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Emotion nouns in Australian languages: a case study and preliminary survey

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1. Introduction

Documenting emotions in Australian languages is a complicated task, not only because of caveats inherent to the privacy of this domain, but also because of additional cultural obstacles specific to the Australian context. Indeed, among Aboriginal groups, emotions are often considered too mundane or sometimes too traumatic to be discussed with strangers (Ponsonnet 2014a). However, linguists who have successfully explored emotions in Australian languages have revealed a wealth of linguistic resources (Turpin 2002; Gaby 2008; Harkins 2001; Ponsonnet 2014b). Dalabon, for instance, a severely endangered Gunwinyguan language of south-western Arnhem Land, numbers more than 160 emotional lexemes, encapsulating fine emotional categories.

Interestingly, the Dalabon emotion lexicon contains mostly verbs and adjectives. Dalabon has only two emotion nouns proper: *yolh-no* ‘pep, feelings’, and *yirru* ‘conflict, anger’. This is a remarkably low figure if we compare, for instance, to French (≈315 emotion nouns and ≈350 emotion verbs according to Mathieu 2000), Tahitian (163 nouns among 444 emotion terms¹), Japanese (≈520 emotion nouns and ≈400 emotion words of other classes²), or Ifaluk (42 emotion words, all but two glossed as nouns and two as adjectives³). Across semantic domains, Dalabon is not a particularly ‘verby’ language (Evans 2012; Polinsky 2012): nouns represent about 50% of entries in the Dalabon dictionary (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004).

¹ Ian Keen pers. com. July 2015 based on Davies (1851).

² Ian Keen pers. com. July 2015 based on <http://www.jisho.org>

³ Ian Keen pers. com. July 2015 based on Lutz (1982).

What are the causes and implications of this scarcity of emotion nouns in Dalabon? Is this an areal feature? Does it result from a structural property of the language? How does it relate to Dalabon speakers' shared conceptual representations about emotions? Indeed, it seems that in Dalabon, the rarity of emotion nouns correlates with a limitation on the types of emotion metaphors available (Ponsonnet 2014b) – which relates to shared representations of emotions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). But the question of the directionality remains open: does language reflect shared concepts and representations about emotions? Or does the rarity of nouns determine metaphors, which may in turn determine shared representations?

There is not enough space to answer or investigate all these questions in any detail in this paper, but I will present a preliminary assessment in order to identify directions for future research. To do so, I conducted a pilot survey of emotion nouns in a small sample of nine other Australian languages. The observations resulting from this survey are two-fold. Firstly, Australian languages, in general, seem to have few emotion nouns, although there may be nuances, possibly due to differences in typological profiles. Secondly, there is some semantic convergence among the nouns documented in the ten languages surveyed. Indeed, the semantic profiles of the two emotion nouns found in Dalabon are matched by nouns in most of the other languages in the sample.

In Section 2, I present the languages and the data considered in this study. Section 3 offers an overview of the distribution of emotion nouns across the languages of the sample. Section 4 discusses the semantics of the nouns and their convergence. I describe Dalabon full-fledged emotion nouns, *volh-no* 'pep, feelings', and *yirru* 'conflict, anger'. For each of these nouns, I discuss the distribution of comparable nouns across the sample. I also present a handful of noun-like derivations that are too rare or not independent enough to be considered full-fledged lexical nouns and noun-like forms. In Section 5, I consider in more detail the possible consequences of the scarcity of emotion nouns upon metaphorical representations of emotions.

2. Linguistic context and data

2.1 Dalabon

Dalabon is a non-Pama-Nyungan language of the Gunwinyguan family that used to be spoken by a few hundred people in Central Arnhem Land, in the Top End (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004; Cutfield, this volume). Dalabon is now severely endangered, and known by probably less than a dozen speakers and semi-speakers in communities to the east of Katherine in the Northern Territory. It is being replaced by Barunga Kriol, an English-based creole. A number of Dalabon speakers are highly motivated to document their language and helped me carry out extensive documentation of the semantic domain of emotions. Emotions are defined here as internal (i.e. psychological) states that are cognitive (thus excluding sensations – pain, hunger) but not purely intellectual (thus excluding mental states such as

knowing or believing). Based on a large corpus combining narratives, stimuli-based elicitation and standard elicitation, I was able to compile a glossary of more than 160 emotion words or expressions, along with an analysis of emotional resources in general (Ponsonnet 2014b).⁴

