**True meanings of words of emotion get lost in translation, study finds**

Analysis finds there may be no universal concepts for some emotions

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The true meaning of words may be lost in translation, according to research suggesting the way people understand terms such as “anger” or “love” differs between languages.

For example, while the concept of “love” is closely linked to “like” and “want” in Indo-European languages, it is strongly linked to “pity” in Austronesian languages – a family that includes Hawaiian and Javanese.

“Even though we might say there is a word for anger in hundreds of languages, these words actually might not mean the same thing,” said Joshua Conrad Jackson, co-author of the research from University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

[Writing in the journal Science](https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aaw8160), Jackson and colleagues report how they carried out an analysis of 24 emotional concepts, such as anger, love and pride, across 2,474 languages. The study also included more than 2,400 non-emotional concepts – such as “quarrel” – that were used to further explore meanings and context of emotion words.

The team then carried out an analysis based on multiple meanings of words.

The Hawaiian word “pu’iwa” refers to both “fear” and “surprise”, suggesting a strong link between the two concepts. Other languages in the same family may have the same word for either “fear” or “surprise” and a third word, such as “unknown”, furthering the likelihood of a link between these two emotion concepts within that language family. In other languages, however, there might be no such overlaps, suggesting that fear and surprise are unrelated concepts for those speakers.

The team found emotion concepts across all language families tend to be grouped together based on whether they were positive or negative and passive or energetic. Moreover, certain emotions such as grief and regret were commonly found to be linked in several different language families, with language families geographically closer showing greater similarities in meanings.

Nonetheless, there were variations. For example, the link between “fear” and “surprise” in Austronesian languages like Hawaiian is not evident in Tai-Kadai languages, spoken in south-east Asia and beyond, where “surprise” sits more closely with “want” and “hope”.

Jackson said the research suggested there may be no universal concepts of emotions. “People may universally have the experience of having their heart beat faster when threatened. However, there is variability in the way that we make meaning of that experience, the behaviours that we associate with the experience, and the way that we verbally communicate the experience to other people as an emotion,” he said, adding that such responses appear to be shaped by culture.

However the study is based on something of a paradox. “Our results suggest that there is no single concept of “fear”, but we couldn’t have done the analysis without starting with the concept of “fear” and comparing the way that it is expressed and co-lexified in different languages,” said Jackson.

But the team say dictionaries are still better than nothing. “What we are saying in this paper is not to throw out translation dictionaries; instead, we are saying we can’t take them too seriously,” said Jackson.

Dr Angeles Carreres, an expert in translation from Cambridge University, said dictionaries often give a false notion of equivalence, noting that even physical entities like the moon can be referred to differently – for example as masculine or feminine – reflecting a different view of the same object. History, she adds, can also shape the meaning of terms. “The word ‘nation’ is notorious for the range of different, often conflicting associations it can bring with it, dependent on a country’s, or a community’s, history.”

Maja Konkolewska, a freelance Polish/English translator and interpreter and an associate of the Stephen Spender Trust, said she believes the emotions we feel are connected to the experiences of our ancestors.

“I always struggle to translate the word ‘vulnerable’ to Polish because there is no direct equivalent,” she said. “When I listen to my grandmother’s stories about her childhood during the second world war, I wonder whether there was no space for vulnerability in Polish history.”

As part of a multilingual family, Konkolewska said she finds that subtle differences in meaning for the same word in different languages are important – and useful. “My favourite English word is ‘flabbergasted’ – I love this feeling, but I can only feel it in English because it doesn’t exist in Polish,” she said.

“My Lithuanian partner says that when he’s moderately angry, he can be ‘angry’ in English, but when he’s really angry, he’s ‘piktas’ in Lithuanian because, in his opinion, the accent and pronunciation of the Lithuanian word carries much more anger than saying it in English.”