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The Linguistic Mirror of Emotion: How Language Shapes Feelings Across Cultures

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Keywords	Abstract
Language and emotion linguistic relativity cross-cultural psychology emotion lexicon	Language is more than a vehicle for communication – it is a mirror reflecting and shaping human emotion across different cultural worlds. This article explores how linguistic structures, vocabularies, and metaphors influence the way people perceive, categorize, and express their feelings. Drawing on evidence from linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, we find that languages encode emotion in culturally specific ways, from unique "untranslatable" emotion words to grammar and idioms that frame feelings differently. Cross-cultural studies show that speakers of different languages may actually perceive emotional expressions differently, supporting the view that language helps constitute emotional experience (Gendron et al., 2014; Jack et al., 2012). Moreover, bilingual individuals often report shifts in emotional intensity and expression when switching languages, highlighting the intimate link between language and feeling. While certain basic emotions may be pan-human, their linguistic labeling and interpretation are far from universal. Understanding these nuances has profound implications for cross-cultural communication, mental health, and global empathy. In sum, our emotions are not just biologically "hard-wired" responses but are also shaped and sharpened by the words and concepts our languages provide.

Introduction

How do our words color our feelings? The relationship between language and emotion has fascinated scholars for decades, raising questions about whether people of different cultures feel the same emotions or whether language shapes those feelings in unique ways. The classic Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity posits that the language we speak influences how we think and perceive the world. Emotions are a poignant testing ground for this idea: if language indeed affects thought, then speakers of different languages might experience or interpret feelings differently.

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Early researchers such as **Paul Ekman** argued for universal basic emotions with corresponding facial expressions recognizable across cultures (e.g., happiness, fear, anger; *Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Friesen, 1971*). Yet other scholars have countered that emotions are also culturally constructed and mediated through language. Anthropologist **Anna Wierzbicka** notably observed that English emotion terms such as *disgust* or *shame* represent a folk taxonomy of feeling, not a universal human repertoire—in fact, other languages may lack direct equivalents for some of these terms *(Wierzbicka, 1999)*. For example, Polish has no exact word for *disgust*, and an Australian Aboriginal language, Gidjingali, traditionally used one word for what English distinguishes as *fear* versus *shame (Lutz, 1988; Ekman, 1992)*. Such findings caution against assuming that English-speaking notions of emotion are globally shared. As Wierzbicka argues, concepts like *disgust* or *fear* can be "highly language-specific and culture-specific," rather than innate universal categories *(Wierzbicka, 1999, p. 45)*.

Contemporary approaches blend these perspectives, recognizing a biological capacity for core affect while emphasizing that language and culture fine-tune emotional experience. Constructionist theories in psychology go so far as to suggest that emotions are not fixed neurological modules but "mental compounds" constructed from more basic psychological ingredients, with language supplying crucial conceptual scaffolding *(Barrett, 2017; Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*. In this view, words for emotions are not mere labels we affix to pre-formed feelings; rather, they are active ingredients in the recipe of emotion. Recent research by **Lindquist**, **Barrett**, and colleagues supports this: when people's access to emotion words is temporarily blocked or altered, their ability to recognize and even feel those emotions can change *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015; Gendron et al., 2014)*. Cross-cultural studies likewise reveal striking differences in how emotions are categorized and recognized, suggesting that what one culture calls *anger* or *sadness* may not perfectly map onto the emotional reality of another culture *(Gendron et al., 2014; Jack et al., 2012)*. The language of emotion, in short, both reflects and shapes the emotional life of communities.

In this article, we examine the linguistic mirror of emotion – how language influences emotional concepts, experiences, and expressions across cultures. We survey evidence that ranges from unique emotion words around the world to psycholinguistic experiments and neuroimaging studies. Section 1 discusses the rich diversity of emotion lexicons, including so-called "untranslatable" terms that illuminate cultural values. Section 2 explores how language affects the perception of emotion, highlighting research in which altering language input (or comparing different language speakers) changes how emotions are recognized and categorized. Section 3 considers cultural scripts and metaphors for emotion, showing how languages frame feelings through metaphor and context and how this guides emotional expression (for instance, some cultures encourage overt emotional talk, while others rely on subtle cues). Section 4 delves into the bilingual experience, investigating how people who speak multiple languages sometimes feel

as if they have different emotional selves in each tongue. Finally, the conclusion reflects on why appreciating the linguistic shaping of emotion matters in an interconnected world. Throughout, we maintain an academic, evidence-based perspective – befitting an inquiry at the crossroads of linguistics, anthropology, and psychology – to understand how our languages both mirror and mold our hearts. By acting as a linguistic lens, culture and language together turn emotion into a profoundly varied human experience.