2.2 Comparative sample

Ponsonnet (2014b) revealed that this language has a strikingly small number of emotion nouns, compared to the size of the emotion lexicon (Section 1). In order to put this observation into a cross-linguistic perspective, I carried out a pilot survey on a sample of Australian languages. I surveyed emotion nouns in nine languages selected among well-documented⁵ languages, so as to cover a combination of regions and genetic groups. The sample includes Pama-Nyungan and non-Pama-Nyungan languages, with some languages in the vicinity of Dalabon and some more distant languages in both categories. In this way, the respective roles of genetic grouping and regional patterns can be assessed. I investigated three languages belonging to different branches of the same family as Dalabon (the non-Pama-Nyungan Gunwinyguan family): Bininj Gun-wok, Jawoyn, and Rembarrnga; two languages adjacent to the Gunwinyguan region, one non-Pama-Nyungan (Mawng, Iwaidjan family), and one Pama-Nyungan (Yolngu Matha). I also examined three Pama-Nyungan languages spoken in more distant regions: Gurindji (Victoria River, Ngumpin subgroup), Kaytetye (Central Australia, Arandic subgroup), and Kuuk Thaayorre (Cape York, Paman subgroup). Finally, I explored one non-Pama-Nyungan language not adjacent to Dalabon, namely Jaminjung (Victoria River, Jaminjung family). This choice of languages was partly motivated by the quality of lexical documentation and/or publications on emotions (Turpin (2002) for Kaytetye and Gaby (2008) for Kuuk Thaayorre). This pilot sample is obviously too small to be conclusive, and indeed the aim of the study was to identify questions for future research, rather than bring immediate answers. The data investigated for each language is listed in the Appendix.

⁴ I am extremely grateful to the Dalabon speakers and community for their support along the years, as well as to the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme for funding field work in Dalabon country (IGS0125). Many thanks also to Erika Charola, Murray Garde, Patrick McConvell, Felicity Meakins, Eva Schultze-Berndt and Ruth Singer for sharing precious unpublished lexical databases; and to David Wilkins for his extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft. Finally, I am thankful to the ASLAN project (ANR-10-LABX-0081) of Université de Lyon within the program *Investissements d'Avenir* (ANR-11-IDEX-0007) of the French government operated by the National Research Agency (ANR), for funding this research under a postdoctoral fellowship.

⁵ Although the level of lexical documentation across these languages differs, all have been extensively documented. A detailed dictionary (published or unpublished) is available for each. For Kuuk Thaayorre, I worked with a somewhat smaller lexicon, but this was complemented by Gaby (2008) on emotions in this language. Given the extent of the data available for each language, the number of attested nouns cannot reflect the quality or quantity of data. For instance, Turpin's (2011) Kaytetye dictionary contains more than 280 emotion-related entries (words and collocations) but only eight emotion-denoting nominals. The fact that in-depth dedicated exploration of Dalabon revealed only two emotion nouns demonstrates that the number of attested nouns does not reflect lack of documentation.

My definition of emotions as internal states (2.1) leaves out of the count some nouns that denote experiencers of emotions, such as the Jawoyn *jotjunggali* ‘jealous person’. In languages that have two distinct categories for nouns and adjectives, experiencer-denoting nouns are rare. In languages where there is only one class of nominals, lexemes that can denote the experiencer of an emotion are more numerous, because some of these nominals play a role comparable to adjectives in other languages. Focusing on nouns that denote emotions as internal states allowed me to identify comparable items throughout the sample.

3. Emotion nouns in Australian languages

The rich emotion lexicon of Dalabon (160+ words) comprises mostly verbs or adjectives used in predicative functions. There are remarkably few nouns: only two, *yolh-no* ‘pep, feelings’ and *yirru* ‘conflict, anger’. Emotion-noun inventories of the sample of Australian languages described in 2.2 suggest that the scarcity of nouns may (a) be an areal tendency of the Australian continent, and (b) depend on the typological profile of the language: in this sample, there are fewer emotion nouns in polysynthetic languages and in languages with coverbs. While the scope of this study does not allow further elaboration on this hypothesis, it is something that can be tested by extending the sample in future studies.⁶

