

A CULTURE-SPECIFIC EMOTION VOCABULARY

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Introduction

Research has extensively elaborated the intrinsic connection between language and emotion (Banse, Scherer, and Wallbott 2001; Kim, 2009; Weirzebicka, 2009). Accordingly, studying a language of a particular cultural group allows not only to spell-out the implicit meaning systems that shapes the psychological processes; such studies also help to examine and identify the acquisition and distribution of such meanings across time and inherent diversities of heterogeneous groups (Good & Klienman, 1984; Russell, 1991; Kitayama & Markus, 1994).

The proposed study examines emotion from a cultural perspective. Research on culture-bound emotions imparts diverse perspectives. On the one hand, it is believed that meaning of an emotion is systematically related to the kind of ethic prevalent in a cultural community (Shweder & Haidt, 2000; Lutz, 1988). On the other hand, Russel (1991) discusses unmistakable similarities in categories of emotion across different languages and cultures. A third and more recent perspective is to recognize universalism in emotion, but without uniformity (Shweder, et.al.). These studies explore specificities in semantics and expressions of emotions which are categorically universal to human kind.

Conceptual Clarity

Emotion, in English language refers to any short term evaluative, affective, intentional, psychological state (Colman, 2003, p.241). Sinhala language has two words for emotions; '*Chittavega*' and '*Bhava*'. A *Chittawega*, literally means a 'strong or powerful thought' or a 'thought that can be felt'. Either way, it denotes a cognitive domain, *thinking*. *Bhava* refers to both 'existence' and to a 'mental state.' Accordingly, emotions are lived experiences conceptualized and expressed as aspects of one's being.

The Ancient Sanskrit script of *Natyasastra* identifies eight basic emotions, namely *rati*, *hasa*, *shoka*, *krodha*, *uthsaha*, *bhaya*, *jugupsa*, & *wismaya* (Marasingha, 1994). The current paper examines *shoka* and *rati*. *Shoka* is the mental state that results from a clear understanding of separation of loved ones, loss of valuable property, problematic affiliations, and painful experiences. The essence of *Rati* is elation. It origins from the fulfillment of expectations and involves a clear understanding of pleasant times, consumption, and non-conflicting relationships (Marasingha, et.al.).

Objectives

Current study focuses on semantic and lexicons of emotions as constructed and expressed through a language. It is

not a cross cultural study of comparing emotions as conceptualized in different cultures and/or languages; rather, the current study explores words, concepts and lexical models for emotion as used and understood by insiders of a selected cultural group. Specific research questions are,

1. What criteria does an average Sinhala speaking person refer to in developing emotion lexicons?
2. What are the possible semantic similarities among different words within one lexicon?
3. What are the most salient verbal expressions of a given emotion in the given cultural context?

Methodology

Proposed study used a mixed method. The study used a sample of 70, which comprised of 60 students and 10 staff members from the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya. Several data collection techniques, collectively known as '*cultural domain analysis*' (Bernard, 1995), yielded both qualitative and quantitative data. Data analysis was primarily qualitative, where emerging themes were coded to identify lexicons. Quantitative data analysis was limited only to a frequency distribution.

Results

Frequency distribution of data produced the best-fit verbal expressions for a given emotion. Four conceptual dimensions underlying the lexical models of emotion words, namely, the cause of emotion, components of emotion, duration, and contextual application were identified. A third finding was the close correspondence between contextual application and emotional

expressiveness of words as they are ordered in an intensity-centered hierarchy.

Discussion

A language-based study of emotions emphasizes the construction and expression of emotions as *discourse* – as a tool for actively shaping a person's social reality. Semantic and lexical models of emotion words, as they emerge in everyday social life, go beyond strictly psychological or cognitive models, including, among others, moral, contextual and relational dimensions. Such an approach to studying emotions focuses on both what an emotion word actually *says* and what an emotion word *does* in social life. Studying emotion as discursive phenomenon signifies the importance of ecology; examining ecology helps to study the distribution of culturally appropriate emotional expressions across situations and times. The focus on ecology also allows probing the interaction of affective, cognitive, and social processes that ultimately produces the semantic and lexical models of an emotion vocabulary.

Conclusion

Studying semantics and lexicons of different emotion words emphasizes the multi-dimensional processes involved in the construction of emotion experiences. The boundaries around different lexicons of verbal emotion expressions appear to vary based on constructive, functional, and social dimensions. The current study indicates clear evidence of noticeable differences in abstract understandings and verbal expressions of the concept of 'emotion' and different types of

emotions in English and Sinhala languages. Moreover, the study reveals unique social and psychological processes involved in semantic and lexical models of emotion vocabulary in Sinhala culture. Intensive ethnographic studies of different emotion vocabularies are essential for a comprehensive understanding of culturally unique emotion languages.

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