughly glossed as ‘the belief that one is loved and cared for’, reads as follows:

[H] semantic explication of Chinese *xìngfú*

- (a) it can be like this:
- (b) someone feels something very good for some time  
because this someone thinks like this at this time:  
“I know that I can be with someone at many times  
I feel something very good when I am with this someone  
I feel something very good when I think about this someone
- (c) at the same time, I know that it is like this:  
this someone feels something very good towards me  
this someone often thinks about me  
this someone wants to do good things for me
- (d) I want it to be like this”
- (e) when this someone thinks like this, this someone feels something very good  
for some time, like people feel at many times when they think like this
- (f) it is very good for this someone if it is like this

*Xìngfú* is an absolute state, as is reflected in the opening line “it can be like this”. Components (a) and (e) set up the frame for the prototypical cognitive scenario of *xìngfú*, which is specified in (b)–(d). Components in (b) describe the experiencer’s feeling towards the other party, attempting to capture a sense of trust and attachment. It forms the basis of the experiencer’s expectations of the other party, which are fully spelt out in (c). It should be pointed out that the components in (b) and (c) are presented in a near-symmetrical way, so as to reflect the relational and mutual aspects expressed by *xìngfú*. The only asymmetrical thought element is “this someone wants to do good things for me”, expressed the final line in (c). This line reflects that the dependent nature of *xìngfú* – one’s own feelings towards the other party alone do not guarantee *xìngfú*. Confidence in the other’s care is, therefore, crucial to the overall semantic picture of *xìngfú*. Second, both (b) and (c) begin with “I know”, indicating that *xìngfú* is sustained by the beliefs of the experiencer, who is highly conscious of what makes oneself *xìngfú*. Component (d) expresses the experiencer’s desire to attain *xìngfú*, leaving open whether or not it can be attained. Component (f) stresses that *xìngfú* is a highly cherished value for many people and can be regarded as an ideal.

## 6 Cross-linguistic conceptualisations of “happiness”: the role of culture

The explications presented above ([F] to [H]) illustrate how Natural Semantic Metalanguage functions as what Leibniz calls the *tertium comparationis*, a common measure, for comparing meanings across different languages. Such cross-linguistic comparisons are enabled, in the first place, by full elucidation of the prototypical cognitive scenarios encoded in each of the local terms, which is made possible also by the use of the metalanguage.

What is clear from these explications is that conceptualisations of what people consider to be a good state of being vary from language to language. Perhaps it is not surprising

to see the dramatic differences in such conceptualisations between English and Chinese because of the expected linguistic and cultural distance between the two. But the striking differences in the prototypical cognitive scenarios between English and Danish, two closely related languages, only highlight the role of culture in shaping the different conceptualisations of “happiness”. What is reflected in these different configurations of meaning, as portrayed in [F] to [H], is in fact the cultural values, orientations and concerns distinctive to each linguaculture.

The prototypical cognitive scenario of English *happiness* reveals a culture which values individual freedom and a goal-oriented way of thinking. The Danish linguaculture is one which discourages materialism and encourages an appreciative attitude towards life and the small things in life. Levisen (2016: 61) ascribes the Danes’ often portrayed “lack of ambition” to such culturally encouraged attitudes. The Chinese usage clearly points to a culture where social relations and family are of central importance to its people, and where actions are valued over speaking. In other words, all of the different conceptualisations in question reflect different “cultural scripts” for thinking about what matters to an individual’s quality of life. These scripts afford insights into the underlying cultural models that inform such ways of thinking. Thus, NSM can be said to be an indispensable tool for researchers to unravel the insider’s perspective on what it means to be “happy” and have a good life, and to fruitfully explore the nexus between “happiness” concepts and the underlying cultural forces that shape them. This insider’s perspective can be of great importance. As Ye (2016) shows, a deep understanding of the links between the conception of Chinese *xìngfú* and the underlying cultural values, which is made possible through a fine-grained semantic analysis and the exclusive use of cross-translatable words, can help researchers to answer some puzzling questions arising from survey results on subjective well-being involving Chinese consultants.

## 7 Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented recent linguistic research on cross-cultural conceptualisations of “happiness” by placing it in the broader context of the fast-growing, emerging field of happiness studies. It highlights the critical role of language and metalanguage in the global study of “happiness” and subjective well-being, and introduces the NSM approach to cross-linguistic meaning analysis and comparison, which provides a solution to the methodological problems concerning translation and meaning equivalence. The chapter also illustrates the extent of cross-cultural differences in conceptualisations of “happiness” and the intrinsic relationships between cultural values and such conceptualisations by presenting three case studies – English *happiness*, Danish *lykke* and Chinese *xìngfú*.

These case studies show that the English word *happiness* is as untranslatable and culturally specific as the Danish *lykke* or Chinese *xìngfú*. Using *happiness* to portray the emotional life of speakers from other cultures can easily gloss over important cultural differences and limit researchers’ imagination about diverse ways in which people think about human goals, concerns and their desire for a good life. However, by using the Danish *lykke* or Chinese *xìngfú* as the meta-category to think and talk about human “happiness”, one

would fall into the same trap as by using the English *happiness*. No “happiness” words in any human languages are capable of serving as a culturally neutral metalanguage because they are inseparable from the deeply embedded, often invisible, cultural values, beliefs and attitudes. Fruitful and meaningful investigations of cross-cultural conceptualisations of “happiness” can only take place if researchers consciously use cross-translatable, culturally neutral words, such as “people”, “feel”, “think”, “good” and “bad”. In so doing, they can position themselves within a culture and unpack local meanings from that culture’s perspective. The three case studies in this chapter show that the cross-translatable Natural Semantic Metalanguage and the techniques that its researchers have developed for studying emotions could be a versatile and highly calibrated tool for global happiness studies, and for the study of the universality and culturally specific aspects of human conceptualisation of “happiness”.

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