RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH EMOTIONAL CONCEPTS

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The idea that languages both reflect and shape their speakers’ mentalities, goes back as far as Humboldt’s work and the famous Sapir and Whorf’s hypothesis. While SWH was empirically and theoretically challenged by the proponents of linguistic innateness and universality, it has seen a comeback in the works of Wierzbicka [Wierzbicka 1990, 1991, 1992, 1999] and the entire NSM school. Though SWH is hardly popular nowadays in its strong version, the weaker claim that language reflects mentality is very much a part of today’s ethnolinguistic discourse. It is strongly featured in Wierzbicka’s line of research, particularly in the notion of ‘fate’ [Wierzbicka 1990, 1997:15, 55-84].

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In the last decade, the search for culture-specific vocabulary, including Russian data, has thrived, and researchers have added a few items to the list of Russian key words, among them 

While the contrastive ethnolinguistic framework has been extremely efficient in dispensing with Anglo-centricity in the description of vasty impressive empirical results, it has also raised some general methodological questions. It is undeniably true that all cultures are unique and that these peculiarities are to some extent reflected in language. However, it is not entirely clear to what extent language can serve as an objective mirror of culture – in other words, to what extent it is possible to draw inferences about a culture or national mentality based on linguistic facts, such as a presence of a certain untranslatable word in the vocabulary of a language. Direct un-translatability is a regular phenomenon across languages, yet it in itself cannot serve as an indication that speakers of these languages do indeed view the world differently.

The notion of linguistic salience which is fundamental to the contrastive ethnolinguistic framework is not entirely transparent either: the frequency of a word in a language as compared to the frequency of its translation in another language is not necessarily a proof of greater salience of a respective concept, as it is often the case that a concept expressed by one polysemous word or a word with a more general meaning in one language is expressed by several words in another language, as is the case, for example, with the Russian word душа ‘lit. soul’, which corresponds to the English soul and heart.

Other linguistic factors that are often considered as an indication of a word’s salience, such as, for example, the number of its derivatives, are not always reliable criteria either, as languages are bound to vary in this respect based on the variation in the richness of their grammatical and lexical systems, irrespectively of how central or marginal the concept in question might be.

This paper proposes a framework for a semantic typology of emotion concepts in language, which considers both their similarities and differences. The framework incorporates the existing linguistic accounts of emotions, i.e. the scenario-based semantic approach of [Iordanskaja 1972, 1984] and Wierzbicka [1999], also adopted by some psychologists [cf. Shweder 2004], as well the conceptual metaphor-based approach of the cognitive semantics [Lakoff & Johnson, Kövecses 1990, Emanatian 1995, Kövecses 2000]. The novelty of the proposed approach is in its scale: rather than comparing individual parts of the system, such as separate emotion terms, entire systems in the form of “emotion clusters” are juxtaposed. Each emotion cluster is represented by many “members”, e.g., anger, fury, wrath, irritation, and other expressions for ‘ANGER’ cluster in English, whose meanings together form the “conceptual map” of ‘ANGER’ system in that language. By cross-linguistic “superimposing” of the conceptual maps of emotions in different languages, one is able to capture a holistic picture of the emotional universe, where both the universality and the differences displayed across languages can be clearly seen. For example, both English and Russian have explicitly incorporated the following types of ‘ANGER’ in their conceptual systems: ‘justified’ anger (indignation, негодование), ‘strong uncontrollable anger’ (rage, бесцошность), ‘mean anger’ (venom, яд), ‘nerve-wrecking anger’ (irritation, раздражение), but English has also a type of ‘helpless disappointed’ anger (frustration), which Russian lacks.

Cluster comparison involves comparing multiple emotion terms belonging to different parts of speech and all other related linguistic items, denoting causation of emotions, emotional behaviors, physiological manifestations of emotions and other aspects of emotions.