The noun inventories are presented in Table 1. Like Dalabon, the other three Gunwinyguan languages of the sample have very few emotion nouns. There are three attested emotion nouns in Jawoyn and four in Rembarrnga and Bininj Gun-wok. Another non-Pama-Nyungan language of the same region, Mawng (Iwaidjan) has three nouns (against ≈ 45 emotional verbs and coverbs), but Yolngu Matha (geographically close to the Gunwinyguan family, but Pama-Nyungan) has ten (against more than 120 verbs and 50 adjectives, Ian Keen pers. com. July 2015). Among distant languages, some Pama-Nyungan languages have more emotion nouns: eight in Kuuk Thaayorre, and ten in Kaytetye, where nearly 180 emotion verbs are also reported. In the non-Pama-Nyungan Jaminjung, on the other hand, only one emotion noun is reported, along with at least 20 emotion coverbs. Gurindji, a Pama-Nyungan language of the same region as Jaminjung, has only three emotion nouns. In all these languages, nouns (or nominals) account for a significant proportion of the lexicon outside of the domain of emotions.

In this sample, non-Pama-Nyungan languages have two or three, and a maximum of four emotion nouns, while some Pama-Nyungan languages (including Yolngu Matha, spoken in the Top End, neighbouring non-Pama-Nyungan languages) have eight or ten emotion nouns. A hypothetical explanation to be explored in future research is the correlation with polysynthesis (for

⁶ See for instance Polinsky (2012) for comparable investigations of correlations between typological profiles and lexical distributions.

Table 1: Documented emotion nouns in a pilot sample of 10 Australian languages
 The left column gives approximate labels rather than precise translations.
 A blank cell means that the category is not lexicalized by a noun (it may be lexicalized by a word of another class).

	Pama-Nyungan						Non-Pama-Nyungan						TOTAL languages
	Gur	Kay	Kuu	Yol	Jam	Maw	Bin	Dal	Jaw	Rem			
generic feelings	2	1	2	4			1	1	1	1			8
generic emotions	1	1											2
affection (compassion)		1	1										2
anger (or conflict)		1	1	1	1			1	1	1			8 4 strict
desire		1		1				1					3
dissatisfaction				1						1			2
fear			1	1									2
jealousy		2							1				2
joy, happiness		1											1
love		2	1	1									3
resentment (hatred)								1					1
shame							1	1				1	3
sorrow (grief)				1			1						2
surprise			2										1
TOTAL	3	10	8	10	1	3	4	2	3	4			

- (2) *Bula-h-yolh-na-ninj,* *yolh-ngan,*
 3pl>1-R-feelings-see-PI feelings-1sg.POSS
Mak *kinikah* *nga-bo-niyan.*
 NEG there 1sg-go-FUT

‘They knew what I felt like, my feelings, I was going my own way.’
 (30116/2007 – 6’ (JW))

Accordingly, the form *yolh* occurs in lexicalized compounds that relate to desire or boredom, for instance *yolh-ni* ‘pep, feelings’+‘sit/be’, ‘feel good, cheerful, be pleased, love, like’ and *yolh-wudj(mu)* ‘pep, feelings’+‘end, die’, ‘feel tired, lack energy, be sulky’. *Yolh* is more frequent in compounds than as an autonomous noun.

Speakers provided Kriol translations and metalinguistic comments of great consistency, highlighting the fact that someone’s *yolh-no* encapsulates their autonomy and individual particularities (Ponsonnet 2010).

- (3) Speakers’ Kriol translations of *yolh-no*:
aidiya (<Eng. ‘idea’)
filing (<Eng. ‘feeling’)
main (<Eng. ‘mind’)
wil (<Eng. ‘will’)

Speakers’ comments in Kriol about *yolh-no*:

im difren brom ebribodi (‘s/he’s different from other people’)
nobodi dalim wat tu du (‘no one tells her/him what to do’)

This notion of individual inclinations and motivations can relate to someone’s physical state. Indeed, someone who has no energy can be tired, depressed, or even sick, hence the physical dimension of *yolh-no*. This also echoes compounds with *yolh* denoting boredom or depression (*yolh-dukkarrun* ‘pep, feelings’+‘tie+REFL’, ‘feel depressed’).

Yolh-no is not a body-part and is not assigned a clear and conventional location in the body, although there are indications that it could relate etymologically to an abdominal body-part (Ponsonnet 2014b:281). When asked to point to *yolh-no* on an X-ray-style drawing of a human body showing internal organs, some speakers located *yolh-no* in the head (the site of intellectual processes, Ponsonnet 2009), some in the abdomen, and one speaker stated that it was not on the drawing – plausibly because she construed *yolh-no* as immaterial.

