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## **EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF RECENT RESEARCH**

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The world's languages offer myriads of different ways to talk about emotions, and this variation has been an object of study in anthropological linguistics for a long time. This chapter begins by recounting how this interest in the language of emotions emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, initially led by anthropologists who did not study language in and of itself. As presented in the second section, their work nevertheless led them to articulate a core question about language per se: how does it produce or transform emotions? In the last section, I review the multiple perspectives adopted by linguists – other than anthropological linguists – to examine emotional language, ranging from the description of words in individual languages to comparisons across languages, and the holistic study of speech and conversation. Along the way, I will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of research on emotional language, suggesting ways forward where possible. Overall, after five decades of remarkable progress in empirical description, the most salient challenge seems to be synthesis and the articulation and structuring of research questions.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 What and why?**

Emotion is a fundamental aspect of human experience that colors all aspects of our lives and most of our interactions. Many researchers have acknowledged that emotion also pervades all dimensions of language and most stretches of discourse (Ochs and Schieffelin 1989: 9, Besnier 1990: 421–422). Therefore, the scientific study of emotional language is central to our understanding of human behavior and social organization. This chapter will recount the development of interest in emotional language in anthropology, linguistics, and anthropological linguistics, all disciplines for which it is a naturally central theme.

Before I explore the importance of research on emotional language further, I will briefly discuss definitions of “emotion”. As pointed out by Izard (2010), Widen and Russell (2010), and Wierzbicka (2010), among others, there is no strong consensus about the nature of “emotion” as an object of scientific study. Apart from the term “emotion”, authors from various disciplines also use a range of other labels to differentiate between subtly distinct adjacent notions. As summarized by Alba-Juez and McKenzie (2019), some authors distinguish “emotion” and “feelings” (Damasio 1999, Wierzbicka 1999, Scherer 2013) and others prefer the term “affect” (Massumi 1995), while some choose to ignore the nuances between these terms (Besnier 1990: 421, Ponsonnet 2014a: 16). Given that this chapter considers the study of emotional language across authors and theoretical frameworks, it is better to adopt a broader definition, and I will therefore ignore these nuances.

In my own research, I define emotions as internal states that have a cognitive dimension (in contrast to sensations such as hunger or cold, for instance), as well as a subjective appraisal dimension (distinguishing them from purely intellectual evaluations such as belief or agreement). While emotions often pair up with physical or physiological responses, some authors leave this out of their definitions (e.g., Ponsonnet 2020: 21), which leads to the inclusion of long-lasting states such as moods, attitudes, or dispositional inclinations within the scope of emotions (Besnier 1990: 421). This definition of “emotion” is not intended to overrule those chosen by other authors. Indeed, many anthropologists and anthropological linguists prefer definitions of emotions that include some aspects of the social context – such as interactions, behaviors, triggering events, and so on – as part of what they call “emotion” or “affect” (see Section 3 for further discussion). I find this definition less specific, and perhaps also further removed from the day-to-day use of the English word *emotion*, but it can certainly be useful in some fields of research. The discussions in the present chapter can be understood either within a narrower or a broader definition of emotion.

There are many reasons why anthropologists, and anthropological linguists in particular, want to study emotional language. As pointed out above, since emotions are everywhere in our lives and everywhere in our language, understanding how humans use emotional language is crucial to any “anthropological study”, broadly understood as “the study of human life”. Likewise, emotional language is relevant to anthropological linguists by definition, since the object of study of this field can be characterized as “how humans use

language to organize their lives and define their selves”. In addition, because emotions are not directly observable, and language is an important way in which humans manifest their emotions, it is tempting to hope that studying emotional language may also help us understand emotional experience itself. While this is a genuine possibility, it also opens up the risk of overconfidently and unreflectively using language as a “window on emotion”. This temptation probably underpins a significant proportion of the research on emotional language, as will be discussed in several places throughout this chapter.

Apart from its evident relevance to anthropology and anthropological linguistics, emotional language also occupies a special space in the study of language, due to the range of semiotic statuses it recruits from. Many linguists have posited a key conceptual difference between *expressive* linguistic resources and *descriptive* linguistic resources (Irvine 1982, Besnier 1990: 419, Bednarek 2008, Foolen 2012: 350, Majid 2012a: 432, Ponsonnet 2014b: 21–22, Alba-Juez and Mackenzie 2019). Expressive emotional resources, for instance an interjection like *wow*, are those that linguists tend to interpret as causal effects of a state experienced by the speaker at the time of utterance: someone is supposed to say “*wow!*” because they feel impressed. Semiotically, such expressive resources are defined as those that convey meaning by *indexing* speakers’ state, in Peirce’s (1955) sense of the term “index”. Descriptive emotional resources, on the other hand – for instance “she is impressed” – are not semiotically bound to the speaker’s emotional state in this way. They can therefore refer to states experienced at any point in time, by the speaker or by others – just like most other utterances in any semantic domain. Of course, the simplistic dichotomy between expressive and descriptive resources does not do justice to the complex communicative nature of emotional language (Ponsonnet et al. submitted). Precisely for this reason, the co-presence and intimate interplay between expressive and descriptive linguistic resources in the semantic domain of emotions allows us to study expressive semiosis and how it combines with other types of semiosis to produce meaning in human life (Goffman 1978, Levy 1984: 230–231). In this respect, emotional language represents a privileged field of study for linguists seeking to examine the semiotic organization of human language.

## 1.2 State of the art

While the above paragraphs make it obvious why the study of emotional language is relevant to a number of disciplines interested in human life and communication, they also give a good indication that this is not an easy task. If emotions are ubiquitous and diffuse, they can only be hard to pin down and analyse. In spite of early interests of philosophers in the topic (Descartes 1649, Spinoza 1677, Hume 1740, James 1884), modern scientists have kept away from emotion for a long time, perhaps because it seemed to fall outside of the realm of systematization (Lüdtke 2015a). In the last half century, however, many life and human sciences – including biology, psychology, social sciences, and the humanities, among others – have taken an “affective turn”, developing interests in emotion as an identified topic (see for instance Lemmings and Brooks 2014). Since then, a relative profusion of studies, stemming from a broad array of disciplines and frameworks, has taught us a lot about the nature and role of emotions in human life.