1. Emotion Words as Cultural Concepts

One of the most vivid ways language shapes emotion is through vocabulary – the words a language provides for feelings. Every culture has developed its own lexicon of emotion, carving up the spectrum of human feeling into named categories that sometimes have no direct equivalent elsewhere. These "untranslatable" emotion words are illuminating windows into what a society deems important or salient in emotional life *(Lomas, 2018; Wierzbicka, 1999)*. When a language invents a word for a very specific feeling, it signals that the experience is common or valued enough to merit its own name *(Lomas, 2018; Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. Conversely, if a language lacks a term that another language has, speakers may be less inclined to notice or dwell on that nuance of feeling in daily life.

Examples of unique emotion words abound across the globe. The German word *Schadenfreude* famously describes the pleasure derived from another's misfortune – a complex emotional mix that English speakers recognize but can only circumscribe with a phrase *(Wierzbicka, 1999)*. Its existence in German (and adoption into other languages) hints that this bittersweet feeling is culturally acknowledged and discussed in German-speaking contexts. In Finnish, *sisu* refers to a deep, quiet inner fortitude and determination in the face of adversity – more than mere perseverance, it connotes a cultural ethos of resilient grit *(Lomas, 2018)*. Finland's long winters and history of struggle may have seeded the concept of *sisu*, and having the word reinforces the importance of stoic courage as a Finnish cultural value *(Lomas, 2018)*. Similarly, Japanese has *amae*, roughly translated as a pleasurable dependence or presumption upon another's love – essentially the comfort of being able to "act like a spoiled child" with someone who cares about you. This nuanced emotional concept, first analyzed by anthropologist Takeo Doi, does not neatly translate into English, yet it plays a key role in Japanese conceptions of family and affection *(Doi, 1973)*. Another Japanese term, *natsukashii*, captures a feeling of nostalgia tinged with warmth or longing for the past; English speakers feel this emotion too but require a description like "bittersweet nostalgia," whereas Japanese wraps it in one evocative word.

Many of these words spotlight emotions that tie individuals to community or environment. The Welsh word *hiraeth* describes a profound homesickness or yearning for a home one cannot return to (or that may never have existed); it reflects Wales' emphasis on homeland and heritage, threading the emotion with national identity *(Lomas, 2018)*. In South African Bantu languages,

ubuntu names the feeling tied to the philosophy of shared humanity ("I am because we are") – a term that blends empathy, community connection, and moral value. Its existence highlights how deeply communal harmony and human interconnectedness are felt in those cultures *(Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. From Tahiti, anthropologists record *pouri*, which roughly corresponds to sadness but, intriguingly, Tahitians before Western contact didn't have a concept equivalent to "anger" as English speakers know it – their emotion lexicon divided the space differently, emphasizing other affective states *(Levy, 1973)*. And on the Micronesian atoll of Ifaluk, as Catherine Lutz documented, the word *fago* represents a blend of love, compassion, and sadness all in one *(Lutz, 1988)*. To feel *fago* is to respond to someone in need with a mix of tender sorrow and love – an emotion that makes sense within the highly cooperative, kinship-focused society of Ifaluk. Lutz noted that *"fago is an emotion whose full flowering requires the understanding attained only through social discourse,"* meaning that in Ifaluk culture one learns to feel *fago* in the context of social interactions and expectations *(Lutz, 1988, p. 45)*. What an English speaker might compartmentalize into separate feelings (grief, love, pity) an Ifaluk person experiences as a singular, culturally meaningful emotion.

These examples underscore that language provides a conceptual scaffolding for emotion. Having a named category for a feeling can focus attention on it and allow people to discuss and even cultivate it. By contrast, the absence of a term might make an experience feel less distinct. As one linguistics blog put it, *"when cultures create words for specific experiences, they're essentially saying: this matters enough that we need a word for it" (Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. The priorities and values of a culture often emerge in its emotion words *(Lomas, 2018; Wierzbicka, 1999)*. For instance, the existence of *sisu* in Finnish or *lagom* in Swedish (meaning "just the right amount, in balance") points to how those cultures prize endurance and moderation, respectively *(Lomas, 2018; Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. In Japan, *omotenashi* denotes wholehearted hospitality and caring for guests—again revealing an emotional value placed on selfless service and consideration *(Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. By learning these foreign terms, we not only enrich our vocabulary, but also expand our ability to recognize subtle hues of feeling. Psychologist **Tim Lomas** has argued that discovering untranslatable words can enhance our well-being by giving us new frames to understand ourselves; indeed, people often report that learning a new emotion word helps them articulate a vague feeling they had but couldn't name before *(Lomas, 2018)*. This demonstrates the powerful feedback loop between language and emotion: language can create new emotional awareness. As one commentator noted, *"language doesn't just reflect our thoughts—it may actually influence how we think,"* especially about experiences as subjective as emotions *(Lara Translate Blog, 2023)*. In sum, the diverse emotion lexicons of the world's languages serve as cultural mirrors, each reflecting a society's emotional landscape and in turn sharpening the feelings of its speakers.

