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Etymologies and emotions: Historical linguistics as a key to emotion categories

The problem of researching the history of emotions

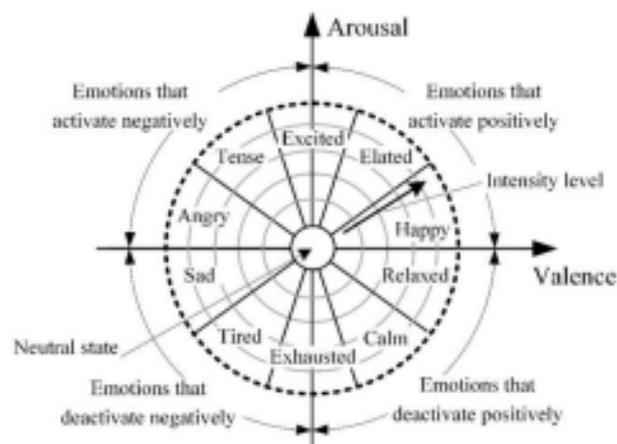
One of the major issues in researching the history of emotions has been the question whether our ancestors did feel completely different or indeed very much the same as we do today. The positions voting for the latter may be labelled, on the one hand, “universalist” – claiming a set of emotions as “basic” according to the allegedly universal evaluation of facial expressions (see Ekman / Friesen 1971) – or, on the other hand, “presentist”, assuming that the “emotion modules” of our brains (e.g., for mate finding or hunting animals) developed in the Paleolithic period and haven’t changed as much since then (cf. Cosmides / Tooby, “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer.”)

Constructionist theories and the role of language

However, these theories fail to account for the role of concept knowledge in *doing emotion*, that is the fact that we make sense of otherwise unspecific or ambiguous sensations and perceptions only by mapping them on emotion concepts, crucially represented in and acquired by language (for a detailed account on “emotional compounds” see Lindquist *et al.* 2015). This psychological constructionism corresponds with the social constructionist theory which claims emotions of former cultures to be accessible for us mainly via their – culturally shaped and historically embedded – conceptualizations. Researching textual sources of historical communities thus allows “to uncover systems of feeling (...); the emotions that they value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore” (Rosenwein 2010: 11).

Assessing emotional properties

Russel’s circumplex model of emotions arranges emotion concepts according to two main parameters forming the axes of *affective valence* (if a sensation is experienced as positive or negative) and *arousal* (the degree to which an experience or sensation causes neural or physical activity). It might prove to be a helpful tool in assessing historical emotions – but the valence and degree of activation inhering a specific emotion might not always be obvious from the linguistic expression or context.



Russel's circumplex model of emotions

Evaluating the emotion words of a historical community of speakers and especially considering etymologies and conceptual metaphors could, in my view, provide an important key to both of these parameters. As an example, we might have a look at two of the Hittite expressions for “fear” revealing via their etymologies quite opposite degrees of activation (cf. Beckman 2022: 176):

pittuliya-, “to be constricted; anxious, anguished” (CHD P: 366–367; EDHIL 680–681) cf. *pittula-*, “loop, knot” (CHD P: 365–366)

lahlahḫiya-, “to be agitated; to worry” (CHD L–N: 10–12; HED 4: 10–12) cf. *lahlahḫeškenu-* (CHD L–N: 12) with horses as object, “to work them up, cause them to run”

Other aspects which can be “extracted” from conceptual metaphors represented in language (but also enacted in ritual performance) refer to the valence of a sensation, a component prominently featured in conceptual metaphor theory: GOOD = up, present, light, sweet, in order, at rest; BAD = down, absent, dark, disordered, unsettled.

The goal of my paper is thus *not* to discuss how conceptual metaphors might be helpful in finding or judging etymologies but, quite the other way around, to raise the question if and to what extent historical linguistics might provide keys to approach emotional concepts via parameters like valence and activation. Doing so would help us to better delimit several “types” of emotions belonging to one conceptual cluster, to identify their correlations with specific situations or members of the community for whom they are considered appropriate – and to finally create more fine-grained maps of a community’s emotional repertoires.

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