

Gender Differences in the Language for Emotions

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ABSTRACT

Emotion terms, such as happiness and anger, are used naturally to express our semantic emotion knowledge, i.e., the mental lexicon of basic emotion terms. This study aims to compare gender-related differences in the use of emotion terms and the correspondence between semantic emotion knowledge and episodic emotion experience, with the method of testing participant's episodic emotion experience (basic knowledge being made up of whatever happens to be the most frequent and impressive in everyday experience). Thirty participants are recruited for two list tasks, a Free Listing task and a Recent Experience task. The results show that (1) for both men and women the most salient emotion words present an antonymic pair—sadness-happiness. (2) Some of the gender-based differences are morphological. The female participants tend to use adjectives and verbs while most of the words mentioned by the males are nouns. (3) Women tend to mention objects or issues associated with emotions while men prefer to keep within the emotion category. Finally, when men recall their past experience, they tend to use positive words while women use both positive as well as negative words.

Key words: cognitive salience, emotion, gender, episodic emotion, semantic emotion knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most of the studies relating to gender differences in emotion expression consider the ways emotions are expressed in a broad sense rather than considering the language in which emotions are talked about. In Bajgar, Ciarrochi, Lane and Deane's paper (2005, p. 570), men have lower emotion awareness than women. Their study was done in accordance with the levels of emotional awareness scale (LEAS) which is a way to measure individual differences in adults' emotional awareness. Hubbard (2001, p. 1427) states that boys will express more sadness and anger than girls who may be more concerned with harmonious relationships. On the other hand, Haviland and Kahlbaugh in Chaplin's paper (2006, p. 977) mention that emotion development may influence the development of autonomy and identity during adolescence. In the present study, we will explore more deeply the emotion concept in different genders. According to Vainik's study (2006, p. 183), women have better competence in emotion with higher productivity in emotion words. However, in Fischer's study cited in Vainik's paper (2006, p. 183), Fischer (1995) states that although the women's emotion words are more active, there is no significant difference in the basic level emotion concepts of different genders.

Furthermore, O'Kearney (2004, p. 916) mentions, "references to other-directed negative emotions (e.g., anger) were predominant for boys, and inner-directed negative emotions (such as sadness, fear, guilt, and shame) were characteristic of girls." Males are educated to hide their real feelings and do not express their emotion easily. Memories of past experiences are quite important in our daily lives, and we usually examine ourselves in terms of our past life to bring

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us a better future. Women and men differ in the narrative description about their life. Bauer, Stennes, and Haight (2003, p. 28) state, “women tend to provide narratives that are longer, more detailed and vivid; women tend to include more emotional content in their autobiographical memories.” Women also recall more emotional memories and need less time to report their memories than men.

The aim of this study is to examine the gender-related differences in the responses to list tasks on emotion words. The study will explore the correspondence between semantic emotion knowledge, the mental lexicon of basic emotion terms and episodic emotion experience, basic knowledge being made up of whatever happens to be the most frequent and impressive in everyday experience, and whether this correspondence could relate to gender in any way. Therefore, the following research questions are raised: (1) What is the gender difference in emotion category? (2) What is the gender difference in episodic emotion experience? (3) What is the relationship between semantic emotion knowledge and episodic emotion experience? Is the difference related to gender difference?

The paper is organized as follows: (1) Introduction (2) literature review (3) methodology (4) gender differences in emotion terms and feelings, including the results of the two tasks and the comparison of them and (5) Conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The linguistic representations of emotions may have important implications for self-awareness development and emotional experiences regulation. O’Kearney (2004, p. 915) says in his study, “there are clear gender differences in emotion display rules with males preferring behavioral and action/expressive modes and women preferring verbal and facial expressive mode.” Males focused less on the consequences and resolution of conflict than women and have a higher priority for more immediate, behavioral representations of their emotional responses.