Following this trend, studies with a specific focus on the language of emotion started to appear in the late 1980s and 1990s, with a range of theoretical orientations, including, in particular, anthropological linguistics, lexico-semantic studies, cognitive linguistics, soon followed by others. As this chapter will attest, a lot more knowledge on how humans talk about emotions is available now than was the case even just 30 years ago. Much of this knowledge relies upon solid first-hand data and innovative methodologies, providing reliable, in-depth analyses of a broad range of linguistic phenomena. At the same time, notwithstanding some fields and authors who have achieved significant coherence and decisive results, the scientific production on emotional language remains somewhat disparate for the moment. This is perhaps unsurprising, with such a sizeable aspect of reality to cover – entire linguistic systems, and virtually all linguistic interactions. Perhaps the most revealing symptom of researchers’ collective difficulty to create unity on this topic is the number of edited volumes (or handbooks) around the broad theme of “language and emotion”. Between 1990 and today, at least a dozen such collective volumes have appeared, all presenting substantial numbers of very valuable, yet extremely diverse studies (often case studies).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To cite just the ones I am familiar with: Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990), with an anthropological linguistic orientation (see Section 2); Niemeier and Dirven (1997), including a range of linguistic approaches; Athanasiadou and Tabatowska (1998), with a cognitive linguistic orientation; Harkins and Wierzbicka (2001), adopting Natural Semantic Metalanguage methodology; Blumenthal, Novakova, and Siepmann (2014), with an emphasis on quantitative methods; Lüdtke (2015b), with a cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics orientation; Tersis and Boyeldieu (2017), including

They provide many useful insights, but we have yet to bring these insights together, in one way or probably several ways, before we can articulate overarching insights about emotional language. This observation is not intended as a criticism of these volumes and their contributors,<sup>2</sup> but as a diagnostic note suggesting that the science of emotional language now needs to work towards producing more syntheses.

The present chapter certainly does not aim to bring about definite coherence in emotional-language studies. This will more likely be a gradual process involving a number of parallel reflections from a range of subfields where studies of emotional language have emerged. With this long-term goal in mind, this chapter offers a brief history of the developments and avatars of scientific interest in emotional language, focusing (for the sake of feasibility, and given the theme of this handbook) on the segments that speak to anthropological linguistics. I will highlight the most cohesive research trends while at the same time identifying some areas that remain loose, in the hope that this might support those who are currently pursuing structured research programs around emotional language. I have tried to be as inclusive as possible; however, given the richness of the field, it is nearly impossible to be entirely exhaustive.

The narrative will start, in Section 2, with the early anthropological interest in emotions, emerging in the 1960s, and how emotional language was operationalized in these studies. Section 3 explains how, in the 1980s, this anthropological interest in emotions shaped up into an attention to emotional language itself. Instead of treating language as a means to find out about emotional states, anthropological linguists began to approach emotional language, and more specifically the emotional *use* of language, as a scientific object in itself. Section 4 shows how studies of emotional language from other linguistic subfields complement the anthropological linguistic approach, investigating comparable questions with a different set of methods and assumptions.

## **2. The role of language in anthropological works on emotion**

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miscellaneous descriptive approaches; Mackenzie and Alba-Juez (2019), with a Systemic Functional Linguistic angle; Pritzker, Fenigsen, and Wilce (2020), with an anthropological linguistic orientation; and Schiewer, Altarriba, and Chin (to appear).

<sup>2</sup> Of which I am one myself.

Apart from some early insights from the work of major anthropologists (e.g., Mead 1928), the anthropological study of emotions for their own sake began in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1970s saw the publication of the first anthropological monographs paying substantial attention to emotions, such as Briggs (1970) on the Utkuikhalingmiut in Canada, and Levy (1973) on Tahiti. This was followed in the 1980s by works that set the foundations of anthropological approaches – and even more specifically, anthropological linguistic approaches – to emotions. Rosaldo’s (1980) account of how the Ilongots’ emotional inclinations explain their eagerness to “take heads” (i.e., kill people), and Lutz’s (1988) discussion of the Ifaluks’ “emotional landscape”, have been the most influential, among a larger number of publications that developed similar perspectives around the same time (e.g., Myers 1979, Heelas and Locke 1981, Schweder and LeVine 1984, and Lutz and White 1986 for a review).

All these works offer thorough ethnographic accounts of behaviors, concepts, beliefs, and moral etiquettes related to emotions among the groups under consideration. As I will show below, language played an important role in these works. However, emotions in their social dimension usually remained their first and foremost object of investigation and theoretical reflection. Beyond specific descriptions of emotions, the main theoretical contribution of the works cited above – as expressed very explicitly by Rosaldo (1980) and Lutz (1988) for instance – has been to present emotions as culturally constructed social phenomena (Harré 1986). This emerged as an answer to psychologists who, in the same decades when these “anthropologies of emotions” flourished, were developing notions of emotions as universal adaptive functions (culminating with Ekman’s 1992 theory of “primary” or “basic” emotions). Such views confine emotions to the domain of “nature”. In response, anthropological accounts demonstrated how emotions depend upon the social contexts in which humans live, which in turn drew emotions back into the “cultural” domain.

## **2.1 Words and cultural representations**

The vast majority of the anthropological accounts of emotions published throughout the 1970s and 1980s recruit language as an essential tool in ethnographic description. These descriptions typically take as their starting point one or two local words that do not find

straightforward translations in English. The author then proceeds to explain this/these word/s based on a rich combination of observations, citations, or direct metalinguistic discussions with informants. This results in remarkably refined cultural translations that not only render the meaning of the pivot word(s), but present and analyze a wealth of ethnographic material. In this process, it is assumed that “untranslatable” words point to culturally salient concepts, which in turn guide and organize anthropological accounts. Famous words/concepts are, for instance, the Ifaluk words *song* and *fago*, which Lutz (1988) glosses as ‘justifiable anger’ and (approximatively) ‘compassion, love and sadness’ respectively; or the Ilongot *liget*, combining ‘anger, energy, passion’ (Rosaldo 1980: 247), which according to Rosaldo underpins the desire to “take heads”.

