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The semantic-cognitive analysis of the lexical-semantic field of "negative emotions" in English

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Abstract: This article presents a semantic-cognitive analysis of the lexical-semantic field of "negative emotions" in the English language. The study utilizes conceptual metaphor theory and prototype theory to explore how negative emotions are conceptualized and lexically represented in English. Ten negative emotion concepts were analyzed: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, guilt, shame, jealousy, envy, humiliation, and despair. The analysis reveals common source domains that structure these emotion concepts metaphorically, including FIRE, OPPONENT, NATURAL FORCE,DISEASE/CONTAMINATION, and SOCIO-MORAL TRANSGRESSION. Prototype structures were also identified within the field, with core emotions like anger, fear, and sadness functioning as prototypes that motivate extensions to non-prototypical members like humiliation. The study demonstrates complex interactions between metaphor, metonymy, and prototype structure in the lexical semantics of emotion and highlights cultural shaping of the English emotion lexicon. Key English emotion words were analyzed in context to determine their semantic structure and connectivity within the field. The findings reveal a coherent, structured lexical field organized by conceptual metaphors and prototypes grounded in shared human experience.

Keywords: emotion, metaphor, lexicon, semantics, prototypes

Introduction: The lexicon of emotion in every language provides insight into how human emotions are conceptualized and categorized within a cultural framework. Emotion words constitute a lexical field, a structured semantic domain containing words related by their connection to a conceptual domain—in this case, the complex domain of human emotion (Lehrer, 1974; Faber & Mairal, 1999). The present study analyzes the lexical-semantic field of "negative emotions" in English, utilizing theoretical approaches from cognitive linguistics—specifically conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2000), and prototype theory (Rosch, 1973; Lakoff, 1987)—to explore the metaphorical and prototypical structure of this field. The analysis focuses on how ten frequently-used negative emotion concepts—anger, fear, sadness, disgust, guilt, shame, jealousy, envy, humiliation, and despair—are represented linguistically in English, tracing common conceptual metaphors, metonymies, prototypicality effects, and patterns of polysemy within the field. The study demonstrates that despite the intensely personal, subjective experience of emotions, the English lexicon reveals a high degree of systematicity in how they are conceptualized and lexicalized based on shared embodiment, neural mechanisms, and sociocultural contexts.

1. Theoretical Background

Cognitive linguistic theories of metaphor, metonymy, and prototypicality have illuminated many aspects of meaning construction, demonstrating the motivated, embodied nature of human conceptual systems. In the domain of emotion, these theories have been highly productive in analyzing emotion language and concepts (Kövecses, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Stefanowitsch, 2006; Geeraerts & Grondelaers, 1995). As Gevaert (2005) notes, “The cognitive view of lexicon structure stresses the existence of networks of related words interconnected by conceptual relations and arranged into domains” (p. 14). This study applies these cognitive lexical theories specifically to the lexical field of negative emotions in English.

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1.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor theory proposes that abstract, subjective domains like emotion are largely structured by metaphorical mappings from more concrete, physical source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Primary metaphors like AFFECTION IS WARMTH arise directly from correlations in embodied human experience, as feeling affection for someone correlates with the physical warmth of hugging or holding them. Complex metaphors like LOVE IS A JOURNEY elaborate on primary metaphors by mapping knowledge about journeys onto relationships conceptualized as journeys. Analyzing these conceptual mappings allows us to "see past the surface structure of language and understand the depth of conceptual structure that underlies meaning construction" (Kövecses, 2017, p. 1). Metaphor is not just poetic ornamentation, but essential to human thought, language, and culture.

1.2 Metonymy

While metaphor involves understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another, metonymy allows us to conceptualize something by reference to another entity associated with it (Littlemore, 2015). For emotion concepts, metonymies like EFFECT FOR CAUSE are common, where the emotion is referenced by its physiological effects (e.g., she broke into sweats signifies feeling nervous/afraid) or behavioral reactions (e.g., he exploded evokes the anger concept) (Kövecses, 2000). Metonymic mappings connect our perceptions of emotional responses or behaviors with the emotion concepts themselves.

1.3 Prototype Theory

Prototype theory proposes that categories exhibit prototype structure, with some members being more central than others (Rosch, 1973). Prototype effects are found across many conceptual domains and influence the polysemy networks of related words. For emotion concepts, some are clearly prototypical, like anger, sadness, fear, and joy, while others are peripheral, like envy, despair, or melancholy. Prototype structure governs categorization and reasoning about emotions, as more prototypical emotions motivate extensions to non-prototypes (Lakoff, 1987).

