

# Natural language processing for subjectivity analysis in personal narratives

Gustave Cortal

Thesis director: Alain Finkel

Co-advisors: Patrick PAROUBEK and Lina YE



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# Introduction

# Context

- ▶ Natural language processing for psychology is underexplored
- ▶ We build on an existing subfield: emotion analysis
- ▶ We study subjectivity (involving first-person perspective, meaning-making processes, and experiential content)
- ▶ We focus on personal narratives (e.g., emotional narratives, dream reports, mental health narratives)

We first address the *content* by classifying elements of personal narratives (e.g., characters and emotions). Then, we study the *form* through the concept of style

# Introduction

How to model subjective experience in personal narratives?

- ▶ Definition of objectives and scope using cognitive science
- ▶ Construction of an emotion dataset
- ▶ Training of language models for emotion analysis
- ▶ Formalization of style in personal narratives

*My research models are publicly hosted on Hugging Face and were trained using the Jean Zay supercomputer*

# Definition of objectives using cognitive science

**G. Cortal** and C. Bonard. [Improving Language Models for Emotion Analysis: Insights from Cognitive Science](#). *CMCL, ACL 2024*.

# Psychological theories and emotion annotation schemes

What are current limitations and interesting research directions?

Psychological theories	In text, emotion is...	Example
Basic emotions theory	a <b>category</b>	"I love philosophy." → joy
Constructivist theories	a continuous value with an <b>affective</b> meaning	"His voice soothes me." → valence (4/5), arousal (1/5)
Appraisal theory	a continuous value with a <b>cognitive</b> meaning  composed of <b>semantic roles</b>	"I received a surprise gift." → sudden (4/5), control (0/5) "Louise (experiencer) was angry (cue) towards Paul (target), because he didn't inform her (cause)."

# Limitations in emotion analysis

- ▶ Different emotion theories lead to divergences in how to annotate them in the text
- ▶ Some linguistic and cognitive science theories are not considered
- ▶ There is no benchmark that evaluates the richness of the emotional phenomenon

## Linguistic and cognitive science theories



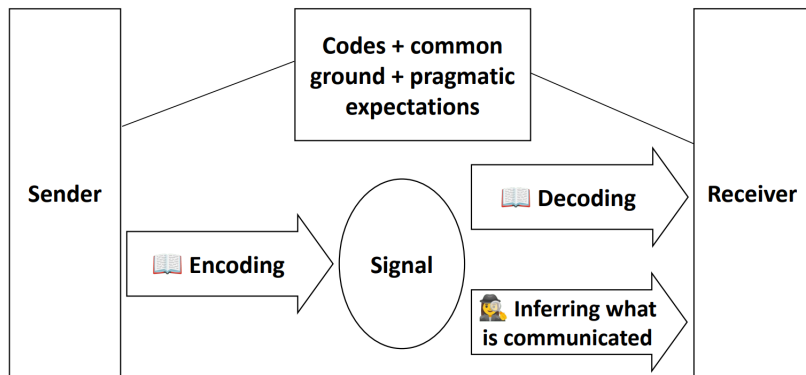
# Which verbal signs are used to infer expressed emotions?

Raphaël Micheli categorizes a range of linguistic markers into three *emotion expression modes* (Micheli, 2013). The emotion can be:

- ▶ *labeled* explicitly with an emotional term ("I am sad")
- ▶ *shown* with utterance features such as interjections and punctuations ("Ah! That's great!")
- ▶ *suggested* with the description of a situation which generally, in a given sociocultural context, leads to an emotion ("She gave me a gift")

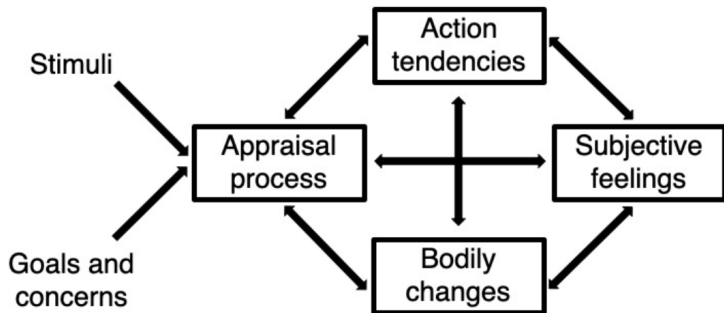
→ Different emotion expression modes are more or less difficult to interpret

What are the psychological mechanisms used to infer what is communicated?



