

## Emotions and Language Documentation: Research Perspectives

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 09 November 2017;

Received in revised form:  
9 December 2017;

Accepted: 19 December 2017;

#### Keywords

Language of emotions,  
Language documentation,  
Minority languages,  
Metaphors.

### ABSTRACT

The language of emotions, a field of research usually neglected in documentary linguistics, requires a strict methodological framework. This paper aims at proposing a critical framework for the research on the language of emotions from the standpoint of language documentation, illustrating both from a theoretic and practical point of view the challenges and the potentiality of a fieldwork-oriented research targeting basic emotions and their linguistic encoding.

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### Introduction

#### Endangered languages and documentation

It is often said – mostly by means of a sort of ideological generalisation – that minority or less-taught/known languages will face inevitable extinction within a few decades. Minority languages (that is, languages spoken by groups or communities that do not constitute the majority within a given country) would be in a very fragile position and linguists should act in order to document and describe these languages before their complete disappearance. Of course, not all minority languages will be gone within the next generations: in a recent report assessing the degree of endangerment of World languages, the situation of ‘minority’ languages in West Africa seems not to be as dramatic as it is depicted to the general public and in certain academic contexts (Simons and Lewis 2013). But it is still a question of numbers, and languages with a few speakers are good candidates to become languages with no speakers at all. Left aside the idea for which the linguist has a *mission* – i.e. the salvation of endangered languages by means of a mix of technical expertise and active commitment –, we can still explain why the documentation and description of moribund languages have become a priority in the agenda of funding institutions. As Yaron Matras points out, the only thing endangered languages have in common is that they are ‘potential sources of data that cannot easily be found elsewhere’ (Matras 2005:232). Documenting languages that are fading away is a great opportunity we have to search for structural diversity and typological variety.

#### Description and documentation

Some scholars narrow the notion of ‘language documentation’ defining it from the disciplinary standpoint of ‘documentary linguistics’. Documentary linguistics, as a sub-field of linguistics, aims at documenting a language by adopting a specific methodological framework. While the outcome of documentary linguistics is language documentation, language documentation without a documentary approach would simply consist of an unsystematic collection of records. Hence, “*language*

*documentation seeks to record the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community, along with speakers’ metalinguistic knowledge of those practices and traditions. This includes systematic recording, transcription, translation and analysis of the broadest possible variety of spoken (and written) language samples collected within their appropriate social and cultural context”* (Austin and Grenoble 2007:13). Even if documentation and description are two different practices, they are not always mutually exclusive. Transcription and interlinear translation involve some analysis, and description is particularly valuable when based on everyday speech rather than on elicitation work only. Descriptive linguistics aims at producing grammars, dictionaries, and collection of texts. In many cases though the work of descriptive linguists includes also a certain amount of time spent collecting material in a systematic way, i.e. for the sake of language documentation. As Himmelmann points out, what differentiates a descriptive linguist from a documentary linguist is (a) the explicit concern for accountability, and (b) the concern for long-term storage and preservation of primary data, both key-features of documentary linguistics (Himmelmann 2006:15). Linguists working on minority languages are well aware that the probability of having two professionals – i.e. a documentary linguist and a descriptive linguist – working on the same language is quite remote: even one single linguist for a given language seems to be a luxury, and many languages will see none. This might explain why some descriptive linguists do not limit themselves to the mere collection of texts (e.g. oral stories, riddles, proverbs, etc.), but extend the documentation to other domains by recording planned (= elicitation, interviews, controlled session) and unplanned (= casual speech) material.

#### Different kinds of documentation

Documentation, as we have seen, should be as much comprehensive as possible. However, different approaches can be taken into consideration: subgroup-driven, context-driven, or domain-driven documentation are examples of some perspectives the linguist may adopt to collect a significant amount of data. Sometimes fieldwork conditions

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dictate the adoption of a perspective over another. Sometimes the linguist feels she/he has to prioritise the different segments of language exchange and make a choice, and so on. We can synthesise these three perspectives as follows: A) *Subgroup-driven documentation*: the documentation focuses on the linguistic exchange of a specific segment of the community under analysis. The subgroup can be defined by the age (language of children) of its members, by their sex (e.g. language used by women) or by their activity (e.g. linguistic exchange in a group of fishermen, hunters, etc.); B) *Context-driven documentation*: the documentation focuses on specific contexts, that is places or periods of observable language exchange (e.g. ceremonies, market areas, etc.); and C) *Subgroup-driven documentation*: the documentation focuses on the linguistic exchange of a specific segment of the community under analysis. The subgroup can be defined by the age (language of children) of its members, by their sex (e.g. language used by women) or by their activity (e.g. linguistic exchange in a group of fishermen, hunters, etc.)