2. Language Influences Emotion Perception and Cognition

Do people who speak different languages actually perceive emotions differently? A growing body of cross-cultural psychological research suggests the answer is yes—language can shape not only how we talk about feelings, but also how we recognize and even experience them at a fundamental level. The theory of linguistic relativity of emotion predicts that if a language makes certain emotional distinctions (or lacks them), its speakers will become attuned to those patterns in the flow of feeling. Modern experiments have tested this by observing what happens when people's access to emotion vocabulary is changed. The results provide some of the most direct evidence that, far from being a passive descriptor, language actively participates in constructing emotion.

One line of research involves **semantic satiation**, a technique where repeating a word over and over renders it temporarily meaningless. In a clever study, psychologists had participants say an emotion word (like *anger*) 30 times in a row—enough to make it start sounding like gibberish—and then immediately perform a task judging facial expressions *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015; Gendron et al., 2014)*. Normally, people are quick to match a scowling face with another scowling face as "the same emotion." But when participants' concept of *anger* had been satiated (and thus momentarily unavailable), they became significantly slower and less accurate at recognizing two scowling faces as both expressing anger *(Gendron et al., 2014)*. In essence, disrupting the word disrupted the perception. Notably, this wasn't just a quirk of being tongue-tied; a control condition repeating a neutral word like *idea* had no such effect *(Barrett, 2017)*. This implies that the brain actively drew on the concept of *anger* (anchored by the word) to make sense of the angry faces—when that concept was knocked out, the visual system struggled to categorize the expressions *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*.

In a related experiment, researchers found that people with **semantic dementia** (a neurological condition that degrades conceptual knowledge and word understanding) also showed an altered perception of facial emotions. Patients who had lost access to many emotion words could no longer sort facial expressions into the usual discrete categories; instead, they tended to group faces only by broad affect (positive vs. negative) *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*. For example, without knowing concepts like *disgust* or *fear*, a patient might simply see a variety of unpleasant faces and lump them together, unable to differentiate a look of disgust from one of fear or anger beyond the shared negativity. Healthy individuals and younger children show a parallel pattern: infants and two-year-olds, who have very limited emotion vocabulary, primarily distinguish happy vs. unhappy expressions, but struggle to separate specific negative emotions until they learn the words for them around age 3 or 4 *(Widen & Russell, 2008; Barrett, 2017)*. All these findings align with the idea that learning emotion words teaches us to make finer perceptual distinctions between feelings *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015; Widen & Russell, 2008)*.

Cross-cultural studies further demonstrate linguistic shaping by comparing speakers of different languages on emotion tasks. In one remarkable study, an American research team worked with the **Himba**, a remote ethnic group in Namibia whose language (*Herero*) has emotion terms that do not map neatly to Western ones. They asked Himba participants and English-speaking participants to sort a set of facial expression photos into piles by emotion type (a method to see how people naturally categorize emotions). The English speakers reliably grouped the faces into the six "basic" emotion categories—anger, disgust, fear, sadness, happiness, and neutral—essentially replicating Western results that assume those categories *(Ekman, 1992; Gendron et al., 2014)*. The Himba participants, however, did not sort the faces in the same six piles *(Gendron et al., 2014; Roberson et al., 2008)*. Even when given translated emotion words as labels for piles, the Himba groups did not align with the Western categories *(Gendron et al., 2014; Roberson et al., 2008)*. Notably, the Himba were not randomly guessing—they tended to sort faces in their own consistent way, often grouping some expressions by intensity or valence (e.g., putting angry and fearful faces together as "high-arousal negative") rather than separating them as Anglo-Americans do *(Jack et al., 2012; Jack & Schyns, 2015)*. This suggests that because the Himba language and culture do not emphasize the same discrete emotion groupings as English (for instance, there may not be distinct words for *disgust* versus *anger*), Himba individuals perceive the continuum of facial expressions somewhat differently, focusing on other cues. In the words of the researchers, *"emotion words have a powerful effect on emotion perception,"* helping to structure sensations into the familiar Western categories—and without those words, people may use alternate frameworks *(Gendron et al., 2014; Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*.

Another cross-cultural comparison looked at Chinese vs. English speakers' perceptions of facial expressions with and without emotion labels. In one experiment, participants from China and the U.S. viewed dynamic facial animations morphing through various muscle movements; they had to press a button when they thought the face showed a specific emotion (from a list given) *(Jack et al., 2012; Jack & Schyns, 2015)*. Interestingly, Chinese participants did not carve up the emotional expressions in the same way as Americans. Whereas American viewers tended to see distinct expressions corresponding to the six basic emotions, Chinese viewers showed more overlap—for example, they did not clearly differentiate *fear* vs. *surprise* vs. *disgust* as separate categories, often confusing those, especially given that the task used English emotion terms or their direct Chinese translations as prompts *(Jack et al., 2012; Jack & Schyns, 2015)*. Researchers hypothesized that the Chinese emotional lexicon (and cultural context) might emphasize different emotion concepts, leading to less segmentation among certain Western-defined categories *(Mesquita, 2022)*.