**Figure:** Detective analysis in cognitive pragmatics.

## How to integrate psychological theories of emotion?



**Figure:** Integrated framework for emotion theories. Emotional episodes are synchronized changes in four components (Scherer, 2022).

# Construction of an emotion dataset

Available at [hf.co/datasets/gustavecortal/FrenchEmotionalNarratives](https://huggingface.co/datasets/gustavecortal/FrenchEmotionalNarratives)

**G. Cortal**, A. Finkel, P. Paroubek, L. Ye. [Emotion Recognition based on Psychological Components in Guided Narratives for Emotion Regulation](#). *SIGHUM, EACL 2023*.

# French emotional narratives based on components

**Goal:** A more comprehensive understanding of emotional events

Component	Answer
Behavior	I'm giving a lecture on a Friday morning at 8:30. A student goes out and comes back a few moments later with a coffee in his hand.
Feeling	My heart is beating fast, and I freeze, waiting to know how to act.
Thinking	I think this student is disrupting my class.
Territory	The student attacks my ability to be respected in class.

Chosen emotion: anger (possible choices: anger, fear, joy, sadness)

More than 1,000 narratives were collected during emotion regulation sessions

# Training language models for emotion analysis

**G. Cortal**, A. Finkel, P. Paroubek, L. Ye. [Emotion Recognition based on Psychological Components in Guided Narratives for Emotion Regulation](#). *SIGHUM, EACL 2023*

**G. Cortal**. [Sequence-to-Sequence Language Models for Character and Emotion Detection in Dream Narratives](#). *LREC-COLING 2024*

# Discrete emotion detection based on components

Component	Logistic Regression			CamemBERT		
	Precision	Recall	$F_1$	Precision	Recall	$F_1$
All	71.2 (2.6)	69.1 (2.2)	67.8 (2.3)	<b>85.1</b>	<b>84.8</b>	<b>84.7</b>
Without behavior	77.4 (2.3)	75.8 (2.4)	74.5 (2.6)	80.3	79.8	79.7
Without feeling	64.3 (1.9)	61.5 (1.2)	61.3 (2.2)	81.6	79.8	79.9
Without thinking	70.9 (1.8)	69.1 (2.0)	68.3 (2.2)	79.6	78.5	78.7
Without territory	64.3 (4.1)	64.5 (2.4)	62.3 (2.8)	78.7	78.5	78.6
Only behavior	52.1 (3.5)	54.6 (2.9)	51.7 (2.9)	68.4	67.1	66.6
Only feeling	69.6 (1.5)	68.9 (2.1)	68.4 (2.0)	67.8	68.4	67.7
Only thinking	50.1 (3.4)	53.8 (2.3)	50.6 (2.7)	70.5	70.1	70.1
Only territory	68.2 (1.8)	66.8 (2.2)	66.6 (2.3)	71.4	68.4	68.9

→ Each component improves prediction performance, the best results are achieved by jointly considering all components

→ Some components benefit from contextual understanding and world knowledge (e.g., behavior and thinking)

# Quantitative analysis of dream narratives

Need other datasets with narrative structure, emotional content, and available for research

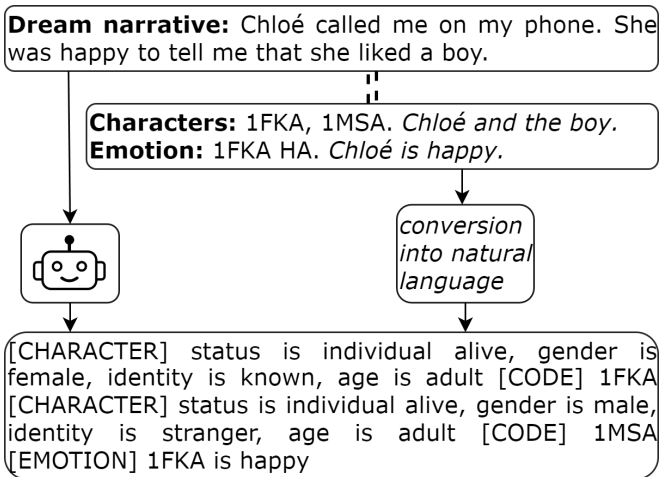
Quantitative dream analysis most relies on dream databases (e.g., DreamBank composed of 27,000 dreams) and annotation schemes (e.g., Hall and Van de Castle system) (Domhoff and Schneider, 2008)

The annotation process is complex and costly

How to automate the annotation process?



