

A Corpus Study of Linguistic-Cultural Conceptualization of FEAR in Chinese and Russian

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Abstract

This study conducted a corpus analysis of the lexical and grammatical representation of the FEAR emotion in Taiwan Mandarin and Russian, focusing on four common fear words which mean ‘to fear’ and function as ‘predicate’. The dataset contains 4,433 instances of *hàipà*, 1,202 *kěpà* instances, 733 *bojat’sja* instances, and 617 *strashno* instances. In the clause, the *hàipà* construction usually includes the nominative experiencer and the accusative stimulus; for *kěpà*, the majority rather include the nominative stimulus only. In Russian, *bojat’sja* appears in the nominative construction, but *strashno* mainly occurs in the dative-impersonal construction, preferably without the mention of the stimulus. The results, together, reflect universality and specificity in the conceptualization of FEAR, which have to do with the agentive and the patientive views. The distinction between ‘what somebody does’ and ‘things happen to somebody’, and the emphasis on different emotion roles by virtue of structure shape linguistic-cultural conceptualization across the two languages.

1 Introduction

For the understanding of the role of culture in human conceptualization, emotion has long been a focus of interest in many areas of study, including anthropology, psychology, and linguistics, among others (see the overviews in Ogarkova 2013). As “[I]anguage is at the nexus of cognition, on the one

hand, and culture on the other” (Majid 2012: 432), the linguistic representation of emotion across languages is an essential indication of conceptualization and cultural universality and specificity. The past cross-linguistic comparison largely rest upon the fine-grained semantic analysis of emotion vocabularies which provided evidence for the reality of culture. Wierzbicka and colleagues (1992, 1999, 2007) also proposed universal semantic primitives as the natural metalanguage for examining the semantic similarities and differences of emotion words across languages.

The relationship among language, culture, and conceptualization can further be manifested in grammatical constructions. Wierzbicka (1992, 1998, 1999) found that English favors the adjectival structure, whereas Russian prefers the verbal structure. The difference reflects the English speakers’ focus on the subjective inner state of the experiencer and the Russian speakers’ emphasis on the entity or thought linked with the emotion state respectively. In Semin et al. (2002), the Dutch emotion lexicons were found to have more emotion nouns, suggesting independence and individuality in the culture; in Hindustani lexicon, the use of more emotion verbs rather reveals the culture of interdependence. In discourse, Pavlenko (2002) studied the cross-linguistic expression of emotions in oral narratives produced by English and Russian subjects. The study confirmed the use of the adjectival structure in English and that of the verbal structure in Russian. The narrative data further attested that the Russian narrators focused

more on facial expressions, body language, and external behaviors. In Apresjan's (2013) corpus study of English and Russian emotional etiquettes, the maxims of self-esteem and non-humiliation appeared to influence the English emotional etiquettes, while the maxim of modesty affected the Russian etiquettes. "Russian speakers, en masse, tend to be at the same time more self-deprecating and supercilious, whereas English speakers maintain a greater communicational parity" (Apresjan 2013:554). Altogether, the previous studies have demonstrated the close relationship among linguistic emotion, thought, and culture in words, grammar, and discourse.

What still remains unclear is whether the speakers of a language have lexical and grammatical preferences that represent people's habitual conceptualization of emotion, and whether the preferences, if any, are language- and culture-specific. The current study addresses the issues and conducts a corpus analysis of the linguistic representation of the FEAR emotion across two typologically and culturally different languages – Taiwan Mandarin Chinese (hereafter 'Chinese') and Russian. FEAR is a basic emotion concept; its linguistic representation is highly language-specific and culture-specific (Wierzbicka 1986). In the emotion literature, the Russian fear words were mainly compared to the English counterparts without much quantitative analysis for the understanding of linguistic preferences, habitual conceptualization, and culture.

The current study focuses on four common fear words which mean 'to fear/be fearful' and function as predicates – the Chinese *hàipà* and *kěpà* and the corresponding Russian *bojat'sja* and *strashno*. Their respective occurrence in various grammatical constructions is analyzed with regard to how the two major semantic roles, namely 'experiencer' and 'stimulus', are expressed in the clausal emotion events. The experiencer is the sentient entity that has the fear emotion evoked; the stimulus is the person, event, or state of affairs that evokes the emotion of the experiencer. With the corpus data, quantitative analysis is also carried out to understand the lexical and grammatical preferences for the expression of FEAR in the two languages, the habitual conceptualizations of FEAR, and the role of culture in the conceptualization.

2 Data and Methods

The study carries out a corpus analysis of four fear verbs. The contextual information is necessary to ensure that the fearful emotion comes into play in the clause or in context. The data also provide a wide range of situations or state of affairs in which the fear words are used to express the emotion, and the frequency of grammatical usages, all revealing similarities and differences between the two languages.