In fact, when Chinese participants were shown the English word *disgust* right before seeing a disgusted facial expression, their brains' processing of the face changed to become more "efficient," more like that of American participants *(Leshin et al., 2023; Pirchner, 2024)*. A recent neuroimaging study by **Leshin et al. (2023)** found that Chinese immigrants in the U.S. activated

different neural networks for interpreting faces depending on whether they were primed with an English emotion word. For instance, without a word, a wrinkled-nose face might not strongly register as *disgust* to a Chinese-born viewer, but seeing the label *disgust* beforehand significantly improved recognition and altered brain connectivity, engaging semantic regions to help interpret the face *(Leshin et al., 2023; Pirchner, 2024)*. In contrast, American participants (for whom that expression and word were deeply familiar) showed no such neural difference whether or not the word was provided *(Jack et al., 2012)*. This implies that language can serve as a mental catalyst for perceiving emotion—giving a name to a configuration of facial cues literally helps the brain *see* it as that emotion, particularly if one's cultural upbringing did not emphasize that category *(Leshin et al., 2023; Jack et al., 2012)*.

Overall, these studies support a compelling conclusion: **language guides the mind in parsing emotional reality**. Emotion perception is not a passive, universal reading of facial muscle movements or vocal tones; rather, the concepts and words we have internalized set up expectations and interpretations. As one scientific review phrased it, accumulated cultural knowledge about emotions "shapes the way people perceive the emotional meaning" of others' expressions *(Leshin et al., 2023; Pirchner, 2024)*. When our language has a precise label, we are primed to detect that signal; when it doesn't, we may miss the finer distinctions. Far from trivial, this has real-life implications. Consider how this insight might affect cross-cultural communication or even technology: an AI trained only on Western emotion concepts might misread the feelings of someone from a different culture if it doesn't account for these differences *(Mesquita, 2022; Leshin et al., 2023)*.

On the personal level, it reminds us that expanding our emotional vocabulary—in any language—could literally expand how we feel and understand feelings. Psychological research shows that simply putting feelings into words (a process called **affect labeling**) can modulate their intensity; for example, verbalizing one's emotions tends to dampen amygdala reactivity and engage regulatory brain regions *(Lieberman et al., 2007; Burklund et al., 2014)*. In one study, people doing a stressful task showed a reduced physiological stress response if they labeled their emotions during the task, compared to those who did not—suggesting that language provided a form of implicit emotion regulation *(Burklund et al., 2014)*. Thus, language not only helps us identify emotions in others, it also can alter our own emotional responses. To sum up, research from semantic satiation experiments to fMRI scans converges on a key idea: **our feelings are partly a product of our language.** The way we learn to speak about emotions trains our perception and can even feed back into how strongly or in what way we experience those emotions ourselves *(Lindquist & Gendron, 2015; Widen & Russell, 2008)*.

3. Cultural Scripts and Metaphors of Emotion

Languages do more than supply vocabulary for emotions; they also provide **cultural scripts** and **metaphors** that guide how feelings are understood and expressed in context. A cultural script can be thought of as the implicit "rules" or norms for when and how to show certain emotions, often reflected in idioms, proverbs, or common turns of phrase *(Wierzbicka, 1999; Mesquita, 2022)*. Metaphors, on the other hand, are the figurative language linking emotions to more concrete experiences, and these metaphors can vary widely across cultures—**influencing how people conceptualize what an emotion is** *(Kövecses, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)*. Both scripts and metaphors embedded in language play a profound role in shaping emotional life.

One key area of difference is the **directness of emotional expression**. It has been observed that Western, individualistic cultures like the United States or much of Europe encourage a relatively direct articulation of one's feelings: "say what you feel" is often considered healthy communication *(Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mesquita, 2022)*. In contrast, many collectivist or traditional cultures place greater emphasis on social harmony and context, often favoring indirect cues to convey emotion *(Matsumoto, 2006)*. This pattern emerges in cross-linguistic pragmatics. For instance, in East Asian languages such as Japanese, there is a well-known distinction between *honne* (one's true feelings) and *tatemae* (the public façade or feelings expressed to meet social expectations) *(Ide, 2008)*. Emotions in such contexts might be conveyed through subtle facial expressions, tone, or situational allusion rather than explicit words. A recent cross-cultural analysis noted that *"Western individualistic cultures tend to favor direct emotional articulation, whereas collectivist cultures often depend on indirect or pragmatic cues" (Mesquita, 2022, p. 144)*. For example, an American might say, "I'm very upset that you did that," whereas a Japanese speaker, following different norms, might not state anger outright but instead fall silent or say something understated like "This is a bit inconvenient" with a troubled tone. The linguistic habits reflect deeper cultural values: Western communication prizes individual self-expression and clarity, while many other cultures prize empathy, reading the air, and not burdening others with one's personal emotions unless appropriate. Neither approach is inherently better; rather, each language-culture system socializes members into a certain emotional style. These styles can sometimes lead to misunderstanding—a direct communicator may perceive an indirect one as "hiding" feelings, whereas the indirect communicator may view the direct one as inappropriately blunt or lacking finesse *(Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 2006)*.