From the semantic point of view, all women mention some objects or issues associated with emotions while men like to keep within the emotion category. In his study, Vainik (2006, p. 174) states that, “some of the gender-based differences are morphological: among the words mentioned by men, there are some adjectives and a verbal noun, whereas the words mentioned by women only include some plural nouns.” According to Bauer et al. (2003, p. 27), “the category of internal states terms is found to be more coherent for women than for men.” That is, women use more emotion terms in their descriptions of events from later in life than men. Moreover, Schirmer, Zysset, Kotz, and Cramon (2004, p. 1114) point out, “semantic processing in women is more susceptible to influences from emotional prosody than is semantic processing in men.”

The ways of the emotional response variables are in the tendency that women are more emotional than men. Chentsova-Dutton and Tsai (2007, p. 175) say, “according to the emotional behavior and self-reports of emotion, women are supposed to be more emotional than men, even for emotions like anger, for which men are suggested to be more emotional than women.” According to Vainik (2006, p. 183), “women are emotionally more competent and more expressive, in

particular with verbal expression.” Women carry out emotional and linguistic tasks more precisely, as they are more sensitive to that kind of stimuli. O’Kearney (2004, p. 916) suggests, “females more frequently report or express emotion terms referring to inner-directed emotions and also more intense positive and negative feelings.”

In some research, we can find the parents’ effects on the emotional development of children of different genders. Aldrich and Tenenbaum (2006, p. 776) state that parents have more discussion about emotion with girls, therefore girls may discuss emotions more than boys. Holm (2001, p. 385) reports “with the exception of anger, girls are encouraged to learn to express their feelings through words and facial expressions, while boys are discouraged from doing so.” That is, boys learn to act on their feelings rather than to talk about them. Vainik (2006, p. 183) states, “in bringing up girls, mothers always use more positive emotion words, turning a lot of detailed attention to their emotional states, whereas with boys the focus tends to be on causes and consequences.” Since girls hear and use a larger and more varied vocabulary for emotional experiences, they may understand past emotions as being more personally meaningful, and view their past experiences as more emotionally diverse than boys do.

3. METHODOLOGY

Two tasks are designed in order to explore the gender-related differences in the responses to emotion words. We use Vainik’s (2006) research as a basis and adopt his research methodology, including two tasks, in order to find the gender differences in emotion expression. The participants are 30 adults (15 women and 15 men) ranging from twenty-five to thirty-six years old. The average age of the participants is thirty years old. All of the participants are native Chinese speakers and they are students in the graduate school of National Cheng Kung University. The reason for investigating the native speakers is to make the data more valid in the intracultural comparison. All participants have jobs and 65% of the female participants are married with jobs.

The two tasks are the Free Listing task and the Recent Experience task. The participants were given different stimuli. The Free Listing task focuses on the abstract name of a category. The Recent Experience task tests the recent memory of emotional experience. We take what the participants think and write as their emotion expressions and analyze the words to probe the gender differences. All the words are written in Chinese and we translate them into English according to their meaning and syntactical functions. For example, if the participants write *kuai* 快樂 ‘fast happy; happiness’, we translate the word as a noun while if the participants use *kuai* 快樂的 ‘fast happy particle; happy’ we translate the word to be an adjective. If the participants write down some words which do not belong to the emotion category, we interview the participants and determine the reasons.

1. (Task A) Free Listing: All the participants were asked to think of the general category of emotions or feeling, and list them. No time limit was set for the

Free Listing task. All the participants can write down any word freely which they think is related to the emotion without the pressure of a time limitation.

2. (Task B) Recent Experience: All the participants were asked to list emotion words that they have experienced in the recent past. The participants could decide how far back in their personal memories they wanted to trace. The purpose of this task is to compare the relationship between semantic emotion knowledge and episodic emotion experience; therefore, we encouraged the participants to recall more emotion experience without limiting the recollection period. They may have positive or negative experiences in their recollection period and we examine whether men or women recall more positive experiences by using more positive emotion expressions.

The words listed in task A should be interpreted as the participants' active use of the emotion words, while the structure of the vocabulary should represent the participants' semantic knowledge within the category 'emotions' or 'feelings'. In addition, the linguistic material listed in task B is the participants' actual use of the emotion words in describing their own emotional states. A comparison of the active and the actual emotion words should reveal how emotion knowledge is organized on conceptual and experiential levels.