Morphosyntactically speaking, *yolh-no* belongs to the nominal subclass of parts of animate wholes – along with other abstract attributes such as someone’s name, mind etc. As such, *yolh-no* is inalienable (Ponsonnet 2015). Therefore, it is always represented linguistically as possessed: a *yolh-no* has to be somebody’s *yolh-no*, as opposed to an abstract property detached from an experiencer. This implies that *yolh-no* cannot be used to refer to an abstract category of feelings as

in the English expression ‘the feeling of nostalgia’ for instance. That is, *yolh-no* is a generic concept in the sense that it refers to someone’s ‘bare emotional state’, but it is not a generic hypernym category for emotions, subsuming subtypes of emotions.

4.1.1 Related concepts in other languages

Generic concepts of ‘feelings’ are broadly attested across my Australian sample: a comparable noun is reported in eight languages out of ten. For some items, the definitions are too brief to tell whether the word is a generic category for emotions or a term for a generic feeling. However, in several cases it appears that the concepts resemble the one encapsulated by *yolh-no* in Dalabon, revolving around the notions of drive, life force or spiritual energy. In the vicinity of Dalabon, Jawoyn *ngan-yilk*⁸ is glossed as ‘spirit, gumption’. Further east within the Top End, Yolngu *maar* is described as one’s ‘feelings, moods and desires’ by Tamisari (2000:281). In Kuuk Thaayorre (Cape York), *ngeengk rithrr* is translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ (Gaby 2008:33) and *ngeengk* ‘belly’ is described as the seat of life force. In the Victoria River District, Gurindji *kawurru* is reported to mean ‘lower chest’, ‘gut feelings’ and ‘life force’.

In several languages across the continent, the generic term for feelings also relates to an abdominal body-part. In Jawoyn *ngan-yilk* (‘spirit, gumption’) also means ‘guts’. In Gurindji, life force is associated with the lower chest. The Kaytetye word for ‘belly’ or ‘liver’ also has generic emotional meanings (Turpin 2002, 2011: 69). As previously noted, the association of feelings with the belly occurs in Kuuk Thaayorre, where emotions can additionally be associated with the heart. In the two languages of the sample that lack a generic-feeling noun (Jaminjung and Mawng), the belly is also considered the seat of emotions.

While the Dalabon word *yolh-no* does not have an obvious simple translation in English (nor in French for instance), the family of concepts depicted above is not cross-linguistically exceptional. Comparable notions are reported on several continents. Lutz (1988:33) defines the Ifaluk (Micronesia) word *tip-* as ‘individual will or desire’. Maya Yucatec *óol* is translated by LeGuen (in press) as ‘will, desire, energy’ or ‘life energy’.

To summarize, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the Dalabon concept of *yolh-no* is representative of a family of concepts for generic feelings as individual life force and energy found in a number of languages across Australia – as well as in some other languages across the world. While the Dalabon concept of *yolh-no* is not synchronically clearly associated with a body-part, comparable concepts are often associated with an abdominal body-part in other languages.

⁸ A possible cognate of Dalabon *yolh-no*.

4.2 *Yirru* ‘conflict, anger’

In its most common sense, the noun *yirru* refers to fights, arguments and conflicts in general; these denotata relate to observable events, not to emotional (internal) events.

- (4) *Biyi-ngong-no-kah, yirru-kah ka-h-kahka-ninj!*
 man-group-FILL-LOC conflict/anger-LOC 2sg>1-R-take:REDUP-PI
 ‘And you brought me here to this mob of people, to this fight!’
 (Dalabon Dictionary)

Yirru is often ambiguous between conflict (external event) and anger (internal event): in (5), *yirru* could refer to either. When it heads a noun phrase, *yirru* is not clearly attested with a solely emotional sense. Some contexts (like (5)) seem to favor an emotional interpretation, but this is never absolutely compelling.

- (5) *Mak nunh yirru-kun kahmun ka-djare.*
 NEG DEM conflict/anger-GEN DEM 3sg-like/want
 [...] *Nga-h-dja-ni yirru-dih ka-h-yin.*
 1sg-R-FOC-sit/be:PR conflict/anger-PRIV 3sg-R-say/do:PR
 ‘This one doesn’t want to fight. [...] I have no anger
 [I’m staying no conflict] he says.’ (20120706a_005_MT 049)

In addition, *yirru* can also be used as a predicate and denote an emotional behavior (‘angry behavior’ (6)) as well as aggressive potential (the word can then be glossed ‘dangerous’). In these cases, it denotes both the behavior and the accompanying emotion.