2. Analysis of Key Negative Emotions

2.1 Anger

Anger is a highly prototypical negative emotion, frequently discussed and researched in emotion studies. Conceptual metaphor analysis reveals anger is largely structured by the ANGER IS HEAT metaphor that maps the FIRE source domain onto anger experiences like body heat, red faces/skin, and physical agitation (Lakoff, 1987; Kövecses, 1995). The HEAT metonymy motivates anger vocabulary like explode, boil, simmer, steam, flare up, burn, etc. An opponent metaphor also structures anger, realized in expressions like she fought against her anger or he wrestled with his temper. In this metaphor, the angry person is viewed as an opponent one battles to control a dangerous, antagonistic force (Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987)

2.2 Fear

Fear is another prototypical negative emotion concept. It is primarily structured by the metaphors FEAR IS A FORCE and FEAR IS AN OPPONENT that frame fear as a dangerous entity one fights against or tries to escape from (Kövecses, 1990). This motivates expressions

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like gripped with fear, paralyzed with fear, flee from fear, overcome by fear. The SELF-CONTROL IS PHYSICAL CONTROL metaphor also manifests in control fear or rein in fear. Additionally, the metaphor BODY IS A CONTAINER OF EMOTION frames fear expressions like brimming with fear or overflowing with terror. Social causes of fear also lead to metaphors of FEAR IS SOCIAL DANGER.

2.3 Sadness

Sadness is a complex emotion concept with prototypicality effects. Central senses relate to general unhappy moods and emotions, while non-central senses cover related states like regret, pity, sympathy (Geeraerts & Grondelaers, 1995). Metaphors structure sadness in several ways. Sadness reduces energy and enthusiasm, reflected in feeling low, down in the dumps, crashing down, etc. (SAD IS DOWN metaphor). Heavy sadness is structured by the SADNESS IS A BURDEN metaphor in carry the weight of grief or burdened with sorrow. Social isolation motivates the SADNESS IS COLD metaphor seen in expressions like chilled to the bone with sorrow or a broken heart

2.4 Disgust

Disgust is a more peripheral negative emotion, relating to revulsion regarding something offensive, contaminated, or dangerous. It is metaphorically structured by the BAD TASTE and DISEASE source domains (Kövecses, 2000). Rotten, sickening, nauseating describe disgust by linking it to physical contamination and disease. Wanting to distance oneself from the disgusting item motivates get that rotten idea out of your head. Moral transgressions can also evoke disgust through the IMMORALITY IS IMPURITY metaphor.

2.5 Guilt

Guilt involves negative feelings about personal moral transgressions or harm caused to others. Conceptual metaphors include GUILT IS A BURDEN (carry the weight of guilt, burdened by guilt) and GUILT IS A PRISON one wants to escape from but cannot flee from the clutches of guilt (Kövecses, 2000). The self-critical nature of guilt is captured in tear oneself to shreds with guilt. Social disapproval motivates metaphors like drowning in condemnation. Guilt leads to self-imposed punishment, as in torture oneself with guilt. Finally, reparative actions map onto guilt, as seen in she needs to cleanse her conscience.

2.6 Shame

Shame is closely related to guilt but involves painful self-judgment regarding the entire self rather than specific acts. Shame highlights negative social evaluation where one feels exposed, humiliated, or diminished in others' eyes (Leeming & Boyle, 2013). This social aspect motivates SHAME IS NAKEDNESS (bare your shame) and SHAME IS UGLINESS metaphors (feel so ugly with shame) (Kövecses, 1990). Hiding from social contact is reflected in expressions like try to cover up the shameful act or conceal one's shame. Shame can crush one's spirit, reflecting emotional damage. Intense shame is described as excruciating, torturous, or corrosive

2.7 Jealousy

Jealousy is a complex, polysemous emotion concept covering feelings of insecurity, fear of loss, and resentment regarding a valued relationship or possession. Romantic jealousy is frequent, but jealousy also occurs regarding friendships, achievements, advantages, material goods, etc. Conceptual metaphors that structure jealousy highlight perceived threats and rivals.

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JEALOUSY IS FEAR frames it as an emotion of anxiety and insecurity about losing someone or something, as seen in expressions like gnawed by jealousy, uneasy with jealousy, tormented by jealousy (Kövecses, 1990). THE RIVAL IS AN ENEMY or OPPONENT motivates battle against jealousy, fight feelings of jealousy, etc. Jealousy often focuses on the POSSESSION metaphorically, as in stolen her love, his attention was hijacked. Finally, jealousy can be an ILLNESS or MADNESS that infects thought and behavior, as in pathological jealousy, deranged by jealousy, or sick with jealousy (Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987).

2.8 Envy

Envy is closely related to but distinct from jealousy. While jealousy fears losing a valued possession, envy covets what someone else has. Envy stems from feelings of inferiority, resentment, and discontent regarding another's traits, status, belongings, or advantages through the conceptual metaphor ENVY IS DESIRE FOR ANOTHER'S POSSESSION (Smith & Kim, 2007). Envy maps the competitor onto an adversary in expressions like her friend was always outdoing her or he wanted to usurp his position. The painful, corrosive aspects of envy appear in eat away at oneself with envy, bitter with envy. Envy evokes physical sickness in a sick feeling of envy or nauseated by envy. Finally, ill will toward the person envied motivates metaphors like spewing venom about her lavish lifestyle.