4. RESULTS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EMOTION TERMS AND FEELINGS

The results of task A shows three basic emotion terms— 'happy', 'angry', and 'sad'. They are the items with the highest indices in the emotion words. For task B, the two terms are 'happy' and 'angry'.

4.1 The Analysis of Task A

The results of task A are presented in Table 1 (see below). Vainik (2006, p. 173) claims that "one of the most obvious gender differences is the men's lower salience of the words 'sadness' and 'happiness' than women's." However, in our Free Listing task, both genders show equally conceptual salience of the words 'happiness/happy'; all male and female participants mention the emotion word 'happy/happiness'. Vainik (2006, p. 173) states: "for males, it is anger that is slightly more salient." However, 'anger' is more salient for females in this study. We suppose that with the rise of feminism and the consequent self-awareness, women may universally become more voluntary and independent, and they tend to express their feelings more directly than before. As we can see, since more and more women work in companies, they will be motivated to strive for their rights, which is one of the aspects of feminism. In addition, the most salient emotion words represent antonym pairs: sadness-happiness for both men and women; that is, lexical antonyms may well lie at the base of the semantic structuring of emotion concepts.

Some of the gender-based differences are morphological. Most of the words mentioned by our female participants are adjectives and verbs while most of the

words mentioned by the men are nouns. The reason why women use adjectives and verbs more is because they tend to use more words to describe their feeling and often express their emotion with actions. However, in Taiwanese society, women are educated to be tender and obedient so they usually express their emotion with more peaceful ways, such as crying. For example, subject No.10 mentioned that when she felt sad, she described her sadness with 'I am sad and cry' instead of only writing 'sad'; she used the adjective 'sad' and the verb 'cry' to represent her sadness. Both, men and women use colors to represent their emotion, such as red means anger, and both genders mention some verbs (cry and sing) to show their way of expressing of their emotion. Chentsova-Dutton and Tsai (2007, p. 175) report, "women are supposed to be more emotional than men." In our study, women list more emotion words than men (about 1.5 times, 27:18).

One more interesting finding is that two women mentioned the word 'sweet' whereas none of the men mentioned the term. The reason why women mention the word 'sweet' is presumably because women usually keep romantic images in mind, so they tend to combine the word 'sweet' with romantic feelings. From the semantic point of view, men prefer keeping within the emotion category, while women prefer mentioning some objects or issues associated with emotions such as mentioning thunder with anger because the participants think when they are angry, they will act like thunder with strong voice and power. The result points out that women are more sensitive to the use of emotion terms than men because women list more emotion words (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The number of emotion terms in different genders*

Terms	Males	Females	Terms	Males	Females
happy	4	13	unhappy	5	7
happiness	11	2	sweet	0	2
sad	0	12	peaceful	0	2
sadness	11	0	exhausted	7	5
anger	8	1	surprised	0	5
angry	2	12	surprise	2	0
nervous	6	7	crazy	0	2
depressed	3	7	worried	0	2
exciting	0	6	sorrow	0	3
excitement	3	0	amazing	0	2
tired	0	4	pain	0	0
anxious	0	7	painful	0	3
anxiety	5	0	love	0	3
disappointed	0	4	boring	3	5
frustrated	0	4	cry	0	4
upset	5	0	sing	2	3
frightened	1	4	red	1	3
fear	2	6	thunder	0	2

4.2 The Analysis of Task B

Only two of the basic emotion terms as defined by task B (*happy* and *angry*) show a comparable rate of salience (for 'happy' 15:15 and 'angry' 7:9) for both

male and female participants. In the task, the participants have to write down the emotion words according to their recent actual experience. For example, if the participant argued with other people two days ago, he or she has to write down 'angry' in the list. The selection of emotion terms is based on the difference of the recalled episodes. For example, subject No.5 wrote 'sad' because she lost her favorite CD while subject No.16 wrote 'surprise' for getting a birthday present from his friend. The rest of the basic emotion terms are also present in the words used to describe one's own experience; however, the conclusion does not show a correlation between semantic emotion knowledge and episodic emotion experience. The result can not support whether the basic emotion knowledge could facilitate the use in categorizing personal experience or not because the subjects who get more basic emotional terms do not perform better in the categorization of personal experience.

