

A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF SYMPATHY, COMPASSION, EMPATHY AND PITY IN ENGLISH AND MOROCCAN ARABIC

Khalid Elasri

Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco

ABSTRACT

This corpus-based study attempts to investigate the conceptualization of sympathy, empathy, compassion and pity in English and Moroccan Arabic. Using examples from the British National Corpus (BNC), I compared these English concepts to their equivalents in Moroccan Arabic. The Semantic Analysis of these concepts in both varieties is carried out through the natural semantic metalanguage. This metalanguage is based on empirically established semantic primes such as feel, want, say, think, know, good, bad, that is shared by all human languages (Wierzbicka, 1999; Goddard, 2010). The use of such universal semantic concepts can make it possible to identify the precise semantic and conceptual differences between English and Moroccan Arabic words. Results of the contrastive analysis reveal that there are significant differences in the conceptualization of sympathy-related concepts in English and Moroccan Arabic. These differences are associated with the prevalence of different models of social interaction in Anglo and Moroccan cultures, as well as different cultural attitudes towards emotional expression. More specifically, the differences between English concepts and their Moroccan Arabic equivalents are mainly related to the degree of familiarity between the experiencer and the target person and the complexity and expression of the feelings. Thus, this corpus-based study can contribute to the description and analysis of linguistic and cultural variation in the conceptualization of emotions towards others plights in two varieties that belong to different cultural dimensions.

KEYWORDS: *Culture, Concepts, Emotions, Semantic Analysis*

Article History

Received: 19 Jun 2017 | Revised: 28 Jun 2018 | Accepted: 04 Jul 2018

INTRODUCTION

Human emotions have been studied from different perspectives in various fields including linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. In linguistics, research on emotion has been of an interdisciplinary nature as linguists bring psychological, anthropological and philosophical insights in order to bear on our understanding of the way emotions are expressed and experienced in different cultures and languages (Wierzbicka, 1999).

Cross-linguistic research on emotion investigates how human inner states are conceptualized in different cultures. It mainly investigates how terms of emotions are used to describe these inner states. Being informed from different disciplines, cross-linguistic research reveals that each language has a unique conceptual organization of emotions (Wierzbicka, 1999). As explained by Wierzbicka, “Every language...has lexically encoded some scenarios involving both thoughts and feelings and serving as a reference point for the identification of what speakers of this language see as distinct

kinds of feelings” (15). This difference in encoding emotions across languages is the result of distinct cultural norms that shape their expression in different societies. In particular, culture is claimed to influence different components of emotions, including causal antecedents, appraisals, regulations, and display rules (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Hence, in some languages, certain emotions may be more salient, differentiated, and codable than in others.

This paper investigates the conceptualization of emotion concepts related to feelings towards others’ plights in English and Moroccan Arabic. A semantic analysis of emotion terms related to this emotional state in both varieties would provide a better understating of such emotion concepts are conceptualized in each variety.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Linguistic Data as Evidence in Emotion Research

This paper investigates the conceptualization of *sympathy*, *empathy*, *compassion* and *pity* in English and Moroccan Arabic. To acquire a representative account of the use of emotion towards others’ plights, examples involving this kind of emotion concepts are taken from the British National Corpus (BNC), which contains 100 million words of texts from a wide range of contemporary language use: written texts (including literary, academic, journalistic, and educational works) and transcripts of spoken language (television and radio broadcasts, interviews, and conversations). The use of examples from this widely used corpus can provide various information about how language is used.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

The semantic analysis of English emotion term, as well as Moroccan Arabic emotion terms, is carried out through the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach. The NSM has been developed as a reaction against ethnocentrism in linguistic research, and specifically research on emotions across cultures. Some scholars in this area of research tend to take English as the metalanguage of human emotional experience, judging emotions of other cultures through their own language (Pavlenko, 2005). Hence, there was a need for a metalanguage to avoid taking English-specific lexical categories as default models for human beings, because this language “does not offer us a better window on human nature than other languages. It is only universal features of human languages that can offer us access to human nature, not their idiosyncratic aspects” (Wierzbicka, 1995: 8).

This metalanguage comprises of semantic primes such as *feel*, *want*, *say*, *think*, *know*, *good*, *bad*, that can be found in all human languages and indefinable themselves (Wierzbicka, 1996). The process of experimental conceptual analysis of semantic primes across languages has been going on for 40 years. And the findings have changed over 40 years (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014). Over this period of research, Wierzbicka and her colleagues have identified more than 60 semantic primes. The currently proposed primes are represented, using their English exponents, in the table below.