**Emotion clusters in English and Russian: general tendencies.**

If one looks at emotion clusters in Russian and English, i.e., at an entire range of emotions within a certain group, one would find a lot of similarity in how the fields are organized logically and conceptually. While the precise linguistic expression can be and is different, a very similar range of emotion gradations is found in the two languages.

Moreover, emotion metaphors turn out to overlap to a large extent as well, which is hardly surprising given that a lot of emotion metaphors are biologically rooted and based on physiologically conditioned responses to various stimuli. Well-known examples of such biologically-based linguistic metaphors are FEAR IS COLD and ANGER IS HEAT metaphors (e.g., to freeze with terror, to boil with anger); cf. [Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Apresjan & Apresjan 1993, Kövecses 2000], on the metaphorical conceptualization of these emotions, Ekman 1984 on their physiological manifestations). Recent neuropsychological research allows to expand this list, as it suggests that feeling “hurt” and feeling empathy indeed activate pain centers in the brain [McDonald & Leary 2005, Gallese 2001, Singer et al. 2004], thus providing a biological explanation for the widely spread OFFENCE IS PAIN and PITY IS PAIN metaphors (cf. to be hurt, to be wounded, to be injured as expressions of ‘offended’ feeling and цеменняя жалость ‘piercing pity’, болю за хого за хого-то ‘to feel pained for somebody’ as expressions of ‘pity’). Likewise, [Calder et al. 2001] suggest that physical distaste, manifested in actual nausea, and moral repugnance that does not involve actual nausea symptoms, are nevertheless neurologically very much the same in that they activate the same neural pathways, thus proving a biological basis for another widely-spread metaphoric mapping, DISGUST IS FEELING SICK.

The following common tendencies in the organization of emotion clusters have been found:

First of all, both languages show a considerably larger number of emotion terms that denote unpleasant emotions, which is not surprising either biologically or linguistically. Among the biologically and psychologically defined “basic” emotions which presumably carry a survival value, there are four unpleasant ones (fear; anger; sadness; disgust) and only one pleasant (joy). Although there
are more pleasant emotions among the non-basic ones (pride, gratitude), unpleasant on the whole outweighs the pleasant (shame, pity, jealousy, envy, resentment). Language, too, is well-known for marking negative and abnormal over positive or normal.

For each of the emotions examined, there are certain gradations within the cluster. Usually, there is a neutral term which denotes a natural degree of emotion in relation to the stimulus: fear, anger, disgust, shame, joy, sadness, pride, pity, even jealousy and their Russian correlates, that do not bear any negative or positive evaluation on the part of the speaker. A degree of emotion which is excessive in regard to the stimulus and therefore inappropriate, or a behavior driven by an excessively strong emotion, or being overly prone to experiencing a certain emotion is usually marked negatively: cowardice (behavior caused by one's inability to master fear), grumpy, irascible (too prone to anger), uptight (too prone to embarrassment), despordinate (too sad for too long a time), bleeding-heart (too prone to pity), etc. Besides, within some clusters, there are terms denoting clinical conditions, marked by prolonged and unmotivated experiencing of a certain emotion: phobia, fright, depression, aversion.

Some emotions are expected to occur in appropriate circumstances and their absence is viewed as a deviation from the social or ethical norm, e.g., pity, shame, gratitude: thus, pitiless, shameless, ungrateful (безжалостный, бесстыдный, бесстыдная, неблагодарная) are negative terms marking the inability to experience a naturally expected emotion. Interestingly, fear is viewed as an expected response to danger, and its absence (fearless, бесстрашиный) as a deviation from the norm, though in this case the norm is biological, and the deviation from it is not only socially acceptable, but even positively evaluated.

Emotions which are either socially expected or otherwise desirable responses can occur as a result of conscious stimulation; cf. to cheer up, to shame, to move or to resemble, to advertise, which denote a controlled intentional action with the purpose of inducing the respective emotion.