# Character and emotion detection in dream narratives



# Results

Baseline is LaMini-Flan-T5 finetuned on 1823 dream narratives

Model	Status	Gender	Identity	Age	Character	Emotion
Baseline	82.87	78.02	76.17	86.21	64.74	75.13
No <sub>semantics</sub>	71.37	56.54*	61.0	90.51	41.79*	75.79
No <sub>names</sub>	80.66*	74.32**	74.2	83.95*	60.93**	73.04*
Size <sub>small</sub>	78.35**	72.13**	70.25**	81.66**	56.79**	70.15**
Size <sub>large</sub>	84.51*	80.3**	78.63**	87.29	67.63**	74.71
First <sub>group</sub>	82.33	77.71	74.86	85.61	63.71	71.94
First <sub>individual</sub>	80.59**	76.14	74.22*	83.87**	62.67	67.32
First <sub>emotion</sub>	83.92	78.74	77.06	87.63	64.97	72.03
Conversion <sub>comma</sub>	84.02**	79.84**	77.67**	87.08*	66.69**	73.68
Conversion <sub>marker</sub>	82.39	78.45	76.53	86.09	65.44	74.36
Cross-validation	86.28	81.9	79.51	89.52	68.64	76.18

**Table:**  $F_1$ -scores for character and emotion detection. Significant differences from baseline: \*\* ( $p < 0.01$ ), \* ( $p < 0.05$ ).

→ Language models can effectively address character and emotion detection in dream narratives

# Oneirogen, a language model for dream generation

Oneirogen (0.5, 1.5, 7B), a language model for dream generation. It is based on Qwen2 and was trained on DreamBank

Oneirogen was used to produce [The Android and The Machine](#), an English dataset composed of 10,000 real and 10,000 generated dreams

*I'm in a building that seems to be a school or maybe a university. There is a lot of noise and activity, and everyone is very busy talking. It is very loud and unpleasant - too loud to talk to anyone easily. The walls are made out of some soft material that might be plastic foam.*

*I was at a shop. There were lots of people there and I lost Mom and Ezra. Later, we were in a car park. We went to get pizza's for dinner from the nearby pizza place but it was really late so they wouldn't serve us. [I think I was also walking around the shops earlier].*

# Formalization of style in personal narratives

**G. Cortal** and A. Finkel. [Formalizing Style in Personal Narratives](#). *EMNLP 2025*.

# How is subjective experience communicated in narratives?

We use narratives to express our representations of reality and make sense of the world (Bruner, 1990)

In everyday usage, style refers to a distinctive manner of expression

We use style as a proxy to study how subjective experience is linguistically communicated

We narrow the general definition of style: *a distinctive manner of communicating subjective experience in narratives*

# How to give an operational definition of style?

**Hypothesis:** An individual uses some redundant choices of features that characterize its style

1. A sequence-based framework defining style as patterns in sequences of linguistic choices
2. A methodology for identifying patterns using sequence analysis
3. A case study on dream narratives

# What linguistic features encode subjective experience?

We ground our framework in *systemic functional linguistics* (Halliday et al., 2014)

Meaning emerges through choices in systems of linguistic features to achieve communicative goals

Language achieves three functions: interpersonal (language builds social relationships), textual (information is organized to create coherent messages), and *ideational* (language represents experience)

# What linguistic features encode subjective experience?

Language represents experience through *processes*, *participants* and *circumstances*