While this approach results in maximally insightful translations, it also relies upon somewhat naïve conceptions of language. Firstly, throughout these texts, words are generally equated with concepts (e.g., Lutz 1988: 210), without much consideration for the distance between the two notions. The existence of a given word in a language is implicitly treated as unquestionable evidence that the concept it encodes is culturally prevalent. Of course, words do often encode culturally salient concepts. Levy (1984), drawing on Levy’s (1973: 305) observations among the Tahitians and the absence of clear words for sadness in the Tahitian language, famously coined the term *hypercognition*. It encapsulates the idea that the presence of words to talk about certain emotions in a language correlates with a higher degree of cultural attention for this emotion. Emotions for which there are few words, on the other hand, are *hypocognized*.<sup>3</sup> Although this is not demonstrated, it may be reasonable to assume that a proliferation of words comes hand-in-hand with cultural salience. However, the existence of *some* word(s) for an emotion does not necessarily warrant the same conclusion (Malt, Gennari, and Imai 2010, Malt et al. 2011). In addition, not all important concepts are encoded by salient lexemes. This is illustrated, for instance, by the concepts of compassion and love in the Dalabon language (Australia). While Dalabon speakers do operate with these concepts to understand and explain their and others’ emotional experience in conversations, words encapsulating just these concepts are scarce or dispersed in the Dalabon language (Ponsonnet 2014c: 196–199, 209–217). The general lack of attention to such nuances in the

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<sup>3</sup> Levy does not specify whether hypercognition *results* from the availability of words, or whether a large number of words simply *reflects* hypercognition (without causing it).



“anthropology of emotions” produced in the 1970s and 1980s results in a somewhat incautious use of vocabulary as a “window onto culture”.

This overly confident reliance upon words as signposts for salient shared representations is often rendered more problematic by the tendency to focus on a relatively small number of lexemes (as recognized by Lutz and White 1986: 423), and particularly on nouns – as opposed to verbs, adjectives, etc.<sup>4</sup> Nouns tend to be salient in speakers’ metalinguistic representations,<sup>5</sup> and therefore lend themselves naturally to anthropological explorations. However, in many languages of the world, nouns only represent a small fraction of the emotional lexicon (Ponsonnet 2016, Yacopetti and Ponsonnet forthcoming), and there is no evidence that they necessarily encode the concepts of emotion that play the strongest role in the local emotional etiquette. While vocabulary is never an ideal “window onto emotions” in any case, the focus on nouns imposes an additional limitation to a small set of presumed “key words”.

## 2.2 The use of language

As noted by Rosenberg (1990), this reliance on language as a window on concepts of emotion is strangely at odds with the authors’ own theoretical considerations on language and how anthropologists should approach it. Both Rosaldo (1980) and Lutz (1988) explicitly condemn “referential conceptions of language” (Wittgenstein 1953), i.e., the naïve assumption that humans use language primarily to point at things in the world. Instead, Rosaldo and Lutz call for more attention to language use, i.e., to what people *do* with language, and in particular how they *use* language to enact, express, shape, and in a sense “produce” emotions in a social context. Indeed, Rosaldo’s and Lutz’s (and other authors’) discussions of the meaning of presumed “key words” do include some quotes from speakers and provide rich context. Yet the purpose remains to describe the concepts these words are assumed to represent – or “point at”. Rosaldo’s premature passing sadly prevented her from pursuing further research on

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<sup>4</sup> With some exceptions; **see**, for instance, Briggs (1970).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps due to their referential status, and as evidenced by speakers’ tendency to borrow nouns from other languages; **see**, for instance, Matras (2009: 166–168).

emotions in language use herself.<sup>6</sup> As discussed in Section 3, Lutz, on the other hand, went on to develop, produce, and channel significant works in this direction, essentially initiating what may be regarded today as the “linguistic anthropology of emotions” proper.

### **3. Emotions in anthropological linguistics**

#### **3.1 Emotions in discourse**

As a direct response to Rosaldo’s (1980) and Lutz’s (1988) encouragements to examine language in use, in the late 1980s and 1990s anthropologists started to effectively study the way emotions are “created in, rather than shaped by, speech” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 12). This goal aligns straightforwardly with the core tenets of anthropological linguistics, which essentially aims to study how human languages contribute to define, structure, and produce social identities, groups, and interactions. In 1990, Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod co-edited a collective volume entitled *Language and the politics of emotions*. Their introduction to this volume (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990) articulate these goals very explicitly, and can easily be read as a “manifesto” for the study of emotional language in anthropological linguistics. The contributions in the volume offer foundational studies in this spirit.

In opposition to the “universalist” view of emotions, Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) reaffirm their view that emotions are a cultural phenomenon, and that “emotions and discourse are not separate variables, one belonging to the private world, the other to the public social world”. As mentioned above, in their view discourse defines and produces emotion as much as it expresses it, which again supports the study of language *in use*, i.e., as a mode of social interaction rather than as a strictly referential tool (Wittgenstein 1953). This clear move away from the instrumentalization of language as a “window on emotions” represents a realignment of theory with practices, compared to the hiatus observed in Section 2.

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<sup>6</sup> Michelle Rosaldo died in an accident in the field in 1981. She did contribute indirectly to later anthropological linguistics study of emotions via her husband Renato Rosaldo’s writings on the experience of loss and bereavement (Rosaldo 1996).

