

Linguistics may be clue to emotions

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Words may be a clue to how people, regardless of their language, think about and process emotions, according to a Penn State researcher.

"It has been suggested in the past that all cultures have in common a small number of emotions or emotion words, but that every culture has multiple ways of nuancing them, sometimes quite differently," says Dr. Robert W. Schrauf, associate professor of applied linguistics at Penn State.

These words include joy or happiness, fear, anger and sadness. Schrauf and Julia Sanchez, graduate student in psychology, Chicago School for Psychology, asked groups of people in Mexico City and Chicago in two age groups, 20 years old and 65 years old, to freely list the names of as many emotions as they could. The emotions were then categorized as negative, positive or neutral.

"People know more negative emotion words than positive or neutral words. The proportion of words was 50 percent negative, 30 percent positive and 20 percent neutral," says Schrauf. "The cognitive explanation is that we process negative and positive emotions in two channels."

Reporting in a recent issue of the Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, the researchers explain that positive emotions are processed schematically. People do not pay a lot of attention to assessment of positive emotions. In general, positive emotions signal that things are ok, so we process them more superficially. Negative emotions signal that something is wrong, and so

they elicit a slowdown in processing. They require more attention and detail in thinking and, consequently, more words.

"Negative emotions require more detailed thinking, more subtle distinctions," says Schrauf. "So they require more names."

There was no significant difference between the Spanish and English speaking groups in the proportions of negative versus positive responses to the assignment.

"We want to know if there are psychological differences between cultures in the way we see the world," says Schrauf. "We found that there are a small number of pan cultural emotion words, which probably makes good evolutionary sense, and that the proportion of negative words was larger than the positive ones."

The younger participants, regardless of language, tended to use the same sets of words with limited diversity in their responses. The older participants had fewer identical words but far more diversity.

"We expect a more diverse vocabulary in the older participants. They have experienced more living and have broader vocabularies," says the Penn State researcher. "This suggests that older adults have more diverse emotions."

However, the proportions of negative, positive and neutral words remained the same for the older adults with 50 percent negative, 30 percent positive and 20 percent neutral. So whether they were young or old, spoke English or Spanish, the proportion of words available to describe negative emotions was always much greater than those for positive emotions and the relationships stayed the same.

"Cross culturally, it appears that the cognitive approach to processing

emotions is the same, with negative emotions requiring more detail and therefore more words and positive emotions requiring fewer words," says Schrauf. "Negative emotions trigger detailed process distinctions, nuances and, consequently, more words."

Source: Penn State

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