Emotions which are not desirable because they are unpleasant for the experiencer or for their object or have no ethical value, usually occur as responses to unintentional stimuli, since nobody wants to induce them on purpose; cf. to disgust, to sadden, to anger, to irritate, to shame, to pity, to ridicule which refer to unintentional behaviors or even events: You disgust me, Her illness saddened him, He was angered by the result of the election, This noise irritates me, but not *Перестань вырывать у меня отвращение *Stop disgusting me*. The idea of unintentional causation is also expressed by adjectives in both languages: срешу, sad, scary, to unbearable, to disgusting, strong, etc.

Emotions whose primary object is another person, can often be directed at self as well, but not if they are strong, uncontrollable, involve obligatory behavioral manifestations or too much of an alienation from the object; thus, one can have self-pity, self-contempt, self-disgust, быть грустным, серьёзный, сердиться which refer to unintentional behaviors or even events: You disgust me, Her illness saddened him, He was angered by the result of the election, This noise irritates me, but not *Перестань вырывать у меня отвращение *Stop disgusting me*.

The second source is different display rules: it seems that American English tends to avoid sending direct negative messages to others or to oneself, that is, while emotionally experienced or described, emotions are more pleasant emotions among the non-basic ones (pride, gratitude), unpleasant on the whole outweighs the pleasant (shame, pity, jealousy, envy, resentment). Language, too, is well-known for marking negative and abnormal over positive or normal.

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riencer. The English language, on the other hand, prefers to spare the feelings of both the experiencer and the object of emotion and only to refer to something that has already happened, it describes the verbal behavior of a person: Он долго угасился моему рассказу ‘He for a long time was being terrified by my story’ means ‘For a while, he was expressing his horror at what I had told’.

Horror is an emotion which combines the elements of ‘FEAR’ and ‘DISGUST’; it is a borderline emotion, a fact which is manifested even in its metaphorical conceptualization. While horror produces some typical terror-like reactions, it also involves some disgust-type reactions; cf. horror iced ‘curdled’ one’s blood; to shrink in horror; but also to vomit in horror (one cannot vomit in terror or in ужасе). Horror is an example of removing barriers between emotion clusters, which is a very typical phenomenon for English. Thus, where in English we find horror, in Russian we may well find ужас and отвращение ‘terror and disgust’, or ужас, смешанный с отвращением ‘terror mixed with disgust’ to describe this particular brand of feeling. However, interestingly, though both ‘strong fear’ and ‘disgust’ components seem to be present in horror, their sum does not equal its meaning. In a very subtle description of horror [Solomon 2004] points out an important component of horror that seems to be absent in either of these two emotions: the component of breaking the norm, of shock from discovering, instead of something normal and familiar, something monstrous and ghastly.

Both languages have single out a kind of religious ‘FEAR’ that is inspired by very powerful objects and forces like God or nature, though both for Russian and English it is a more marginal concept; thus, lexical items expressing it are less frequently used, as well as the Russian пугаться/испугаться/перепугаться.

Both English and Russian have concepts for a very strong short-living ‘FEAR’ which can be explicated as ‘X thinks that a very bad Y might happen or that a very bad and powerful Y might do something very bad to X; X feels that (s)he cannot do anything to prevent this; X feels very bad’.

In English, there is a special word to express this meaning, terror and its derivatives – to terrify, terrifying, terrified. This kind of ‘FEAR’ involves a very strong physiological and uncontrolled behavioral response, which is reflected in language, cf. to go pale with terror, one’s blood turns icy with terror, to freeze to numb with terror; to flee in terror. The Russian correlate of this word, ужас, as well as its derivatives, ужасается/ужасаться has a wider meaning: it can refer not only to the feeling of anticipating something very bad, but also to the feeling of being exposed to something very bad that has already happened. Thus, it is possible to use this word in both of the following contexts, where English uses two separate terms: Он с ужасом смотрел на приближавшихся бандитов ‘He was looking at the approaching gangsters in terror’ and Он ужасно смотрел на обезображенное тело ‘He was looking at the mutilated body in horror’. In the first usage, it is very much like terror, cf. застать <побеседовать> от ужаса, быть парализованным ужасом, убежать в ужасе ‘to freeze with terror, to be paralyzed by terror, to go pale with terror, to flee in terror’.