Abo-Lughod and Lutz (1990) explicitly narrow down their definition of “discourse” to the most formal, elaborate, or artistic contexts, to the exclusion of everyday conversations. While this may seem restrictive to anthropological linguists broadly interested in language as a social tool, this focus renders the task more approachable, given the ubiquity of affect in language (see Section 3.2 on Besnier 1990). In line with this focus, the chapters in the edited volume *Language and the politics of emotions* analyze moral discourse (White 1990), Bedouin love poetry (Abu-Lughod 1990), griot talk in Wolof (Irvine 1990), and Tamil songs (Trawick 1990), among other topics. The interest of anthropological linguists in emotion and affects in well-identified, formal genres and performances has remained prevalent through time (see Section 3.3, on Wilce 2009). On the other hand, attention to emotion in day-to-day speech has so far been more prevalent only in (relatively recent) linguistic research (see Section 4 below).

### 3.2 Research agenda

In the same year when Lutz and Abu-Lughod’s edited volume appeared, Besnier (1990) published another foundational article entitled *Language and affect*, based on comparable premises. Besnier’s piece offers a substantial review of existing publications on the topic, mostly from the preceding two decades. At the same time, it effectively articulates a working program for the on-going linguistic anthropology of emotions, identifying a number of research questions and avenues for future research.

Besnier partitions the task of studying what he calls “affect”<sup>7</sup> in language into two different organizing principles. The first principle, corresponding to the first part of Besnier’s text (1990: 421–428), takes linguistic forms as its starting point. The author examines the range of possible loci of affect in language, i.e., types of linguistic resources that are more likely to encode emotions, and that have been/should be investigated as part of the study of the relationship between language and emotions. The list is long given that “affect permeates all levels of linguistic and communicative structures” (ibid.: 437), including resources as diverse as metaphors, address terms, syntactic constructions, intonation, and laughter. So far,

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<sup>7</sup> Besnier (1990: 421) does not differentiate between “affects”, “feelings”, or “emotions”, and also includes “moods” and “attitudes” under the same grouping.

this language-oriented research program has mostly been fulfilled by linguists, and will be further discussed in Section 4, below.

In the rest of the article, Besnier reviews where the question of the emotional dimension of language has so far surfaced in anthropological linguistics publications. This defines a research agenda aiming to explore the interactions between “language and affect” to the extent that they overlap with the then established research questions of anthropological linguistics itself. Amongst areas of interest, Besnier mentions the semiotic status of emotional language and its relationship with indexicality (Besnier 1990: 428), i.e., the semiotic nature of emotional language discussed in the above introduction (Section 1.1); registers and genres, particularly in social contexts where emotional language plays a key role (e.g., psychological therapy or ritual, *ibid.*: 431–434); the role of emotional language in acquisition and socialization (*ibid.*: 420); and the interplay between language, emotion, and gender (*ibid.*: 434–436), as well as between language, emotion, and class (*ibid.*: 436–438). All these themes align neatly with the pivotal questions and methods of anthropological linguistics, around indexicality, identity, power, and social structures.

The majority of the literature cited by Besnier remains relevant today. Many major works that touch upon emotional language in the context of language acquisition and socialization (Ochs 1986, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989, Schieffelin 1990), language and gender (Lutz 1986, Smith 1985), or registers and style, for instance, all containing fundamental insights on emotional language, were published earlier than 1990. Naturally, a large amount of additional work on comparable topics has appeared since, and fortunately several published syntheses are available that help keep track of these rich investigations of emotional language. The most exhaustive are probably Wilce’s (2009) monograph on *Language and emotion*, along with the more recent handbook edited by Pritzker, Fenigsen, and Wilce (2020). Like Besnier’s (1990) review, Wilce’s (2009) comprehensive account structures the field of research on language and emotion around the broader questions tackled in anthropological linguistics, including, in particular, identity and identification, and language and power, as well as giving thorough attention to language in performance and in ritualized contexts. Wilce also considers how language informs the historicization and medicalization of emotions, as well as the question of emotions triggered by language. Pritzker, Fenigsen, and Wilce’s (2020) collection also includes further discussions on

language acquisition, performance genres, and embodiment, with themed chapters for each of those. Wilce (2009) and Pritzker, Fenigsen, and Wilce (2020) offer comprehensive reviews of the vast literature on the topic, and I refer the reader to these volumes for references as well as syntheses on the above questions.

### **3.3 Embracing emotions?**

The syntheses cited above demonstrate the richness of the anthropological linguistics literature on how emotions surface in discourse. Yet they also reveal that emotions are in fact relatively rarely treated as primary objects of study by anthropological linguists. Some publications do demonstrate an interest in emotional experience as such. However, with a few exceptions, the content on emotions in discourse is typically embedded within publications that address a broader topic of anthropological linguistics – for instance registers, rituals, language and gender, language and power, etc. This mirrors the organization of the syntheses cited above around these key disciplinary questions. In other words, emotional language tends to be approached as a piece of a larger jigsaw puzzle of anthropological linguistics.

A consequence of this less direct approach to emotions is that, to my knowledge, no synthesis exists that organizes the abundant literature on emotional discourse “by emotion”. In other words, a reader interested in how humans around the world use language with respect to, say, the experience of grief, would have to harvest a large number of relevant works from a massive amount of text. The task would be arduous, since many of the publications in which the relevant information is included may be flagged (e.g., by their titles and abstracts) as literature on poetry or songs, for instance. Of course, an approach “by emotion” runs against the core theoretical views of anthropologists and anthropological linguists about emotions. We saw in the previous sections that researchers in these disciplines fundamentally regard emotional experience as a product of the cultural context in which it takes place, which rules out the existence of a universal set of biologically defined basic emotions (Ekman 1992). In this perspective, focusing on a specific emotion as a theme of enquiry or synthesis is not only artificial, but also stands at odds with the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline. Further, and presumably in reaction to more biological conceptions of emotions, some anthropological linguists have denied their “internal” (private)

dimension altogether, instead approaching them as exclusively social, interactional phenomena. Wilce (2009: 8), for instance, following Haviland (2003: 481) and Kockelman (2003), prefers to define emotions as “[...] shared **intersubjective**<sup>8</sup> states, performed in complex multimodal contexts [...]”. This contributes to the justification that emotions should be studied through the lenses of research questions on social interactions.