Processes	Examples
Action: actions and events in the physical world.	[He] <sub>Actor</sub> [ <b>takes</b> ] <sub>Action</sub> [the valuable] <sub>Affected</sub>  [Members of my cult] <sub>Actor</sub> [ <b>have made</b> ] <sub>Action</sub> [1500 euros] <sub>Result</sub>  [I] <sub>Actor</sub> [ <b>give</b> ] <sub>Action</sub> [her] <sub>Recipient</sub> [a chance] <sub>Range</sub>
Mental: internal experiences such as thoughts, perceptions, and feelings.	[We] <sub>Senser</sub> [ <b>believe</b> ] <sub>Mental</sub> [women are the leaders of change] <sub>Phenomenon</sub>  [The moon] <sub>Senser</sub> [ <b>sees</b> ] <sub>Mental</sub> [the earth] <sub>Phenomenon</sub>  [He] <sub>Senser</sub> [ <b>disliked</b> ] <sub>Mental</sub> [Gilbert's writing] <sub>Phenomenon</sub>
Verbal: acts of communication.	[David] <sub>Sayer</sub> [ <b>said</b> ] <sub>Verbal</sub> ["the corrupt, criminals and money launderers"] <sub>Verbiage</sub>
State: states of being, having, or existence.	There [ <b>was</b> ] <sub>Existential</sub> [a swimming pool] <sub>Existent</sub>  [John] <sub>Carrier</sub> [ <b>is</b> ] <sub>State</sub> [an interesting teacher] <sub>Attribute</sub>  [Hadrian's Wall] <sub>Possessor</sub> [ <b>has</b> ] <sub>State</sub> [something for everyone] <sub>Possessed</sub>



# Pipeline for our sequence-based framework

Clause	Process (symbol)	Participants
I wake in a dark room	Action ( <b>a</b> )	Actor
I feel a cold wind	Mental ( <b>m</b> )	Sensor, Phenomenon
I tell myself to move	Verbal ( <b>v</b> )	Sayer, Recipient

**Sequence:** *amv* | **Substrings:** {*am*, *mv*}

1. We first segment "*I wake in a dark room. I feel a cold wind. I tell myself to move.*" into clauses
2. Identify features (e.g., processes and participants) for each clause using in-context learning with large language models
3. Each narrative is mapped to a symbolic sequence using an alphabet based on identified features
4. We perform sequence analysis to identify patterns such as frequent substrings and representative sequences

# Conclusion

How to model subjective experience in personal narratives?

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# Perspectives

- ▶ Emotion analysis for mental health (empathic support, cognitive distortions, theory of mind)
- ▶ Psychology of language models (sycophancy, thought operations)
- ▶ Post-training for psychology (preferences and reasoning data)

I co-supervised ongoing PhD thesis: Nicolas Richet (multimodal emotion recognition), Amine Haddou (cognitive distortions), and Raphael Faure (style analysis)

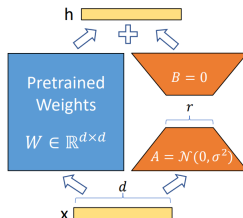
# Post-training for psychology

Piaget (0.6, 1.7, 4, 8B), a model for psychological reasoning

Domain filtering on open reasoning traces from [Dolphin R1](#) and [General Reasoning](#)

Prompts were embedded, clustered with  $k$ -means ( $k = 20\,000$ ) and majority-voted for domain labels using [Qwen3-1.7B](#)

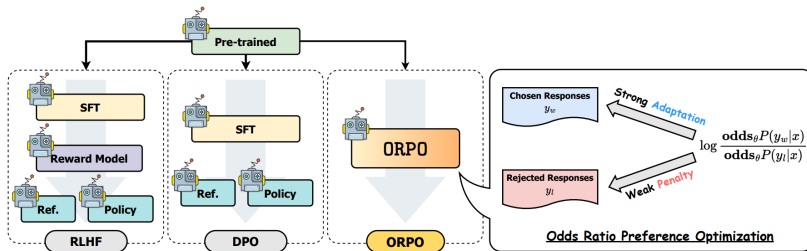
Clusters tagged psychology or philosophy were retained for LoRA finetuning based on Qwen3



# Post-training for psychology

Beck (0.6, 1.7, 4, 8B), a model aligned with psychotherapeutic preferences

Beck is based on [Piaget](#) and was finetuned on psychotherapeutic preferences from [PsychoCounsel-Preference](#) using preference optimization (ORPO) and LoRA