In the second usage, it is different from terror and closer to horror, though it lacks the ‘disgust’ component of horror. The perfective verb form ужасается, derived from ужас, can only refer to the feeling that occurs after something bad has happened, not prior to it. The imperfective verb form ужасаться is also used to refer to something that has already happened, only it describes the verbal behavior of a person: Он долго угасился моему рассказу ‘He for a long time was being terrified by my story’ means ‘For a while, he was expressing his horror at what I had told’.

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This type of ‘FEAR’ is mixed with great respect and admiration, and the component of ‘FEAR’ in it is not enough to render the resulting feeling unpleasant. Y is not perceived as dangerous or potentially harmful; on the contrary, it is viewed as exceedingly good; however, Y’s omnipotence as compared to the experiencer’s relative weakness accounts for the ‘FEAR’-component. Semantically, it can be explicated as follows:

‘X thinks that Y is very powerful and very good; X feels something very good and very strong for Y; X feels that Y can do everything; X feels small and insignificant in the presence of Y; X cannot do anything in the presence of Y’.

In English, this type of fear is more pronounced: the word awe and its derivatives (awesome, awed) refer to this mixed type of feeling, whereas in order to express this combined meaning the Russian language would resort to using a phrase блаженствующий
A person experiences fear. The measure of the good emotion, admiration, is stronger than that of the scary emotion; so, on the whole, it is perceived as a positive emotion rather than negative.

In contrast to this reverent, religious-like feeling, there is a totally rational type of 'FEAR' which involves little, if any, emotional components and implies a mostly rational appraisal of a certain object or situation as dangerous and, as a result, a controlled behavior in the form of consciously avoiding it:

‘X thinks that Y is dangerous; X prefers to avoid Y’.

This type of ‘FEAR’ is expressed by apprehensive and its derivatives in English and опасается and its derivatives in Russian: Alaphetic about the side effects of anti-depressants, he opted out of pharmaco therapy; Опасаясь побочных эффектов антidepressивов, он отказался от медикаментозного лечения.

An absolute opposite to the rational ‘FEAR’ are panic and freaking out, as well as the Russian паника. This type of ‘FEAR’ implies complete loss of rational control over emotions and, in the case of panic and паника, uncontrolled behavioral reactions; unlike all other types of ‘FEAR’, this one can characterize the psychotic behavior of large groups of people, even crowds; cf. the psychological term crowd panic.

Since ‘FEAR’ involves behavioral responses, its appraisal is partly triggered by social and ethical norms. Both languages contain a concept of “bad, unethical” ‘FEAR’ or, rather, unethical behavior in the situation when a person experiences fear. The situations themselves might differ with time, place and culture, but there are always some which require bravery, and the failure to live up to the required expectations results in negative ethical evaluation of the person and his (her) behavior. This type of ‘FEAR’ can be explicated as

‘X feels that Y is dangerous; X wants to avoid Y; X tries to avoid Y; the speaker thinks avoiding Y is bad’.

This type of behavior and type of personality associated with it is expressed by the English to get cold feet, coward, cowardly, chicken and the Russian (с)дрейфить and (с)дрейфует, where the imperfective form implies reluctance to do something and the perfective form – a complete withdrawal from the situation.

Characteristically, both languages employ the same metaphorical means to describe this cowardly behavior in a derogatory way, which are based on one of the rarer symptoms of fear – involuntary defecation; cf. to poop out, to crap out or the Russian expression наложить в штаны which all mean ‘X didn’t do something because of fear; the speaker thinks this is very bad’ [cf. Dobrovols’kij 1996 on this expression in Russian and German]. Another way of carrying negative evaluation metaphorically which is often used in the field of emotions is likening the experiencer’s behavior to that of an animal; cf. the expression with a similar meaning to have one’s tail between one’s legs or its Russian equivalent поджать хвост.

References