Table 1: Semantic Primes Grouped Into Related Categories (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014)

I, you, someone, something-thing, people, body, kind, part	Substantives
this, the same, other-else	Determiners
one, two, much-many, little-few, some, all	Quantifiers
good, bad, big, small	Evaluators and Descriptors
think, know, want, don’t want, feel, see, hear	Mental predicates
say, words, true	Speech
do, happen, move	Actions, movement
be (somewhere), there is, be (someone/something)	Location, existence, specification
(IS) mine	Possession
live, die	Life and death

when-time, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time, moment	Time
where-place, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside, touch	Space
not, maybe, can, because, if, very, more, as	Logical concepts

Wierzbicka (1996) argues that semantic primes can yield a universal “grammar of human thoughts”, composed of basic sentences that can be said in any language. By using such an independent metalanguage, the meaning of a concept can be explained from an outsider’s point of view rather than an insider’s. In the domain of emotions, the NSM has been used to describe cognitive scenarios which give rise to a certain way of feeling. Regardless of some limitations of this approach (see Parkinson, Fischer & Manstead, 2005), the NSM approach will be used in defining Moroccan Arabic and English emotion concepts.

SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

Sympathy and Related Concepts in English

Sympathy, empathy, compassion, and pity refer to emotions that people experience in response to other people’s sufferings. Nevertheless, each term has a different conceptualization. *Sympathy* is caused by the realization that something bad has happened to another person, and a wish for this person to be better off. The following examples display the contexts in which this concept can be used:

- I have great *sympathy* for the police. They are confronted by big problems.
- I’m dreadfully sad that my team-mate Riccardo Patrese won’t be with me next year... I have every *sympathy* for him.' It's so sad because he's so quick, so experienced.'
- Blanche had summoned up a tearful of *sympathy* for Christine Mills when she learnt of her father's death.
- Printers had canceled orders to print 18 periodicals deemed in the past to have shown some *sympathy* to the Kurdish cause.

The extracts above show that feeling sympathy can extend from the discomforts of everyday life (example 1) to serious misfortunes (example3). Moreover, the examples suggest that in English, the object of *sympathy* can be someone whom one knows and is in contact with (example 2); someone whom one does not know and is not in contact with (example 1), or a group of people whose cause is justified (example 4). The cognitive scenario of *sympathy* can be represented in NSM as follows:

Sympathy (X Felt Sympathy)

- X felt something because X thought something
- sometimes a person thinks about someone else:
- “something bad happened to this person
- this person feels feel something bad now
- I don’t want people to feel bad things like this”.

In *empathy* the response to other people’s plights is different; for one imagines himself/herself to be the person who is suffering, as in examples 5 and 6 below. According to Ioannidou & Konstantikaki (2008), empathy does not

necessarily imply that one understands another's feeling because he/she had the same experience; rather, empathy is a key element of emotional intelligence that endows a person with the power of understanding and imaginatively entering another person's feelings.

- Having been late to work many times himself, the boss had empathy for the employee who was late.
- His months spent researching prison life gave him greater *empathy* towards/for convicts.

Feeling *compassion*, on the other hand, makes the experiencer have a more active response towards people undergoing a bad time than feeling sympathy and empathy. In other words, compassion is associated with an active desire to alleviate the suffering of others going through tough time, as shown in the following examples:

- 'I'm all right, Dad. Don't worry.' She saw kindness in his face and *compassion*, and she ... went to him and the tears came... Her father rocked her in his arms...
- Walter Jones... used to come over in the evening from Bembridge School to sit with me after my son died ... I was aware of his *compassion* and deeply grateful for it.
- 'A kind couple, took *compassion* on me and provided my needs, refusing payment'.
- Louise Lombard shows such *compassion* by helping to serve food to London's down-and-outs.

In example 7, the girl sees compassion in her father as he comforts her; and in example 8, the experience feels the compassion of Walter Jones for whose actions (used to come over in the evening ... sit with me after my son died) is grateful. In example 9, the residents show compassion by providing needs to a person without payment. In example 10, Lombard shows her compassion towards the poor by serving food to them. Thus, these examples show that compassion involves a more 'active' response towards people going through tough time. The compassionate person may have a close relationship with such people, as in examples 7 and 8; or a distinct relationship with them, as in examples 9 and 10. The cognitive scenario associated with this concept is explicated by Wierzbicka (1999) as follows:

Compassion (X Felt Compassion)

- X felt something because X thought something
- Sometimes a person thinks about someone else:
- "Something bad happened to this person
- This person feels something bad now
- I want to do something good for this person if I can'' (p. 103).

Pity is closely related to *Compassion* and *sympathy*. Yet, 'pity' differs from these concepts in significant ways, as can be shown in these examples:

- I do not truly know what it is like to have a child with Down's Syndrome'...*pity*, that was the thing I was worried about: that people were going to *pity* me.
- When I left the private sector ... the car industry in this country was in ruins. ... an industry where we were once world leaders was an object of *pity* and derision.