Over the years and decades, some anthropological linguists have nevertheless adopted one or two emotions as their explicit object of study. Amongst the emotions that have received the most dedicated attention are anger, which also attracts a lot of attention in cross-cultural studies in other subfields of linguistics (see Section 4); shame, which is an eminently social emotion with implications around empowerment; and grief, often embedded in specific ritualized contexts and genres. Emotions with lesser social or linguistic inscriptions, such as fear, for instance, have naturally attracted less attention in the anthropological linguistics literature. Lutz and White (1986: 427) offer a review structured around “problems with which the person is impelled to deal”. This allows for cross-cultural comparison between similar emotional experiences without having to postulate any universal concept of emotion. For instance, contexts involving interpersonal conflict capture situations where anger-like emotions can be experienced and expressed; the loss of significant others triggers grief-like emotions, etc. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, Lutz and White’s (1986) early synthesis has not been updated in recent years (and no comparable synthesis exists for other linguistic studies either; see Section 4 below). Organizing the vast literature produced by anthropological linguists on emotional discourse around emotional concepts/contexts would be a very worthwhile task to undertake. It would render a considerable amount of literature more readily accessible to a broader range of scientists, including historians, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, and many more.

#### **4. Emotions in other fields of linguistics**

While anthropological linguists are interested in language *use*, and how it contributes to shaping human identities and social structures, most linguists prefer to study linguistic *codes*. That is, linguistic structures are the primary object of investigation in general linguistics.

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<sup>8</sup> Emphasis from the original text.

Understanding linguistic structures may include exploring how these structures are used, but the focus tends to remain on the shape of the tool, rather than on what speakers achieve with it. In line with this interest in structure, the methods of linguistics generally start from observable forms, i.e., words and constructions. Semantics (the study of meaning) is often implicitly treated as an addendum to the study of forms, and linguists sometimes express defiance about its vagaries. Emotional meanings, with their not-directly-observable denotata, have long been considered to lie entirely outside the realm of the empirically approachable dimensions of language. As a consequence, the “emotional turn” took place even later in linguistics than in anthropology. Linguists effectively began to pay some attention to emotions in the early 1990s, i.e., shortly after the emergence of a sustained interest in emotional language among anthropological linguists.

In line with these different goals, general linguists’ theoretical stances regarding the nature of emotions, and the relationships of emotions with language, differ significantly from those observed in anthropological linguistics. Perhaps due to the focus on languages as codes rather than on social structures, linguists other than anthropological linguists are not particularly preoccupied with the question of the social or psychological nature of emotions. Many of them embrace (more or less explicitly) constructivist views of emotions as internal states (e.g., Scherer, Shorr, and Johnstone 2001, Feldman Barrett 2009, Boiger and Mesquita 2012, Lindquist and Gendron 2013). Linguists from several different subfields do treat emotional language as a “window onto cultural conceptions of emotions”, as did early emotion anthropologists. Some linguistic subfields make this an explicit method and articulate theories to support this approach. Many linguists regard their scientific contributions to the understanding of emotional language as potentially useful to the investigation of emotional experience itself (Wierzbicka and Harkins 2001: 1, Majid 2012b).

Given their interest in languages as codes, linguists have generally put more effort into describing the types of linguistic resources available across languages to talk about emotions – i.e., what sort of “tools” (words, inflections, grammatical constructions, etc.) different languages offer to their speakers in this semantic domain. This complements the research program set by anthropological linguists in several ways. Firstly, examining emotional linguistic resources is a necessary preamble to the study of their use. Indeed, linguists (e.g., Foolen 2012) follow some of Besnier’s (1990) recommendations, effectively mapping the

shape and diversity of Besnier’s “loci of affect in language” (see Section 3.2 above). This will be discussed in Sections 4.1 to 4.3 below. In addition, as mentioned above, many linguists also study how linguistic codes function in use, i.e., they investigate how emotional meanings unfold in speech, narratives, conversations, etc. In this vein, linguists from a range of methodological traditions attend to the same data as anthropological linguists – albeit with different questions in mind. These trends are presented in Section 4.4 below.

Another feature shared across linguists’ approaches to emotional language, whether from anthropological linguists or from other subfields, is their diversity (in terms of data, methods, and research questions) – and, consequently, a relative lack of synthesis, already alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. Notwithstanding this dispersion, the following section highlights some of the areas where sustained research in one direction has brought decisive results on one question or another, and attempts to present the rest in a way that suggests pathways for further synthesis. Given the ubiquitous nature of emotional language, the field is so diverse that I have had to leave some trends aside. I have chosen to omit those with less potential for dialogue with anthropological linguistics, such as Potts’ (2007) semantic formalization of expressive features, or the psycholinguistic research on bilingualism (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2004, Pavlenko 2005, 2006, 2014).

## **4.1 The lexicon**

### *4.1.1 Natural Semantic Metalanguage*

Anna Wierzbicka is probably the linguist whose name is most closely associated with the study of emotions. She had already worked on emotion for a number of years (Wierzbicka 1992a) when her seminal monograph *Emotions Across Languages* was published in 1999. Wierzbicka’s (1999) work on emotion in language is grounded in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework, a method of semantic description based on “semantic primes”, i.e., words/meanings that are believed to occur in every language in the world (Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994). These primes allow linguists to articulate non-circular definitions intended to be accessible to speakers of any language. Although the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework can be applied in any semantic domain, it is particularly helpful with emotions, because it helps capture the subtle nuances of relatively abstract words. Natural Semantic



Metalanguage definitions conveniently highlight differences between semantic “neighbors” across languages, such as the German word *angst* and the English word *fear*, for instance (Wierzbicka 1999: 134, Wierzbicka and Harkins 2001: 15).