Metaphors of emotion in language also shape how feelings are conceptualized. Cognitive linguist **Zoltán Kövecses** and others have shown that English speakers often use *heat* and *pressure* metaphors for anger—e.g., "he erupted in anger," "simmering rage," "ready to explode"—reflecting an implicit model of anger as a *hot fluid in a container* (the body) that can boil over *(Kövecses, 2000; Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987)*. In contrast, Chinese conceptual metaphors for anger include the notion of *qi* (vital energy or gas) rising upward in the body; an angry person in

Mandarin might say something like "气上来了" (literally "the qi has risen up") rather than "I'm boiling mad" *(Yu, 1995)*. Such differences suggest that even the physiological experience of anger might be interpreted through one's cultural-linguistic model: Do you feel a *hot head* or a *chest full of rising energy*? Likely, people's bodily experience aligns to some degree with the metaphors their culture provides, teaching them where to "locate" and how to describe their anger. Likewise, sadness in English is often a "down" feeling ("down in the dumps," "feeling low"), whereas in some cultures sadness might be described as a heaviness or a pressure on the heart *(Kövecses, 2000)*. These pervasive phrases are not just ornamental; they reflect and reinforce mental models of emotion. Research in cognitive linguistics suggests that such metaphors can influence how we process emotions; for example, experiments have found that thinking of an emotion in metaphorical terms (like visualizing anger as a pressurized container) can affect how intensely people report feeling it, because the metaphor carries certain entailments (pressure building, eruption, etc.) *(Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011)*.

Grammatical structures also frame emotions. An intriguing difference exists between languages in whether they treat an emotion as something one *is* or something one *has*. In English, one typically says "I am angry," equating the self with the emotional state. But in Spanish, it's common to say "tengo miedo," literally "I have fear," instead of "I am afraid." Other languages, like Russian or Arabic, might say "to me there is sadness" (using a dative construction) or "it makes me sad"—effectively phrasing emotion as something that happens to the person or that one possesses temporarily, rather than an identity *(Wierzbicka, 1999; Dewaele, 2008)*. These grammatical nuances may subtly influence people's attitudes toward emotions. If "I am angry," then anger might be viewed as somewhat inherent or defining in the moment; whereas if "I have anger" (or "anger is upon me"), it suggests the emotion is a separate entity that one might control or lose, akin to a possession or an external force. Linguists have pointed out that such structures can influence perceived **agency in emotions** and strategies for regulation *(Wierzbicka, 1999)*. For example, Spanish speakers might, by habit, externalize emotions a bit more ("the fear has come over me"), which could affect how they attempt to get rid of it (since it is "had," perhaps it can be let go). English speakers might internalize it ("I am angry") and perhaps feel it as more tied to their self-concept in the moment. These are subtle tendencies, but they exemplify **Benjamin Lee Whorf's** famous idea that grammar is an invisible guide to everyday thinking *(Whorf, 1956)*. Indeed, one cross-cultural linguistic study highlighted this English–Spanish contrast, noting that *"in Spanish, emotions are often expressed as possessions ('Tengo miedo' – 'I have fear'), whereas in English, emotions are described as intrinsic states ('I am afraid'). These differences suggest that language…actively constructs emotional experiences" (Wierzbicka, 1999, p. 123)*. In other words, whether we linguistically cast emotions as objects, states, actions, or reactions can shape how we psychologically experience and cope with them.

Cultural scripts also dictate which emotions are socially emphasized or played down. For instance, in many East Asian cultures influenced by **Confucian** values, anger (especially toward elders or in-group members) is often seen as destructive and discouraged, whereas feelings like shame or remorse in response to one's own missteps are given more attention as tools for self-correction *(Mesquita, 2022; Markus & Kitayama, 1991)*. The language reflects this: there are multiple words for shades of shame, humility, modesty, and feelings related to maintaining honor (for example, Japanese *hansei* refers to introspective regret and self-reflection on one's mistakes), whereas there might be fewer casual words for overt anger *(Ide, 2008)*. In English, we find the opposite pattern—many everyday expressions of anger (*annoyed, peeved, ticked off, irate, furious,* etc.) but less rich vocabulary for shame (often just *ashamed* or borrowing idioms like *red-faced*) *(Wierzbicka, 1999)*. This doesn't mean people in English-speaking cultures never feel shame or that Japanese people never feel anger; rather, the linguistic resources available can encourage people to focus on and discuss certain emotions more readily, thus weaving them more deeply into the fabric of social interaction. We can think of it as the **emotional "menu"** offered by a culture's language. If a concept is on the menu, you're more likely to order it (experience it and talk about it); if it's absent or only available off-menu, you might overlook it or feel it only vaguely. A poignant example comes from Wierzbicka's analyses: some languages lack a general word for *emotion* as a category. For instance, she noted that some smaller languages do not have a single term that lumps feelings together in the way English does with *emotion (Wierzbicka, 1999)*. Speakers of those languages may not talk about "emotions" in the abstract at all, but only about specific states like *anger*, *joy*, etc., each in its own context. This could lead them to perceive those states as less connected to each other than an English speaker who is taught from childhood that anger, joy, fear, etc. are all species of the same genus "emotion." In contrast, English and many Western languages have a whole apparatus of talking about emotions in general (emotion versus reason, emotional intelligence, controlling your emotions, and so on), which itself shapes how we conceptualize feelings as a domain of life *(Mesquita, 2022)*.