#### Emotions as a domain of inquiry in linguistics

When documenting the botanical lexicon of a language we rely on what the land occupied by the target community has to offer. All the botanical terms we collect become even more interesting when we inquire about the meaning and the specific use of the item the term is referring to. The interplay here is between the geographical context, the members of the community, and the set of practices and beliefs productive within the group, i.e. the culture. The documentation of the language of emotions does not rely on ethnic or geographic-dependent items. We are not looking for new emotions or emotional states, for we know that emotions *per se* (and 'all emotions are basic', to use Ekman's words) are not culture-dependent. The expression 'language of emotions' covers the linguistic and extra-linguistic encoding of a fixed set of events, i.e. the emotions as an evolutionary product fostered by the need to answer specific environmental challenges. Emotions (or 'basic emotions') are a product of our evolutionary history. They originated as an adaptive response to challenges and fundamental life tasks. This universality entails a human-specific way to express emotions, namely through a physiological response activated at neurological level. On the motivational side, we know that what activates a given emotion (the 'trigger event') corresponds either to a universal theme (i.e. a culture-independent trigger event), a variation of the universal theme (i.e. a partly culture-independent trigger event), or instead to a particular theme (i.e. an individual or culture-dependent trigger event). Understanding the language of emotions across different communities is the key factor to comprehend how human groups and societies managed to modulate evolution-driven responses through culture. The key features of the language of emotions are: A) *Universality*: the universality of the event (=being not culture-dependent) entails the existence of the encoding in every community/language; B) *Pervasiveness*: the language of emotions is present in everyday language exchange and in any kind of domains and contexts; and C) *Themes*: presence of universal themes mirroring our evolutionary history. The realisations of the language of emotions can be summarised as follows: A) *Congruence*: label terms (lexical level); B) *Imaginative*: metaphors, metonymy, image-schema, symbol; and C) *Phraseology*: multi-word expressions, riddles, proverbs, etc.

The primary outcome of such a study should lead to the following outcomes: A) *Lexicon*: inventory of emotion terms;

B) *Phraseology*: inventory of phraseological material; C) *Definitions*: folk-theories on emotions; and D) *distribution* of encoding strategies. A study on the language of emotions is inter-disciplinary by default and a

#### Emotions: a growing interest

The interest towards emotional events, and in particular the discussion over the so-called basic emotions, was fostered mainly by the works of Paul Ekman (with Wallace Friesen 1968, 1969, 1971; Ekman 1994). The research on pre-literate and literate cultures and the consequent identification of physiological universals and culture-free constants represented a significant contribution to the psychological field (see Averill 1997, Lazarus 1991, Sherer 1997). Emotions have been neglected in linguistics and language studies at least until the '80, when works such as 'Metaphors We Live By' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and 'Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things' (Lakoff 1987) broadened the cognitive approach in linguistics, giving a strong impulse to investigate the metaphorical event as a cognitive structure characterised by a culture-dependent output (e.g. the conceptual metaphors). The interest for the relationship between metaphor and emotion, and subsequently for the emotional encoding tout court, gained ground over the years: 'Emotions across Languages and Cultures' (Wierzbicka 1999), 'Metaphor and Emotion' (Kövecses 2003), 'Emotion Categories across Languages' (Boster 2005), 'Codes and Rituals of Emotions in Asian and African Cultures' (Pawlak ed., 2009), 'Encoding Emotions in African Languages' (Batic, ed., 2011), and 'Le langage de l'émotion' (Tersis and Boyeldieu, 2017) are examples of this growing interest.

#### Goals and research questions

The objectives of a project on the language of emotions can be listed as follows: A) To detect the emotion labels across the target languages in order to build a cross-cultural inventory of emotion terms and categories; B) To detect the lexico-grammatical and phraseological inventory displayed by the target languages to express emotions: this aspect will address the morpho-syntactic characteristics of emotion terms as well as the syntactic structure of multiword expressions used to designate emotions and emotional states; C) To determine what strategies are displayed to encode emotional states. Previous research has shown that emotion encoding is by far the richest in terms of lexical inventory and imaginative strategies, that is, of strategies making use of metaphors, metonymy, image-schema, and symbolic conceptualisation. The investigation on this aspect will point to a better understanding of universal, areal, and culture-specific metaphors. Along with the cross-cultural comparison to be carried out at a later stage, the results will be of particular relevance to the current research on the relationship between emotion and metaphor, especially in African context; D) To analyse the lexico-grammatical and strategic encoding with respect to universal themes, variations, and culture-dependent themes: this aspect will focus on the strategies displayed in order to encode different motivational antecedents as well as on the role of metaphor in describing a variety of emotion-triggering scenarios; E) To describe and categorise the trigger events in terms of acceptability. Many themes can be productive within a given community, but only a few are accepted as motivational antecedents. Society modulates universal themes by inserting socially learned norms that affect the way community members conceive and represent an event and their reaction to it. What does trigger, let's say, a sadness-oriented event? Are all the triggers