The Chinese data are from the Taiwan Chinese Traditional Gigaword 2 Corpus. It consists of 382-million-word news data from the Xinhua News Agency from 1990 to 2002. The word *hàipà* has the frequency of 11.65 per million usages in the corpus; 4,433 instances function as predicates. The usages of the other fear word *kěpà* are 6.97 per million, and a total of 1,202 instances are predicates. The Russian data are from the 209-million-word Main Corpus of the Russian National Corpus. In order to compare the Chinese and the Russian data on the same basis, the search of *bojat'sja* (бояться) and *strashno* (страшно) is subject to the news texts from 1990 to 2002. The use of *bojat'sja* as predicate yields 733 instances. For the other fear word *strashno*, its adjectival form *strashnyj* (страшный) is included since both can function as predicate. The data consist of 617 instances.

The grammatical constructions in which the fear words occur are investigated in terms of 'the clause', which consists of a main predicate and its argument(s) (Thompson & Couper-Kuhlen 2005). Each clause refers to a fear event that involves the experiencer and/or the stimulus. Then, the semantic and morpho-syntactic manifestation of the clausal instances is examined to provide linguistic evidence for the discussion of language, conceptualization, and culture.

3 Chinese fear words – *hàipà* and *kěpà*

Of all the 4,433 instances of *hàipà*, they occur in four types of the nominative construction. Table 1 provides an example for each type and the frequency distribution. First, the large majority of the *hàipà* instances comprise a nominative experiencer and an accusative stimulus (I) The stimulus can come before the verb by the use of the accusative marker *duì/duìyú* (II). A small portion occurs in the causative construction where *lìng*

‘make’/rang ‘let’/jiào ‘make’ is the main predicate. The stimulus takes the nominative role as the subject, whereas the experiencer plays the accusative role in the object position (III). Finally, 18.7% of the instances merely include the experiencer in the clause; what the experiencer actually fears is unknown in the clause and has to be inferred from the context. As shown in Table 1, the nominative-experiencer-and-accusative-stimulus pattern prevails among the various types of usages.

Table 1. *Hàipà* and grammatical constructions

| Nominative | | Accusative / <i>dùiyú</i> -Accusative | | | |
|---|-------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| I | Experiencer | <i>hàipà</i> | Stimulus | | 75.3% |
| 遊客 ‘tourists’ 害怕 ‘fear’ 土石流 ‘mud slides’ | | | | | |
| II | Experiencer | | Stimulus | <i>hàipà</i> | 1.2% |
| 他 ‘he’ 對 ‘accusative marker’ 這兩個人 ‘the two persons’ 實是 ‘really’ 害怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | |
| III | Stimulus | Causative <i>líng/ràng/jiào</i> | Experiencer | <i>hàipà</i> | 4.8% |
| 外面的變化 ‘the change outside’ 令 ‘make’ 人 ‘people’ 害怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | |
| IV | Experiencer | | | <i>hàipà</i> | 18.7% |
| 弟弟 ‘the younger brother’ 很 ‘very’ 害怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | |

Another Chinese fear word for the study is *kěpà*. Of all the 1,202 instances as predicates, the overwhelming majority include the stimulus subject without the experiencer in the clause (I). The nominative stimulus can also take part in the causative construction consisting of the accusative experiencer that is followed by a feeling verb such as *juéde* or *gǎndào* (II). Last, without the stimulus, the experiencer can be the nominative subject, also followed by a feeling verb prior to *kěpà*. As shown in Table 2, the mere mention of the stimulus as the nominative subject is most preferred.

Table 2. *Kěpà* and grammatical constructions

| Nominative | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|------|
| I | Stimulus | | | <i>kěpà</i> | 98.0% | |
| 心態 ‘mentality’ 的 ‘associative marker’ 殘障 ‘handicap’ 最 ‘most’ 可怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | | |
| II | Stimulus | Causative <i>líng/ràng/jiào</i> | Experiencer | Feeling verb <i>juéde/gǎndào</i> | <i>kěpà</i> | 1.6% |
| 接著而來 ‘follow’ 的 ‘associative marker’ 大雨 ‘heavy rain’ 特報 ‘special report’ 才 ‘then’ 讓 ‘make’ 人 ‘people’ 覺得 ‘feel’ 可怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | | |
| III | Experiencer | | | <i>juéde/gǎndào</i> | <i>kěpà</i> | 0.4% |
| 他們 ‘they’ 通常 ‘usually’ 進 ‘enter’ 醫院 ‘hospital’ 治療 ‘take treatment’ 時 ‘when’ 會 ‘will’ 覺得 ‘feel’ 痛苦 ‘pain’ 和 ‘and’ 可怕 ‘fear’ | | | | | | |

Between the two Chinese fear verbs, *hàipà* is nearly four times more commonly used than *kěpà*. Despite the quantitative difference, they each exhibit distinct types of structure for the expression of the fear emotion. For *hàipà*, the most preferred type of construction is to have the nominative experiencer and the accusative stimulus in the

clause. As to *kěpà*, the overwhelming majority rather take part in the construction with the mere mention of the nominative stimulus. The two grammatical preferences evidence the lexical categorization of FEAR and the habitual ways the Chinese speakers conceptualize the emotion.