2.9 Humiliation

Humiliation involves strong feelings of degradation, indignity, and powerlessness in relation to perceived lower status, unjust treatment, ridicule, or rejection (Leeming & Boyle, 2013). The Humiliator is framed metaphorically as causing injury in tear someone’s dignity apart or crush someone’s spirit. Humiliation’s painful emotional impact appears in stab to the heart, emotionally scarred. The metaphors HUMILIATION IS DOWN and LOW STATUS IS DOWN capture the demeaning, lowering aspect of humiliation in expressions like he sank to his knees in humiliation, bowed his head in shame. Social isolation results from humiliation, seen in ostracized for his shameful conduct. Humiliation fundamentally attacks self-worth, reflected in demolish someone's self-esteem or shred someone's sense of self-respect.

2.10 Despair

Despair indicates an utter loss of hope, beyond typical sadness or disappointment. The USER IS A CONTAINER metaphor in expressions like filled with despair or awash in despair conveys despair's pervasive, surrounding quality (Charteris-Black, 2019). Other metaphors highlight despair’s profound, immobilizing emotional impact: DESPAIR IS A PHYSICAL BURDEN in weighted down with despair, DESPAIR IS DARKNESS or A SHADOW in sunk in the depths of despair, DESPAIR IS BEING LOST like lost in a wasteland of sorrow, DESPAIR IS PHYSICAL CAPTIVITY as in trapped in despair (Kövecses, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson 1999). The loss of agency and numbness of severe despair appears in expressions like paralyzed by despair or numb with hopelessness. Social isolation results from despair in cut off from society. Utter despair conveys life having no purpose or meaning, as in void of meaning or purposeless existence. Finally, the metaphor SELF-CONTROL IS OBJECT POSSESSION is reflected in losing one’s grip on reality.

3. Prototype Structure of the Lexical Field

In addition to common metaphorical source domains, the lexical field of negative emotions displays prototype effects. some emotions are more prototypical members of the category “negative emotion,” while others are more peripheral (Fehr & Russell, 1984). Emotions

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like anger, fear, sadness, and disgust function as central prototypes that motivate extensions to related peripheral members.

For example, sadness forms a prototypical core for sorrow, melancholy, homesickness, regret, and loneliness (Geeraerts & Grondelaers, 1995). The central anger prototype extends to annoyance, irritation, frustration, grouchiness, rage, wrath, hostility, resentment, disgust, and contempt via metaphor, metonymy, and chaining through intermediate concepts. Disgust branches to revulsion, contempt, and loathing. Fear's network includes anxiety, nervousness, dread, panic, and cowardice. Guilt extends to regret, remorse, and shame. Envy connects to jealousy and resentment. The prototypical structure reveals both the unique identity of specific emotions and their connectivity within the overall lexical field.

4. Polysemy Patterns in the Lexicon

The negative emotion lexicon also displays complex polysemy networks stemming from metaphor and metonymy (Evans, 2006). For example, depression lexically denotes a depressed or low mood but also a clinical mood disorder; anxiety indicates a temporary worried state and also an anxiety disorder; bitterness applies to a resentful emotional state and a harsh taste. Other examples include low, down, heavy, burdened, oppressed, and blue expressing sadness in addition to their central senses. Heat, flare, explode, erupt, and burn convey anger's "heated" metaphor. Disgust describes revulsion and also displeasure more generally. Envy denotes resentment and coveting what another has but also admiration. The polysemy networks for key emotion words thus demonstrate the creativity and productivity of metaphorical mappings.

5. Culture, Embodiment, and Emotion Language

As seen in the analysis, conceptual metaphor and metonymy interact closely with embodied cognition and sociocultural context in structuring the lexical field of negative emotions. Primary metaphors like SIMILARITY IS CLOSENESS and GOOD IS UP emerge directly from embodied experience and neural connections, providing widespread source domains for abstract concepts (Grady, 1997; Sullivan, 2013). Complex metaphors like ANGER IS HEAT or SADNESS IS COLD elaborate primary metaphors based on shared cultural models. Embodied simulations shape abstract emotion concepts through metaphorical mental imagery (Gibbs, 2006). Culture also provides much of the source knowledge for structuring metaphors, like social relationships for SHAME IS REJECTION or VALUE IS WEALTH for envy (Yu, 2008). Thus, the English negative emotion lexicon reveals deep connections between language, embodied cognition, neural mechanisms, and sociocultural contexts.

6. Conclusion

This lexical-semantic analysis has demonstrated the highly systematic, motivated nature of the emotion lexicon in English. While emotions seem intensely personal and subjective, the language used to express and describe them draws creatively on shared source domains grounded in human experience, physiology, cognition, and culture. Conceptual metaphor theory and prototype theory prove highly useful in revealing coherent lexical structures, not just random polysemy. Further cross-linguistic analysis can uncover both universal and culture-specific patterns in emotion language. Overall, a cognitive linguistic approach illuminates the motivated processes by which embodied minds within a culture organize complex human experiences like negative emotions into lexical systems.

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