Lastly, **cultural values** can be inferred from the scripted emotion words that often appear in moral exhortations or folk wisdom. For example, many languages have proverbs about anger and patience. In Arabic, one proverb says, *"غضبك نار، فأطفئه بصبرك"* ("Your anger is a fire; extinguish it with your patience"), metaphorically teaching emotional control through the lens of locally resonant imagery *(Al-Sughair, 2015)*. In English, the proverb "Don't cry over spilled milk" trivializes regret or sadness for accidents, implicitly encouraging emotional restraint in the face of minor loss. The fact that certain proverbs gain currency indicates the emotional tendencies a culture seeks to promote or curtail. By internalizing these linguistic nuggets, speakers learn patterns—for example, anger should be cooled down like a fire, or sadness should be overcome when it's pointless. Language thus carries **cultural emotion-regulation strategies** across generations in aphoristic form *(Mesquita, 2022; Wierzbicka, 1999)*.

In summary, beyond individual words, the broader linguistic and cultural context—metaphors, syntax, idioms, and discourse norms—systematically influences how emotions are framed. Through language, cultures script when one should feel proud or ashamed, how one should describe love or anxiety, and even how to physically experience a surge of anger or a pang of longing. Emotions may be universal in potential, but language channels those potentials into culturally preferred grooves, ensuring that each society not only speaks but feels in its own characteristic style. As linguist **Anna Wierzbicka** notes, even the so-called "basic emotions" like happiness, fear, or anger, when examined closely, turn out to be entwined with cultural meaning and linguistic expression *(Wierzbicka, 1999)*. Recognizing these differences is essential in intercultural settings: what might seem like an absence of emotion could be a different style of expression, and what seems like a strong emotion could have a different connotation in another language. Appreciating the role of language in emotion equips us to navigate cross-cultural relationships with greater empathy and insight.

4. Bilingual Minds: Shifting Languages, Shifting Emotions

If language shapes emotion, what happens in the minds of people who speak multiple languages? **Bilinguals and multilinguals** provide a natural experiment in how different linguistic contexts influence feeling. Interestingly, many bilingual individuals report that their emotional experiences and expressions can change with the language they are using. They often feel that one language (usually their mother tongue) is more emotionally intense or "true" to them, whereas another language (often a later-acquired one) might feel more detached or cerebral for emotional topics. This phenomenon has been termed the **emotional-resonance hypothesis**—the idea that one's first language, imbued with early childhood experiences, carries greater emotional weight than languages learned later *(Dewaele, 2008; Pavlenko, 2014)*. Research in psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics largely supports these self-observations.

Multilinguals commonly describe a sensation that emotional words—like *I love you* or curse words—do not pack the same punch in their second language (L2) as in their first language (L1). A study by **Dewaele (2008)** found that bilingual speakers reported different levels of emotional arousal depending on which language they were using; for example, many said that swearing or expressing anger in their native tongue felt much stronger (and in some cases more uncomfortable) than doing so in a second language. Conversely, some bilinguals prefer to discuss vulnerable or traumatic experiences in a second language precisely because it provides a kind of emotional distance—the feelings are "held at arm's length" when filtered through a less instinctive lexicon *(Pavlenko, 2014)*. This may explain why bilingual individuals in psychotherapy sometimes switch languages when recounting painful memories, or why a multilingual person might argue in one language but apologize in another. One participant in **Pavlenko's** research vividly noted, *"We usually argue in English/Spanish mishmash. When either of us are boiling, it's each in her/his own L1,"* whereas if feeling a bit more in control, switching to the other language can be a strategy to

diffuse intensity *(Pavlenko, 2014, p. 183)*. This anecdote illustrates how each language can tap into different emotional circuits—the native-language channel brings out raw, unfiltered emotion, while the second-language channel allows a step back, sometimes enabling more cool-headed or even wittier expression of the feeling *(Pavlenko, 2014)*.

Neuroscientists have begun to uncover why this might be. Language learned in early childhood tends to be encoded in memory along with the emotional contexts of one's family and early life, engaging limbic (emotional-brain) regions more strongly. Later languages, often acquired in classroom or formal settings, might remain somewhat "disconnected" from those deep emotional networks. Brain-imaging studies of bilinguals show differential activation patterns when hearing emotional phrases in L1 vs. L2—hearing an endearment or taboo word in one's native tongue can trigger greater amygdala (emotion-center) response than the same word's translation in an L2, which the brain may treat more like a cognitively processed stimulus *(Harris, Ayçiçeği, & Gleason, 2003; Caldwell-Harris & Ayçiçeği-Dinn, 2009)*. Essentially, the mother tongue is tied to emotion-laden memories (your parents' voices, playground insults, childhood lullabies), whereas an L2 might have been used mostly in relatively neutral contexts initially. Of course, as one becomes truly fluent and especially if one lives emotionally in the second language (relationships, significant life events), that language gains emotional resonance too. Nonetheless, a sizable number of bilinguals report a persistent difference. As one study succinctly put it, *"bilingual speakers' first and second languages are differentially associated with their emotional experiences" (Dewaele, 2008, p. 1754)*.