The next section investigates the way the Russian speakers express FEAR for understanding the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural emotion conceptualization.

4 Russian fear words – *bojat’sja* and *strashno*

The dataset includes 733 instances of *bojat’sja* and 617 instances of *strashno* and its adjectival form *strashnyj*. According to the Dictionary of Russian Language (Evgen’jeva 1999), *bojat’sja* means ‘to experience fear’, which is closest in meaning to the Chinese *hàipà*. *Strashno* is about the feeling of fear, and *strashnyj* about arousing and filling with the feeling of fear. The Chinese counterpart is *kěpà* which needs to co-occur with *juéde* or *gǎndào* ‘to feel’ in Types II and III (see Table 2).

Kalyuga (2005) has proposed several types of structure for Russian emotion verbs as a whole. However, without quantitative analysis, people’s lexical and syntactic preferences are not known. This section, based on the corpus data, provides quantitative analysis of different grammatical usages. For *bojat’sja*, Table 3 presents four types of grammatical construction and their respective frequency distribution. Overall, *bojat’sja* takes part in the nominative structure with the experiencer in the subject position. In most cases, the stimulus is marked as genitive (II) or infinitive/clausal complement (III). Rarely does it take the accusative case (I). Finally, a small portion of the Russian instances includes the mere mention of the experiencer in the clause (IV).

Table 3. *Bojat’sja* and grammatical constructions

| | Nominative | Accusative | Genitive | Infinitive/clausal complement | |
|---|-------------|------------|----------|-------------------------------|-------|
| I | Experiencer | Stimulus | бояться | | 1.0% |
| Я ‘I’ эту комнату ‘this room’ очень ‘very’ боялась ‘feared’ | | | | | |
| II | Experiencer | | бояться | Stimulus | 43.5% |
| Он ‘he’ боялся ‘feared’ поражений ‘defeats’ | | | | | |
| III | Experiencer | | бояться | Stimulus | 39.5% |
| (a) Ребенок ‘child’ боится ‘fears’ ходить ‘to go’ в ‘to’ школу ‘school’ (b) Я ‘I’ боялся ‘feared’ что ‘that’ тебя ‘you (accusative)’ арестуют ‘(they) will arrest’ | | | | | |
| IV | Experiencer | | бояться | | 16.0% |
| Я ‘I’ очень ‘very’ боялась ‘feared’ | | | | | |

Table 4 presents the three types of dative-impersonal construction for the usages of another fear word -- *strashno/strashnyj*. Each type has a dative experiencer and an emotion adverb functioning as the predicate. The stimulus can be marked as nominative (II) or appear in the infinitive/clausal complement (III). In most cases, the clause does not include the stimulus (I).

Table 4. *Strashno* and grammatical constructions

| Dative | | Nominative | | Infinitive/clausal complement | |
|--|-------------|------------|----------|-------------------------------|-------|
| I | Experiencer | | страшно | | 54.1% |
| Вам 'you (dative)' будет 'will' страшно 'be fearful' | | | | | |
| II | Experiencer | | страшный | Stimulus | 26.7% |
| Им 'they (dative)' не 'not' страшны 'be fearful' никакие 'not any' беды 'troubles' | | | | | |
| III | Experiencer | | страшно | Stimulus | 19.2% |
| (a) Мне 'I (dative)' страшно 'be fearful' об 'about' этом 'this' подумать 'to think' | | | | | |
| (b) Ему 'he (dative)' не 'not' страшно 'be fearful' что 'that' пойдут '(they) will go' воевать 'to fight wars' его 'his' дети 'children' | | | | | |

In the corpus, the occurrence of *bojat'sja* is as frequent as *strashno*, but their grammatical preferences diverge. First, *bojat'sja* appears in the nominative construction, but *strashno* takes part in the dative-impersonal construction. Second, the single mention of the dative experiencer prevails for *strashno* (54.1% for Type I in Table 4), but the mere mention of the nominative experiencer for *bojat'sja* is not frequent (16% for Type IV in Table 3). The differences, again, demonstrate the lexical categorization and varied habitual conceptualizations of FEAR.