justified within the community? What emotions should be repressed, and in relation to what kind of antecedent?; F) To identify the limits of emotional language. Emotions are an everyday presence both in social and private life; they can be preceded or followed by deep suffering or great joy; our experience of emotional events is always something personal, even if we display the emotion in public. But what can be said about single emotions? Is it possible to talk about them? Can a community member interpret and openly describe the emotion felt by another person; G) To analyse the language of emotions across gender and age segment. This sub-theme addresses the following questions: does emotion encoding depend on gender or age? Do women and men encode emotions and emotional states in the same way? How would a man describe the emotional life of a woman (and a woman of a man)? How would the elders describe the emotional life of a young person (and a young person of an elder)? H) To describe the role of the human body in verbal and extra-verbal emotional encoding.

### Methodology

The expected outputs of a documentation work focusing on the language of emotions are: A) A comprehensive lexicon of emotion terms, including encoding strategies and phraseological items (e.g. proverbs, non-synthetic expressions, etc.); B) An extensive amount of documentation material: (1) high-quality audio and video recordings, and (2) detailed transcription of audio and video recordings. The first collection of lexical material is obtained through elicitation, namely by means of wordlists aiming at the basic cultural vocabulary. Differently from the wordlists already used to compile dictionaries of minority languages, a domain-driven list includes specific sections for each main experiential domain (Conception, Cognition, Perception, Volition, Emotions, and Physical events). Particular attention is paid to the emotional domain with the purpose to obtain 'working labels' for each basic emotion. In order to be successful, the documentation of the language of emotions should take into account the set of (basic) emotions as defined by psychological science, without adding emotions or emotional states popularised by the collective imagery close to the researcher. Elicitation can not be considered as an exhaustive method to understand the language of emotions. The emotions terms obtained through elicitation are 'working labels'. One major problem with elicited words is that they are elicited by means of a contact language, i.e. the language shared by the researcher and the consultants. It is important to bring the research onto the experimental ground, hence bypassing the contact language. The researcher (or the research team) should work with small groups of speakers (8-12) carrying out test sessions aiming at (1) the obtainment of label terms for each emotion and (2) the detection of causal antecedents in relation to the labelled emotions. The Max Plank-published document 'Emotion Categories in Language and Thought' (Levinson, Senft and Majis 2007) illustrates an effective instrument to investigate how speakers identify emotions and emotional categories. This diagnostic tool consists of a photographic stimulus (laminated cards with different facial expressions), a scenario stimulus (short stories in the target language are associated with a term or expression), and a video stimulus (familiar and unfamiliar events are shown in order to get a synthetic output, e.g. term or expression).

Another test to be conducted might focus on the production of non-verbal vocalisations: making use of a

certain number of scenarios as in the previous test, this test aims at isolating affective vocalisations (i.e. sounds produced to express the relevant emotion). Then, these vocalisations are used to detect emotional terms (i.e. which emotions are associated to a given vocalisation?). These tests not only will allow us to detect emotion labels and categories, but also (a) to verify them inter-culturally, and (2) to verify the grade of coherence and divergence in attributing labels to emotional states within a particular community (see Sauter 2009). Test sessions are followed by individual interviews. The interviews are carried out in a controlled environment and follow common guidelines. Apart from the test and interview sessions, data are also extrapolated through observation over a period spent within the community. Observed data (audio and video recorded upon consent) are meant to be discussed with pre-selected consultants in multiple sessions. The spectrum of possible renderings is summarised in Figure 1:

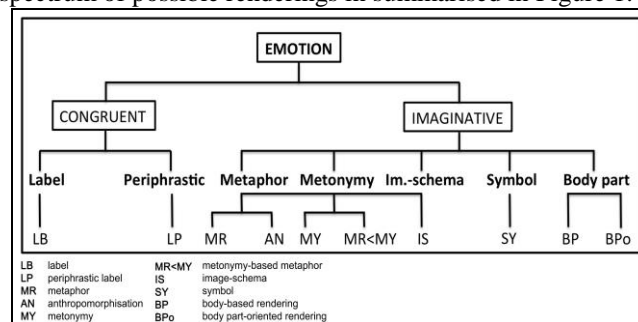


Fig. 1. Encoding strategies.

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