This can also lead to **code-switching during emotional moments**. Research by **Williams et al. (2020)** observed immigrant parents switching from English to their native Chinese when expressing strong negative emotions toward their children, and back to English when the emotional intensity reduced—indicating that high arousal might spontaneously drive people to the language in which they can most fully (or automatically) express that arousal *(Williams et al., 2020)*. Their analysis suggests that when emotion runs high, cognitive control is lowered and bilinguals may revert to their emotionally dominant tongue, whereas mild positive emotions might be handled in either language more flexibly *(Williams et al., 2020; Pavlenko, 2014)*.

This has fascinating social implications. A bilingual person might appear to have "different personalities" in different languages—a trope sometimes noted humorously in multicultural settings. For example, someone might be more reserved when speaking Japanese but quite boisterous in English, or more polite in French but more blunt in Russian, aligning with the cultural norms each language embodies *(Grosjean, 2010)*. Part of this is adapting to social expectations (pragmatic competence), but part may be that the emotions themselves feel differently accessible. A French–English bilingual may find it easier to say *I love you* in English than *Je t'aime* in French, because the French phrase feels weightier and more intimately tied to deep feelings, whereas the English words, while understood, might roll off with less inner vulnerability. On the other hand,

some emotions might be more readily accessed in the second language if the first language has taboos. For instance, speakers from cultures where discussing sexuality or mental health is stigmatized might find it liberating to talk about those topics in English (an L2) because English words aren't loaded with the same shame or discretion they learned in their native terms *(Pavlenko, 2014)*. Essentially, a second language can sometimes function like an emotional "filter" or, conversely, an "escape," allowing expression of things that would be hard to admit in one's mother tongue.

Psychologically, using a foreign language has been found to induce a more utilitarian, less emotional mode of thinking—a phenomenon called the **foreign language effect**. Studies where people make moral decisions (like trolley-problem dilemmas) have shown that people are more likely to make coldly rational choices (sacrificing one to save five, for instance) when considering the problem in their second language, compared to their native language in which they respond with more emotion-based aversion *(Costa et al., 2014; Hayakawa et al., 2017)*. This suggests that an L2 can provide emotional distance, dampening instinctive gut reactions. In daily emotional life, that might translate to someone being less anxious when talking about a phobia in an L2, or less angry when cursing in an L2—essentially, the emotional color is a few shades paler. Indeed, bilingual writers have described feeling like a slightly different self in each language, precisely because their emotional repertoires shift.

However, it's crucial to note that context and proficiency matter. Immigrants who use an L2 (say, English) for decades and primarily in emotional situations (like family life in a new country) can come to develop just as strong emotional connections in that language. In some cases, the language in which one first says *I love you* to a partner, or experiences a tragedy, becomes deeply emotionally salient regardless of whether it was L1 or L2. Furthermore, not all bilinguals experience a big split; balanced bilinguals who grew up using two languages from early childhood may have a more blended emotional encoding. Still, the majority do sense some difference, and this is supported by aggregated research findings *(Dewaele, 2008; Pavlenko, 2014)*.

One important real-world application of understanding bilingual emotional dynamics is in **therapy and counseling** for multilingual individuals. Therapists often ask which language a client feels more comfortable or real in when expressing certain feelings. A multilingual person processing trauma might switch to their native language when crying or venting anger, but then prefer a second language to analyze or intellectualize the experience. Sensitive clinicians take these cues to navigate between languages in sessions, ensuring the patient can both feel and reflect in the languages that serve each purpose *(Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2015)*. **Legal settings** also grapple with this: testimony given in a second language might lack some emotional nuance or intensity that it would have if given in the mother tongue, which could affect jurors' perceptions *(Dewaele, 2010)*. Skilled interpreters and cultural consultants are aware of these subtleties.

In summary, the bilingual experience strongly reinforces that language and emotion are intertwined. By straddling two (or more) languages, bilinguals effectively illuminate the boundaries and influences of each on their inner emotional life. As one bilingual writer quipped, *"I swear in Spanish, but I save my secrets for English"*—highlighting that different languages may house different emotional domains of one's life. Scientific studies confirm that bilinguals' hearts and minds respond distinctively depending on the linguistic context *(Harris et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2020)*. These insights remind us that to truly understand someone's emotions, it can be crucial to understand the language through which those emotions are being filtered. For the bilingual individual themselves, being aware of this can be empowering: if expressing grief feels too intense in one language, another tongue might allow a safer outlet—or vice versa, when one wants to really connect with a buried feeling, using the language of childhood might unlock it. The languages we speak are not just interchangeable channels; each is a lens with its own focal length for the heart. As such, bilinguals live with multiple lenses—sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent—giving them a unique perspective on how profoundly language shapes emotional reality.