This framework could be seen as a useful complement to anthropological discussions of emotions based on thorough translations of emotion words (see Section 2 above). Wierzbicka (1999) shares her primary goal with early emotion anthropologists such as Rosaldo (1980) and Lutz (1988) (whose works she cites); they all aim to demonstrate the non-universality of emotional concepts. In a sense, Wierzbicka’s (1999) semantic discussions of German emotion words, for instance, richly contextualized against literary and historical references, are not too distant from Rosaldo’s and Lutz’s thorough “ethnographic translations” (see Section 2 above). In addition, Wierzbicka presents a systematic linguistic method (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) that provides some theoretical anchorage for such translations.

Like anthropologists of emotions, Wierzbicka uses emotion words as a window onto culture. She bases this approach upon the assumption that words, as the building blocks of communication, contribute to shaping social interactions (Wierzbicka 1999, Chapter 6). Beyond defining and translating emotion words, she discusses what she calls “cultural scripts”, i.e., patterns of interactions built around certain emotion words, and supposed to distinctively characterize different language communities. Wierzbicka’s notion of cultural scripts pertains to a less anthropologically informed conception of “culture”, and has been criticized for its essentialist overtones (Mondry and Taylor 1998).

Beyond her thorough analyses of emotion words in German, Russian, and Polish, Wierzbicka’s (1999) monograph tackles major questions such as the relationship between facial expressions and emotional language, and a systematic discussion of potential universals of emotional language (1999: 273–305). The legacy of Wierzbicka’s work on the study of emotional language can hardly be overestimated. It inspired several foundational collective volumes that in turn set the tone for future developments. Some of these volumes focused on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Athanasiadou and Tabakowska 1998,<sup>9</sup> Harkins and Wierzbicka 2001), and some are more broadly oriented towards cognitive linguistics (Dirven and Niemeier 1997). A significant portion of the descriptive research on the linguistic

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<sup>9</sup> Although published before Wierzbicka’s monograph, this collection was the outcome of a symposium in honor of Anna Wierzbicka.

encoding of emotions across languages stems from the tradition of Natural Semantic Metalanguage. These works often focus on nouns (Kornacki 2001, Zhengdao 2001), but other parts of speech are also covered (Wierzbicka 2001, Levisen 2016), including interjections (Wierzbicka 1992b, Goddard 2014). Recent publications have shown the potential of this research for application in “positive psychology” (Lomas 2016), in particular around the language of well-being and pain (Goddard and Ye 2016).

#### *4.1.2 Other lexical studies*

Linguistic diversity in emotion lexica (i.e., words used to describe emotions) has attracted a significant amount of attention beyond the work of Wierzbicka and other Natural Semantic Metalanguage semanticists. Some in-depth linguistic studies have attempted semantic and lexicographic generalizations (Novakova & Tutin 2009; Dziwirek & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2010). Cross-linguistic comparisons (Ponsonnet 2016, Ponsonnet 2018a) and even broader typological studies (Ogarkova 2013, Yacopetti and Ponsonnet forthcoming) are facilitated by the extensive lexical data provided not only by focused linguistic publications, but also by dictionaries, as well as by anthropological studies such as those discussed in the first section of this chapter. On this basis, we are beginning to reach an understanding of what meanings tend to be encoded by a dedicated word in most languages, what meanings are much rarer, and what scope of variation we can expect across the world’s languages (see Ogarkova 2013 for a comprehensive discussion). Apart from linguists, psychologists have also carried out broader-scope comparative studies on emotion words, where universal tendencies in lexical distinctions serve as clues to human cognition (Russell 1991, Hupka, Lenton, and Hutchison 1999, Jackson et al. 2019).

## **4.2 Figurative language**

Another subfield of linguistics that developed an interest in emotions around the same decades (1980s/1990s) is cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics, as theorized under the leadership of George Lakoff (1987), explicitly seeks to reveal the isomorphisms between the structure of languages and the mental structures of those who speak them. In other words,

cognitive linguists approach language as a window on shared cultural representations, and they actually explore possible justifications for the proposed isomorphisms.

Figurative language is one aspect of language with a strong potential to reflect speakers' conceptual representations. "Metaphors", as defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) or Kövecses (2002), for instance, typically use linguistic descriptions of concrete events (e.g., *he was about to explode*) to talk about more abstract events (e.g., *he was very angry*). According to the cognitive linguistics framework, such linguistic associations reveal speakers' conceptual associations between pairs of phenomena – i.e., in this case, they conceptually associate anger with a force leading to an explosion. The underlying assumption (which has naturally been challenged; see, for instance, Geeraerts and Grondelaers 1995, Goddard 1996, Enfield 2002), is that humans need to scaffold the conceptualization of more abstract aspects of the world based on what they know of more concrete aspects of the world. Figurative language is in turn assumed to reflect how this is achieved.

The semantic domain of emotions is very rich in metaphors. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that others' emotions are not directly observable, and are therefore more abstract; and one's own personal emotional experiences lend themselves very naturally to "embodiment", i.e., representations in terms of physical aspects of the person (Csordas 1990, Pritzker, Pederson, and DeCaro 2020). Reflecting the figurative wealth of the semantic domain, emotions are in focus in early discussions of figurative language by cognitive linguists (e.g., Lakoff 1987: 380–416 includes a case study on anger). Overall, emotion metaphors are probably the aspect of the linguistic encoding of emotions that has attracted the most systematic and conclusive studies. Kövecses (2000) offers a comprehensive analysis of the figurative language of emotions in English (see also Kövecses 1998), and Kövecses (2008) includes discussions of emotion metaphors across languages. Somewhat like Wierzbicka, Kövecses exploits linguistic metaphors to extract cultural models (Kövecses 1995) that summarize shared expectations about how emotions develop and are experienced. This is another instance of language being used as a window onto shared representations and habits around emotions (Kövecses 2002: 123–136).