Furthermore, the results also show that when men recall their past experience they tend to use positive words while women mention both positive and negative words. In comparison with men, women remember more events about experiencing anxiety, hate and confusion. Men recall more feelings about 'comfortable' and 'shouting'. According to Bauer et al. (2003, p. 27), women tend to use more emotional words men do when they describe future events. Our study reveals that women recall the events within one to three months whereas it is seldom that men remember their feelings from the past time, except for the recent one or two days. This shows that women like to remember details of what happened in their daily life more than men do. All the men are employed and 65% of women are career women, and both genders have emotional reactions, such as being angry, tired and anxious, because of their tiring work. If the subjects can enjoy their work and do not have work pressure, they tend to be more relaxed, calm and content. Men may tend to focus their life on their work and women may focus on their work as well as on their relationships with others. Hook, Gerstein, Detterich and Gridley (2003, p. 464-465), on measuring intimacy and examining gender differences, mention that women like to have a good connection with others. Unlike women, men prefer to have an element of separation included in their relationships with others.

Table 2. *The number of experiencing emotion terms in different genders*

Terms	Males	Females	Terms	Males	Females
happy	15	15	boring	6	4
glad	5	1	comfortable	2	0
angry	7	9	nervous	1	4
sad	5	7	shout	4	0
tired	5	0	disappointed	2	4
satisfied	6	1	pressure	3	6
anxiety	0	4	confused	0	2
disgusting	0	2	painful	3	3
fear	4	9	surprise	2	6

4.3 Comparison of the Results of Tasks A and B

Both men and women gave more answers in task A than in task B; we obtained thirty-six terms in task A and eighteen terms in task B. In comparison with personal experience, both men and women mention 'happiness', while women particularly mentioned 'anxiety', 'hate', and 'confused' and only men mention 'comfort' and 'shout'. Some of the gender-based differences are morphological so in task A, women mention more verbs than men do; however, men mention one verb 'shout' while women mention no verbs in task B; that is, men tend to express their emotion along with actual action in their experience; for example, when they are in anger, they will shout loudly or beat the wall with their fist to express their emotion.

In addition, women mention the word 'tired' in task A but never mention it in task B, conversely, men do not mention 'tired' in task A but mention it in task B. While recalling their experiences, women get the confused feeling without listing it in task A. In contrast, men experience more comfortable feelings than they can think about and list in task A. Moreover, the difference between the semantic knowledge and the words to describe personal experience is more obvious for women than for men since women list 142 words in task A but only list 77 words in task B while men list 81 words in task A and 70 words in task B. Women have more semantic emotional terms in their conceptual knowledge but they only use part of them in describing their emotional experience while the concept and the use of men's emotional terms are similar. From the comparison, we understand that the conceptual and the experiential emotion words are different from different genders' perspectives.

5. CONCLUSION

Men and women are considered to be naturally different in some aspects and women are defined as being more expressive and emotional than men. In the present study of gender differences in the emotion language, both men and women are similar in the most common emotional term 'happiness'. However, the emotion 'anger' which is thought to be more salient to men became more salient to women because, in our opinion, with the rise of feminism, women have become more independent and express their feeling voluntarily. When they feel injustice they may show their anger more directly than before.

For both genders, the most salient emotion words shows antonym pairs because the terms are often used in daily life. Men as well as women use colors and some verbs to show their emotion expression. From the semantic aspect, men like keeping within the emotion category whereas women mention some objects associated with emotions.

While recalling their past experiences, men tend to use positive words while women mention positive and negative words at the same time. In Taiwan, men are educated to be brave without showing their weakness and they get used to not expressing some negative emotions such as fear and depression. The result

indicates that women may have a greater difference between semantic knowledge and the episodic emotion experience than men do. Women are more emotional than men so they have better conceptual knowledge in emotional terms; however, with the description of their experiences, women tend to use detailed and specific terms which are not as abundant as the basic emotional terms.

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