# Appendix

## Results on the war veteran

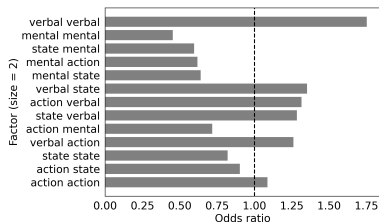
Group	Category	% Vet	% Total	$\Delta$
Identity	known*	24.9	51.6	-26.7
	prominent	1.9	2.5	-0.6
	occupational*	22.4	8.0	14.4
	ethnic*	4.1	0.9	3.1
	unknown*	46.8	37.0	9.8
Gender	male*	56.2	43.0	13.1
	female*	24.1	33.1	-9.0
	joint	10.9	12.2	-1.3
	undefined	7.9	8.7	-0.9

**Table:** Identity and gender proportions for the veteran (n=566 narratives) versus other dreamers.  $\Delta$  shows the difference in percentage points. \* indicates significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ).

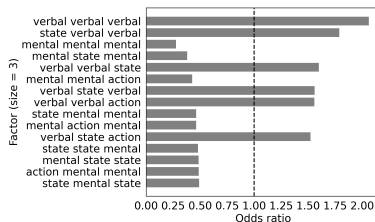
→ The war veteran dreams more about *occupational*, *ethnic*, and *unknown* identities compared to other dreamers.

# Results on the war veteran

We compare the proportion of sequences containing a given substring



(a) Size 2.



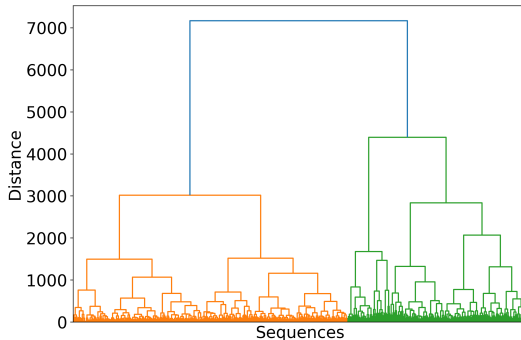
(b) Size 3.

**Figure:** Top substring odds ratio between the veteran and the norm

We show a preference for the war veteran to remain in a verbal process, as indicated by substrings such as *verbal.verbal* and *verbal.verbal.verbal* with high odds ratios (respectively 2.00 and 1.75)



# Results on the war veteran



**Figure:** Dendrogram with Ward linkage and cosine similarity

**Representative sequences:** *savamasasaaamaasavvvaaaaaavssaaaaa*  
and *sssssavaavssvsavvvvsmasasaasasaamaamvmsss* with  
*a = action, m = mental, s = state, v = verbal*

# Selected research papers

Constant Bonard and Gustave Cortal (2024). "Improving Language Models for Emotion Analysis: Insights from Cognitive Science". In: *Proceedings of the Workshop on Cognitive Modeling and Computational Linguistics*. Ed. by Tatsuki Kuribayashi et al. Bangkok, Thailand: Association for Computational Linguistics, pp. 264–277. DOI: 10.18653/v1/2024.cmc1-1.23




Gustave Cortal, Alain Finkel, et al. (2023). "Emotion Recognition Based on Psychological Components in Guided Narratives for Emotion Regulation". In: *Proceedings of the 7th Joint SIGHUM Workshop on Computational Linguistics for Cultural Heritage, Social Sciences, Humanities and Literature*. Ed. by Stefania Degaetano-Ortlieb et al. Dubrovnik, Croatia: Association for Computational Linguistics, pp. 72–81. DOI: 10.18653/v1/2023.latechc1f1-1.8

Gustave Cortal (2024). "Sequence-to-Sequence Language Models for Character and Emotion Detection in Dream Narratives". In: *Proceedings of the 2024 Joint International Conference on Computational Linguistics, Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC-COLING 2024)*. Ed. by Nicoletta Calzolari et al. Torino, Italia: ELRA and ICCL, pp. 14717–14728



Gustave Cortal and Alain Finkel (2025). "Formalizing Style in Personal Narratives". In: *Proceedings of the 2025 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*. Ed. by Christos Christodoulopoulos et al. Suzhou, China: Association for Computational Linguistics, pp. 7322–7337. ISBN: 979-8-89176-332-6

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