Much research has derived from these foundational works on figurative language. Anger metaphors, in particular, have been studied cross-linguistically to the extent that one of the many metaphorical representations of anger, namely its association with heat, is now

regarded as quasi-universal (Kövecses 1995, Mikolajczuk 1998, Ogarkova and Soriano 2014, Ogarkova, Soriano, and Gladkova 2016). The figurative mapping of emotions onto parts of the body (i.e., the cross-linguistic distribution of expressions like *broken hearted* or *cold feet*, which are prevalent across languages (Wierzbicka 1999: 256), has attracted a significant amount of attention as well, again showing considerable cross-linguistic coherence amid some variation (Sharifian et al. 2008a, Maalej and Yu 2011, Ponsonnet and Laginha 2020). For those prepared to assume that figurative language does reflect conceptual structures, this suggests a background of shared conceptual patterns for emotions across languages and cultures, against which variation takes place. Some studies have interrogated the influence of grammar upon the figurative affordance of emotions, pointing to cases where the availability of a particular grammatical construction constrains the range of emotional metaphors available in this language (Ponsonnet, Hoffmann, and O’Keeffe 2021). This in turn raises interesting questions regarding how this relates to conceptualization.

#### 4.3 The typology of emotional linguistic resources

Lexica and figurative language, as discussed in the above paragraphs, represent the two loci of linguistic encoding of emotions for which we currently have the best cross-linguistic knowledge. For both, some of the cross-linguistic variation and regularities have been effectively mapped, taking into account a number of languages beyond the handful of large, dominant ones (English and other European languages, Chinese, etc.). However, lexica and figurative language correspond to just two of the “loci of affect” identified by Besnier (1990: 421–428), from a much longer list that also includes the following:<sup>10</sup>

- Ideophones, interjections<sup>11</sup>
- Person reference (e.g., pronouns, address terms)
- Sound symbolism (pertaining to phonetics and phonology)
- Evidentiality (e.g., the encoding of surprise as part of evidentiality systems, a.k.a. “mirativity”)

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<sup>10</sup> Besnier also lists aspects of language that do not pertain to the code, strictly speaking, such as “ways of speaking” (e.g., registers, code switching), performance styles, and genres, the organization of conversation, laughing, and weeping.

<sup>11</sup> I.e., specific parts of the lexicon.

- Evaluative morphology (particularly diminutives, i.e., things like the -y of *kitty* in English)
- Syntax (e.g., valency, clefting)
- Intonation

Some of the above linguistic resources have been studied cross-linguistically to the extent that it has been possible to draw some conclusions on their overall typology. Descriptions of evaluative morphology (in particular diminutives) are available for a range of languages, and Ponsonnet (2018b) offers an early typology of their emotional values. More generally, Ponsonnet and Vuillermet (2018) examine the morphological expression of emotions, i.e., how they can be expressed by small linguistic elements merged into words, like prefixes or suffixes, for instance. Emotion interjections have also been described in a number of languages (e.g., Ameka 1992, Evans 1992, Eastman 1992, Wierzbicka 1992b, Wilkins 1992 and other authors in the same special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Enfield and Wierzbicka 1992), Drescher 1997, Kockelman 2003, Goddard 2014, Ponsonnet 2014b: 109–126), including a typology for the Australian continent (Ponsonnet in press). Majid (2012a) offers a review of the existing literature on emotional language locus by locus, with an organization comparable to Besnier’s. Ponsonnet (to appear) also summarizes the findings for some of the resources.

Resources regarded as expressive (as defined in Section 1.1 ) have overall attracted little coverage. Our typological knowledge of emotional interjections is still in its infancy, and the literature on emotional intonation remains extremely scarce (Bolinger 1986, Omondi 1997, Ponsonnet 2014b: 127–142, Ponsonnet 2018c). This is all the more notable in the light of the omnipresence of these resources in speech, and of the opportunity they represent to understand the semiotic complexity of human languages (see Section 1.1). Generally speaking, again, our current grasp of the cross-linguistic diversity of the linguistic encoding of emotions across languages remains somewhat fragmented. The number of publications is not insignificant, but studies have often focused on one particular aspect in one particular language, with few efforts towards comprehensive coverage or pathways towards generalization. Even for major languages such as English or French, the literature tends to offer glimpses into a range of aspects of emotional language, but rarely links them

systematically. Our knowledge of minority languages is even more dispersed (with some exceptions, e.g., Ponsonnet (2014b) on Dalabon, Australia).

So far, most linguists have approached the typology of emotional language from a semasiological point of view: they organize their investigations based on linguistic forms, starting from types of emotional linguistic resources, as I did here. However, as suggested for anthropological studies, onomasiological approaches, starting from emotion categories, could constitute welcome additions. Celle and Lansari's (2017) work on the language of surprise illustrates a fruitful onomasiological alternative. While the difficulty of bringing order into the complexity of language remains, even within just one emotional category, this organization may offer a more convenient entry point for non-linguists wishing to understand emotional languages (e.g., psychologists or anthropologists). Compiling the results from existing linguistic publications on a range of major categories of emotion into structured syntheses may be a worthwhile endeavor in the future. This would be especially fruitful for an emotion like anger, for instance, which has already attracted a great deal of research attention over the last few decades.

#### **4.4 Emotions in speech**

Even with the aspects of the linguistic code for which we have decent cross-linguistic knowledge, merely understanding how the code is structured is far from sufficient to understand how language conveys emotions. Knowledge of the code can serve as a useful grid to develop further research, but it usually only records the most basic properties of the linguistic resources in question. With emotion words, for instance, the descriptive and typological literature tells us about their denotative properties, but rarely ventures into analyzing their connotations. Yet emotions are most commonly expressed not through the operation of denotative functions, but via speakers' choices to *use* linguistic resources in certain ways for stylistic effects. For instance, the expressive value of an utterance will depend on whether the speaker chooses to use *whinge* or *complain*, *broken-hearted* or *sad*, etc. Therefore, lexical distinctions in the emotional lexicon are less relevant for the expression of emotions than contrasts in register. Likewise, with metaphors, the question is not so much what they reveal about conceptual associations, but their evocative power

(Foolen 2012). The linguists who tackle these dimensions share with anthropological linguists an interest in language *in use*, i.e., in “discourse”. In this respect, general linguists are more interested in everyday language, i.e., ordinary speech, than in the higher genres and performances brought more to the fore by anthropological linguists.