The next section investigates the way the Russian speakers express FEAR for understanding the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural emotion conceptualization.

5 Language, conceptualization, and culture

The corpus findings presented in the previous sections evidence that different fear words, whether in Chinese or Russian, exhibit distinct linguistic preferences which reveal the usual ways the speakers think about FEAR. In this section, these lexical-grammatical preferences are then used to discuss linguistic universality and specificity in the habitual conceptualization of FEAR, and their relationship with culture.

At the lexical level, the categorization of the FEAR vocabularies is evident. *Hàipà* is preferred over *kěpà* in Chinese, but the word preference between *bojat'sja* and *strashno* in Russian is not

apparent. At the grammatical level, the preferred constructions for different vocabularies also diverge within the same language. To account for the linguistic divergence in relation to conceptualization and culture, the study distinguishes between the agentive and the patientive perspectives toward emotion (Wierzbicka 1992). Holding the agentive view, people emphasize action and volition. This cultural view is typically realized by the nominative or nominative-like construction. The patientive view, on the other hand, emphasizes impotence due to people's limitations and constraints. This cultural view of patientivity is usually realized by the non-nominative structure, such as the dative or dative-like construction in Russian.

For *hàipà* and *bojat'sja*, both occur in the nominative construction. The large majority has the experiencer as the subject in the two languages. The stimulus in Chinese mostly takes the object role, whereas in Russian, the stimulus is either in the genitive case or in the infinitive/clausal complement. Altogether, 76.5% of the Chinese instances and 84% of the Russian counterparts consist of the two semantic roles within the clause. The consistent grammatical preference manifests the agentive view toward emotion, as the Chinese and Russian people habitually conceptualize FEAR as if the agent-like experiencer actively engages in and undertakes the emotion being evoked by the stimulus. Agentivity is also a prevalent way to describe emotions in most European languages (Majid 2012). Moreover, Wierzbicka (1992) has claimed that *bojat'sja* revealed the Russian cultural view that the emotion is self-induced and being evoked internally rather than by external causes. In our data, only 16% of all the Russian instances do not include the stimulus in the clause. In Chinese, the lack of the stimulus takes only 18.7% of all the data. The low occurrence rates appear to demonstrate that the self-induced view is not as dominant as the agentive perspective in the two languages. Cross-cultural similarities are thus attested by the grammatical preferences of *hàipà* and *bojat'sja*.

Linguistic specificity is rather found in the usages of *kěpà* and *strashno*. The Chinese *kěpà*, just like *hàipà*, predominantly occurs in the nominative structure, but the stimulus functions as the subject without the experiencer in the clause. *Strashno*, which is used in the dative construction with the

experiencer being marked as dative, shows the opposite preference – most of the instances do not include the stimulus. The two commonly-used structures in the two languages appear to manifest the shared cultural view of patientivity, still with language-specific concerns. On the part of the Chinese speakers, the mere mention of the stimulus emphasizes the thing that evokes FEAR, implicating that the implicit experiencer is passive and patient-like in the emotion event. On the part of the Russian speakers, it has been well accepted that the dative-impersonal pattern conveys the idea that the experiencer is impotent and passive, as the fear emotion goes beyond the experiencer's control (Wierzbicka 1992). Nonetheless, the preferred single mention of the experiencer in the clause does not align with Wierzbicka's (1992) general claim that the Russian speakers tend to focus on the entity linked with the emotion state. Our corpus data show that, at least for *strashno*, the main concern is the passive inner state of the experiencer. Language specificity thus lies in the emphasis on the stimulus in Chinese, but on the experiencer in Russian.

In summary, within a language, different lexical words have diverse usages. The results not only demonstrate the linguistic categorization of FEAR, different emotion words that tend to occur in particular constructions bear out the varied habitual conceptualizations of FEAR. Across languages, linguistic universality and specificity in the conceptualization of FEAR can be related to the agentive and the patientive cultural views toward emotion. The distinction between 'what somebody does' and 'things happen to somebody', and the emphasis on different semantic roles shape linguistic-cultural conceptualization across the two languages.

6 Conclusion

It is universal for people to use language to express emotion, yet the linguistic representation reflecting the emotion conceptualization is shaped by culture. This study contributes to the understanding of the preferred lexical and grammatical choices for the expression of FEAR in Chinese and Russian, based on sizable amounts of corpus data. The distinct linguistic preferences reveal different habitual conceptualizations of emotion and their relationship with various cultural views. In the

future, it is hoped that written data of various types and spoken data will be available for further discussion. The findings can also be used to investigate the strength of linguistic specificity and cultural views on learning Chinese or Russian as a foreign language.

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