- I think I still hate you.' He shrugged.' When Leila told me about you,...I *pitied* you,' she said bitterly.' Now, I suppose I should *pity* you more. This is crazy!

The extracts above show that, unlike sympathy and compassion, pity is something undesirable (example 11 'pity, that was the thing I was worried about'). Moreover, it is associated with negative emotions: (example 12: 'pity and derision'). Also, it is an emotion that tends to dehumanize and belittle others (example 13: 'I should *pity* you more'). Hence, pity is a negative feeling towards others whom the experiencer thinks are suffering, as he/she is not going through the same experience. The following cognitive scenario represents the meaning of 'pity' as follows:

Pity (X Felt Pity)

- X felt something because X thought something
- Sometimes a person thinks about someone else:
- "Something bad happened to this other person
- This is bad
- Something like this is not happening to me" (Wierzbicka, 1999, p. 101).

Thus, we have explored four English concepts related to thinking about other people's suffering, namely sympathy, compassion, empathy, and pity. Compassion and sympathy are triggered by thinking about people, seeing their distress and realizing that they are suffering. Compassion differs from sympathy by taking on an element of action. Empathy is about understanding the suffering of others by putting oneself in their position. Pity is the least desirable emotion as it is associated with inferiority. As Kunderal (1984) explains, "to take pity on a woman" means that we are better off than she, that we stoop to her level, lower ourselves" (p.20).

Sympathy and Related Concepts in Moroccan Arabic

In Moroccan Arabic, concepts that are related to thinking about other people's plights include *taṣa:tuf*, *muwa:sa:t*, *mhenna*, and *shafaqa*. *Muwa:sa:t* is used in contexts where people express their feelings over someone's serious misfortune or someone's death of a close relative. The action taken by the person in this situation involves sharing the feeling of pain with the person who is suffering this loss. The explication of this concept can be represented as follows:

***Muwa:sa:t* (X feltmuwa:sa:t)**

- Person X knows that something very bad happened to person Y
- X knows that Y feels something very bad because of this
- when X thinks about it, X thinks about Y like this:
- "This person feels very bad; I also feel bad
- Because of this, I want to do something good for this person
- I know this person feels good if I do something".

The concept of *taṣa:tuf* (literally: sharing one's emotions with another person or people) implies understanding

other's suffering and their need for assistance, as well as a desire to relieve their plight and do something good for them. It usually describes the feeling of a group of people. Such people do not have a close relationship with the experiencers, as shown in example 14, but they may have a close contact with them, as in example 15. The explication of *taša:tuḥ* is presented below:

- Bezzaf dial n-naskaytʃatfumʃalfilistiṭiniyyin
(lietarily: many of- the-people sympathize with Palestinians)
- N-naskaytʃatfumʃahadakhellaqhitʃanduiʃaqasamʃia
(lietrally: the-people sympathize with that barber because he has a disability hearing)

taša:tuḥ (X felt *taša:tuḥ*)

- X felt something because X thought something
- Sometimes a person thinks about someone else:
- “Something bad happened to this person/ these people
- This person feels/ these people feel something bad now
- I don't want this person/ these people to feel bad things like this.
- I want to do something good for this person/ these people if I can”

On the other hand, *mḥenna* is experienced towards people with whom one shares one's life on an everyday basis. In other words, this emotion is felt towards someone with whom one feels a bond, particularly a family member. It is also felt towards one's friends, colleagues, and neighbors. It is usually associated with discomforts of everyday life; for example, the person who is suffering has to work long hours, has a long-term disease, etc. At the same time, the experiencer feels what the suffering person feels and would like to do something for him/her. Hence, *mḥenna* involves a desire to relieve the plight of another person and to do something good for him or her and a generally positive attitude towards that person. The cognitive scenario of this concept can be represented in NSM as follows:

Mḥenna

- Person X knows that something bad is happening to person Y
- X knows that Y feels something bad because of this
- When X thinks about it, X feels something bad,
- At the same time X thinks about Y like this:
- “Something bad is happening to this person
- I feel bad because of this
- This person is a part of me
- I don't want this person to feel bad things

- I want good things to happen to this person”

Shafaqain Moroccan Arabic implies an awareness of other people’s suffering due to their bad fortune. It is usually felt towards people with whom the experiencer does not have a bond or close relationship. The explication of this concept is suggested as follows:

shafaqa(X felt shafaqa)

- X felt something because X thought something
- Sometimes a person thinks about someone else:
- “Something bad happened to this person
- This person feels bad
- Something like this is not happening to me
- I don’t want people to feel bad things like this.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the sympathy-related terms in Moroccan Arabic reveals that these concepts have different degrees of equivalence in English. Concerning the words that have near equivalents in Moroccan Arabic, the cognitive scenario related to *shafaqa* shows that this concept is closer in meaning to ‘pity’. For example, pity in the extract above (*pity*, that was the thing I was worried about) can be translated as follows ‘...šafaqa, hialhjalwahida li kuntxaifmenha’ (literally: pity, it is the thing only that I was afraid from).