Conclusion

Language and emotion are inextricably linked, forming a feedback loop that is fundamental to the human experience. As we have seen, language serves as a mirror of emotion, reflecting a culture's values and nuances—yet it is also a mold, actively shaping how feelings are understood and even felt. Different cultures carve up the emotional landscape in distinctive ways through words and expressions: what is *heartbreak* in one tongue might be *saudade* in another—the Portuguese term for a deeply nostalgic longing—each capturing facets the other leaves out. These linguistic differences are not superficial. They influence how we categorize a crying face or a fit of laughter, how we judge someone's emotional reaction, and how we make sense of our own inner turbulence.

Cross-disciplinary research supports the notion that while the capacity for basic affect may be universal, the categorical emotions humans experience are partially a cultural construction, with language as a key building material *(Barrett, 2017; Gendron et al., 2014)*. We found that speakers of diverse languages do not always agree on where one emotion ends and another begins—the boundaries are drawn according to the lexicon they have learned *(Gendron et al., 2014; Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*. Words act as anchors for perception; without them, we rely on broader intuitive impressions (e.g., simply good vs. bad feelings), and with them, we gain finer discrimination *(Widen & Russell, 2008; Lindquist & Gendron, 2015)*. From the Himba of Namibia to bilingual immigrants in New York, people illustrate in myriad ways that language guides emotional awareness. In practical terms, this means that increasing one's emotional vocabulary—even by borrowing foreign terms or learning a new language—can enrich one's emotional intelligence and empathy. Each new word is like a lens sharpening our view of a particular feeling.

Understanding the linguistic shaping of emotion has significant implications. In an age of global interaction, being attuned to these differences can foster better cross-cultural communication and empathy. Rather than assuming someone is cold, overly emotional, or inscrutable, we might consider how their language conventions influence their emotional expressions. For instance, a Japanese colleague's stoicism or an Italian colleague's expressiveness in a meeting might both be better understood in light of their cultural emotion scripts, as opposed to knee-jerk judgments about personality. On the level of international relations and multicultural communities, acknowledging that languages encapsulate different emotional worlds could improve everything from diplomacy to customer service—anytime we deal with feelings across a language barrier. Even technology must take this into account: artificial-intelligence systems aiming to recognize or respond to human emotions (in, say, sentiment analysis or facial-expression reading) must be culturally informed. As **Leshin et al. (2023)** warned, an emotion-detecting AI that ignores linguistic-cultural differences might "misinterpret people's expressions," underscoring the need for culturally aware design *(Leshin et al., 2023)*.

Within individuals, the interplay of language and emotion opens interesting possibilities for emotional growth and regulation. Psychologists have found that simply labeling an emotion in words can help manage it—a practice now used in mindfulness and therapy ("name it to tame it"). Our review suggests that using the right word, one that truly fits the felt experience (perhaps drawn from any language), can provide a cathartic clarity. Conversely, lacking a word can leave emotions amorphous and harder to handle. Hence, learning from the rich lexicons of the world—the Icelandic term *þetta reddast* for a kind of optimistic resilience, or the Korean *han* for sorrowful lament mixed with hope—might not only be intellectually enlightening but emotionally liberating. We also see that for bilingual people, choosing the language of expression is an emotional tool: one language may allow more intensity, another more distance, enabling bilinguals to navigate their feelings by code-switching as needed *(Williams et al., 2020)*.

Ultimately, exploring how language shapes emotion across cultures reinforces a humbling and beautiful truth about humanity. We all laugh, love, fear, and mourn—those capacities are in our shared biology. Yet the way we laugh, the flavor of our love, the shades of our fear, the rituals of our mourning are deeply colored by culture and language. Emotions are often touted as a universal language, but as we have shown, actual languages profoundly influence emotions. Rather than a universal language, emotions are a universal story told in 7,000 tongues. Each tongue tells it a bit differently. By listening to these differences, we gain a more complete understanding of the human heart. We become, in effect, emotionally multilingual—able to empathize with experiences that our own language may not emphasize. In a global era, this empathy is invaluable. It helps transform what could be cultural collisions into opportunities for connection, as we learn to see emotional expressions not through a monolithic lens but within their cultural-linguistic context.

In closing, the study of language and emotion teaches us that neither words nor feelings exist in a vacuum. As language scholar **Claire Kramsch** eloquently put it, *"Language is the road map of a culture."* If so, then emotion words are the landmarks on that map—guiding us through the terrain of joy and sorrow that people navigate. The scientific evidence and examples across cultures make one thing clear: change the language, and you change the map. Happiness might be a hill in one culture and a valley in another; anger, a fire or a hot fluid or a sharp arrow, depending on the metaphors provided. But by exchanging our maps and learning from each other's lexicons, we can all travel a little further into understanding the diverse richness of human emotion.

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