To disentangle the complex questions alluded to above, some linguists quantitatively examine linguistic resources across large corpora (Bednarek 2008). Blumenthal, Novakova, and Siepmann’s (2014) edited collection gives a good idea of the range of methods that can be recruited and the range of questions that can be answered (see also Novakova and Tutin 2009, Dziwirek and Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2010). The studies in this volume analyze a range of linguistic phenomena from the fine semantic nuances between near-synonym sets of emotion words or verbal constructions, to the connotations arising from the interplay between emotion words and the discourse context in which they occur. Based on larger amounts of contextualized data, these methods provide more detailed analyses of how linguistic tools are mobilized to produce emotional meanings. Once again, however, studies in this style remain somewhat disparate for the moment, and more unitary approaches would be most welcome – either focusing on types of expressive resources, or one type of method, or perhaps around one category of emotion. Most of these methods can only be applied to dominant languages for which we already have large, automated corpora, as well as fine-grained grammatical descriptions, but this should not prevent researchers from pursuing them wherever possible.

There also exist linguistic frameworks that directly tackle discourse organization. Conversation analysts, who investigate the structure of human conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974; Sidnell and Stivers 2012), have applied their concepts and methods to the investigation of “troubles talk”, for instance (Jefferson 2015). Peräkylä and Sorjonen (2012) offer a valuable collection of studies about emotion in spontaneous interactions. In a slightly different tradition, recent developments in cognitive linguistics have explored the notion of e-implicature, i.e., the principles according to which emotional states are implicitly inferred in linguistic communication (Schwarz-Friesel 2015).

The most significant contribution to the study of the emotional impact of discourse structure comes from Systemic Functional Linguistics theory, a branch of linguistics concerned with discourse organization and functions. Within this tradition, the framework called Appraisal (Martin and White 2005) caters for the analysis of emotional discourse to

some extent. Appraisal offers a set of tools that can be applied systematically across languages and genres to extract “evaluative” effects. As pointed out by Alba-Juez and Mackenzie (2019), Appraisal was designed to cover evaluation more broadly, of which emotions are only a subsystem. Accordingly, with some exceptions (e.g., Mackenzie and Laura 2019), most publications based on Appraisal theory examine rhetoric and/or ideology in public-oriented contexts such as political discourse or the media, rather than the linguistic description or expression of intimate emotional experience. However, the Appraisal framework stands out as an all-encompassing analytical tool specifically tailored to a semantic domain endowed with subjectivity, and as such is a very welcome effort towards synthesis.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

This chapter has summarized the development of the interest in, and scientific investigation of, emotional language from an anthropological and linguistic point of view. In the 1970s, attention to emotion words initially emerged in the margins of cultural anthropologists’ interest in emotions as social phenomena, which prompted them to use phrases such as a “window on shared representations”. By the late 1980s, the same anthropologists had revised their angle and placed language use at the center of their research. This defined the mode of investigation of emotional language in anthropological linguistics, where language is no longer treated as a window onto another reality, but as the very reality to be investigated. As a consequence, emotional experience itself tends to recede behind the scene. Meanwhile, linguists other than anthropological linguists also started actively studying emotional language from the 1990s, developing a myriad of approaches and methods. Some of them also propose to use language as a window on shared representations; most of them seek to deepen our understanding of how human linguistic codes convey emotional concepts and experience. Naturally, the angles described above are all part of one and the same jigsaw puzzle. Language use can only be understood based on thorough analyses of linguistic codes; and only a thorough assessment of the relationship between emotional concepts, emotional experience, and emotional language can tell us where and when emotional language may offer a window on the representations of emotion or even emotional experience.



Half a century after the publication of the first anthropological accounts attuned to emotions and emotion words, emotional language is a well-established object of study in both anthropological linguistics and linguistics in general. The field has produced a wealth of data and analyses offering insights into a broad range of linguistic phenomena involving emotional language. With this strong basis, the next decades may now welcome additional efforts towards synthesis, and this could take a range of different forms. So far, the numerous trends of research on emotional language identified in this chapter have often (although not always) progressed side-by-side rather than jointly. Improving the synergies between (sub-)disciplinary traditions may help in bringing the pieces of the puzzle together. Although some authors (especially anthropological linguists) have published summaries that compile the existing literature into ordered, digestible accounts, there is room for further publications organizing the material under more accessible keywords – for instance by emotional categories. This may in turn help communication across (sub-)disciplines. In terms of producing new research, in-depth investigation of a smaller number of topics may now be preferable to more cursory insights. This will require a focus on emotional language as a research topic in and of itself, rather than treating it as an aside, addendum, or instrument while carrying out research on other matters. This shift requires us to develop and fund dedicated research programs on emotional language, which in turn implies addressing clear research questions.

Which research questions about emotional language should be prioritized certainly remains a matter for individual researchers/teams to decide. Many of the research programs already explored by existing publications would be worth extending and systematizing. For instance, Celle and Lansari's (2017) onomasiological study of surprise could be applied to other categories of emotion; lexical typologies like Ogarkova (2013) could be expanded, etc. In addition, there is a need to clarify fundamental questions that underlie the study of emotional language. For instance, it would be worth investigating the relationship of emotional language to emotional experience, asking, in particular, to what extent the use of expressive linguistic resources is a response to emotional arousal, and whether this use can in turn modify emotional experience (Ponsonnet in press). This would help clarify the extent to which language is actually a window on emotional experience, and the particular semiotic status of expressive emotional language.

In conclusion, with many material and methodological insights accumulated over several decades, yet many important questions left to be answered or even raised, emotional language is a highly fertile field of study for linguists in general and anthropological linguists in particular. Given the central role of emotion and emotion talk in human life, we can only hope that the field will attract the attention it deserves.

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