- (6) *Nunda ngey nga-h-yirru ka-h-yin,*
 DEM 1sg 1sg-R-conflict/anger 3sg-R-say/do:PR
rrrrr, ka-h-yin.
 ONOMAT 3sg-R-say/do:PR

‘Now I’m angry he says, rrrrr, he goes.’ (20110613_002_LB 16)

In addition to the use of *yirru* as an autonomous word, there exists a relatively large set of compound verbs using *yirru* as their first component, describing the stages and aspects of anger as an emotional event: for instance *yirru-burlih(mu)* ‘conflict, anger’+‘appear’, ‘be(come) angry’, *yirru-ngalmu* ‘conflict, anger’+‘appear’, ‘be(come) angry’. Unlike the noun *yirru*, some of these compounds refer unambiguously to emotional states, as in (7), where the speaker explains that she was already angry in spite of not showing it (hence an emotion, not a behavior). In several of these *yirru* compounds (like the ones quoted above), *yirru* can be interpreted as meaning ‘anger’.

- (7) *Bah korre nga-h-dja-yirru-ngal-minj.*
 but before 1sg-R-FOC-conflict/anger-appear-PP
 be(come).angry

Nga-h-bolan-yinmi-wo-ng,
 1sg>3-R-nearly-speech-CSTVZR-PP

bah derrh-no-bo nga-h-n-iyam
 but few.days.later 1sg>3-R-see-FUT

nunh kanh ka-ye-yin-miyan
 DEM DEM 3sg-SUB-say/do-FUT

‘But I was already angry before [my anger had already appeared].
 I was about to tell him, but I’ll tell him later.’ (20120714b_005_MT 052)

In summary, when used in isolation, the noun *yirru* primarily means ‘conflict’, which is not an emotion, but it often suggests emotional interpretations. When used predicatively, *yirru* means ‘angry’, and denotes both a behavior and the emotional state that triggers this behavior. Finally, *yirru* is used to form emotional compounds within which it can be interpreted as referring to ‘anger’, i.e. to the emotion proper.

4.2.1 Related concepts in other Australian languages

Eight languages out of ten resemble Dalabon in having either a noun glossed as ‘anger’, or a noun glossed with a word relating to ‘conflict’ (‘fight’, ‘argument’, often ‘trouble’) that is reported to denote angry behavior in some contexts. One language in the sample has a noun for anger that does not relate to conflict: Kuuk Thaayorre, where ‘anger’ is *ngeengk-kul*, literally ‘belly-lap’ (Gaby 2008:35). Nouns meaning ‘conflict’ and ‘anger’ proper are attested in Jawoyn and Kaytetye. Nouns meaning ‘conflict’ primarily, and ‘angry’ in some contexts (like Dalabon *yirru*) are also attested in several regions: in the Top End (Rembarrnga, Mawng and Yolngu Matha), and in the Victoria River District where Jaminjung *wirrij* is described as both a coverb and a noun, meaning ‘be aggressive, be angry, argue, fight’, and occurs in anger-related compounds. In the same area, Gurindji has a coverb with a comparable meaning. This coverb is not described as a noun in the latest description, but it was in an earlier version of the database I investigated. The other language where no noun is reported to relate to anger or angry behavior is Bininj Gun-wok (genetically very close to Dalabon), where the noun *kun-rid* (possibly cognate with Dalabon *yirru*) is only glossed as ‘trouble, argument’. However, *rid* occurs in conflict-related compounds that resemble Dalabon anger compounds with *yirru*.

no ‘pep, feelings’); the other is a noun for conflict, fights and arguments that extends to anger in some contexts (*yirru* ‘conflict, anger’). Dalabon also has marginal nominalized forms for fear, compassion, shame and resentment, and these emotions are also lexicalized by nouns in at least one (and often several) language(s) in the sample.

In Dalabon, the lack of emotion nouns, and the particular morphosyntactic behaviours of the only two emotion nouns, may be responsible for the absence of a certain type of metaphor where emotions are represented as entities independent of the person. This hypothetical correlation between metaphors and the proportion of emotion nouns can be tested in the future by studying emotion metaphors in other Australian languages, and comparing these metaphors with the emotion nouns available in each language.

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Appendix

Bininj Gun-wok, NPN, Gunwinyguan, Top End, Arnhem Land

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