Sympathy and compassion, on the other hand, have partial equivalence in Moroccan Arabic. As explained earlier, sympathy can extend from the discomforts of everyday life to serious misfortunes. Such different situations are lexicalized differently in Moroccan Arabic. When sympathy refers to discomforts of everyday life, its appropriate equivalent is ‘taša:tuf’. But when it refers to serious misfortunes (e.g. death), sympathy can translate into ‘muwasat’. Thus, sympathy in example 1 above (I have great *sympathy* for the police) can be translated as follows: ‘kantšatefmšalbolisbezzaf’ (literally: I sympathize a lot with the police.), while in example 3, which includes sympathy over someone’s death, it is translated as follows: ‘Blanche wasa:t Christine Mills...’ (literally: Blanche sympathized Christine Mills).

As far as compassion is concerned, this concept is very complex and does not have a single equivalent in MA. For instance, when compassion is felt towards someone who is close to the experiencer, the appropriate equivalent would be ‘mħenna’; the related adjective ‘ħnin’ refers to a person who has the tendency to think and care about family members, friends, neighbors, etc. Thus, ‘compassion’ in example 9 above, felt by the father towards his daughter (She saw kindness in his face and *compassion*), can be translated as follows: ‘shaft taybu:ba f wejhu u l-mħenna ...’ (literally: she saw kindness in his face and the compassion). This concept can be used as a noun (e.g. mafihshmħenna= there is no compassion in him); or a verb ‘ħan’ ‘to have compassion for someone’, as in example 9 above (...they took *compassion* on me and provided my needs), which can be translated as follows: ‘...ħennušlia w štawnidakshielikuntnehtaaj’ (literally: they have compassion on me and provide me what I needed).

Moreover, the word compassion can also be translated with ‘taša:tuf’ when some kind of assistance, especially financial assistance is given to people in need, as in example 10 above (Louise Lombard shows such *compassion* by

helping to serve food to London's down-and-outs). This can be translated as follows: 'Louise Lombard kantkatṣabberṣlataṣaṭufdialhamṣalfuqara dial London mellikantteṣithum l-makla'. (literally: Louise Lombard was express on compassion her with the poor of London when she gave them the food).

On the other hand, the English term 'empathy' does not have any lexical equivalence in Moroccan Arabic. The word 'empathy' can only be translated with the phrase "ḥa:sbi:k" (literally: I feel what you feel), which is frequently used in Moroccan Arabic speech; for Moroccan people in distress, often complain because others do not feel what they feel.

Overall, the analysis of words related to feelings of people responding emotionally to others' plight in MA and English shows that the difference between English concepts and their MA equivalents is associated with the degree of familiarity between the experiencer of the emotion and the object. In English, compassion is used in situations regardless of the closeness between the experiencer and the target person. This indicates that the models of social interaction in Anglo culture do not rely to the same degree on the contrast between 'close' people and people one does not know. On the other hand, the use of the terms '*shafaqa*' and '*taṣaṭuf*', which are related to distinct people, and the term 'mḥenna', which is felt towards people who have a greater degree of 'closeness' with the experiencer, indicates that the Moroccan models of social interaction rely on the distinction between people one knows well and people one does not know. Consequently, relationships with 'close' people are characterized by warmth, openness and an overt display of emotions, while 'distant' people are treated in a more reserved manner.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Throughout this paper, we have investigated how sympathy-related concepts are conceptualized in English and Moroccan Arabic. The semantic analysis of emotion terms related to these concepts reveals that there are similarities between the two varieties, as well as differences. The differences are associated with the prevalence of different models of social interaction in Anglo and Moroccan cultures. The present study, therefore, contributes to the description and analysis of linguistic and cultural variation in the conceptualization of emotions across cultures by exploring emotion concepts of Moroccan Arabic, a variety that has not been investigated yet as far as this area of research is concerned. Nevertheless, the study of emotions needs input from a variety of languages in order to understand human emotions in general. This is because an emotion term is not any word referring to a single entity in the world, rather it encompasses a whole scenario, a way of feeling in a culture and, therefore, a way of thinking about feeling is revealed about that culture.

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