

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH ON EMOTION CONCEPTS (COMMENTARY ON CHOI & HAN)

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ABSTRACT. Choi & Han conceive *shimcheong* as a specific Korean emotion concept that can be considered as an extended empathy embedded in Korean culture. This article analyzes from a conceptualist perspective the problems of translation in cross-cultural research about emotion concepts and the necessity of differentiating emotion concepts and emotional experience. Everyday concepts of emotions across languages and cultures are not mere tools for understanding emotions. They have to be considered as an object of study in itself.

Keywords: concepts, cross-cultural research, emotion concepts, translation

Choi and Han are two Korean researchers who have conducted an interesting study on a native emotion concept. Interestingly, and against most of the research in Cross-Cultural Psychology, Choi and Han's linguistic and cultural framework is not English speaking Western culture but Korean speaking Asian culture.

In this article Choi & Han (2008) conceive *shimcheong* as a specific Korean emotion concept. The main focus of the article is the description of *shimcheong* as it is understood within a cultural system of concepts, but they also establish certain cross-cultural comparisons. They argue that *shimcheong* as a psychological experience might also exist in Western cultures, and that concepts as *empathy*, *sympathy* and *compassion* may include the same aspects of *shimcheong*. However, they explain that *empathy* connects individuals whereas *shimcheong* works to serve we-ness, which is a different way of understanding social or interpersonal relations that differs from the west. Therefore, they conclude that *shimcheong* might be equivalent to an extended *empathy* embedded in Korean culture.

In this way, they raise fundamental questions for the cross-cultural analysis of emotion concepts. How can we compare emotion concepts across cultures? What is the relation between emotion concepts and emotional experience? How does the cross-cultural research approaches to the problem of translation?

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From Representation to Experience

One of the problems of the research on emotion is the lack of in-depth analysis of everyday emotion categories and its relationship with emotional experience. Fernandez-Dols & Russell (2003) describe how the issue of translation is approached from different philosophical positions. From a realistic perspective, emotion words are mere labels that express subjacent biological entities and therefore, one-to-one translations are possible because they approximately express those universal entities. On the contrary, from a nominalist perspective, emotions are understood as concepts that are embedded in a cultural system, the biological aspects or the emotional experience only have a meaning in the context of specific cultural concepts. Therefore, translations between emotion terms are not possible because meaning is distorted in translation.

A more fruitful alternative to the realistic and nominalist approaches is the conceptualist perspective. This perspective combines the strengths of the realistic and nominalist perspective, it defends that emotion terms express everyday concepts that are part of the emotional experience, but the emotional experience cannot be reduced to the analysis of the concepts. Therefore, it is necessary to study the relation between emotion concepts and emotional experience.

The conceptualist approach provides important insights about the differentiation between emotional experiences (phenomenological level), emotion concepts (representational level), the problematic, non-univocal relations between experience and representation, and the consequences of these problems for conducting cross-cultural comparisons through translations. From a conceptualist approach it is necessary to differentiate between the level of the emotional experience and the emotion concepts. Everyday concepts do not refer directly to the experiential sphere, but to a representational level by which the emotional experience is categorized depending on its degree of similarity with a mental script. Both levels of analysis are related but it is not possible to establish a simple and direct relationship between them (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Fernández-Dols & Russell, 2003).

It is important to analyze which are the components of emotional experience that increases the probability that an emotional experience is categorized as a specific everyday category and how these categorizations influence the emotional experience. For that purpose, it would be necessary to study in detail the everyday concepts of emotions in different cultures to be able to establish cross-cultural comparisons analyzing the relationship between the everyday concepts and the emotional experience.

The Translation Problem

Emotion words such as *happiness*, *fear* or *shame* do not express scientific classical concepts defined by necessary and sufficient features, they express English

everyday categories. Everyday concepts are better represented as probabilistic concepts with an internal structure with better and worse examples of the category and fuzzy boundaries. Therefore, one-to-one translations become problematic (Fehr & Russell, 1984, 1991; Russell & Fehr, 1994).

In the field of cross-cultural research in emotion categories, the translation problem has gained an increasing concern throughout the years and many authors are aware that translation equivalents might not express exactly the same concept (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mauro, Sato & Tucker, 1992; Parkinson, Fischer & Manstead, 2005; Rodriguez Mosquera Manstead, & Fischer, 2000). However, most of the cross-cultural comparison of emotion concepts has relied only on emotion terms and one-to-one translations. Most studies ask participants to recall an experience of *X* (emotion term) and make simple and direct translations to other languages assuming in an implicit way that the translation equivalents express comparable categories.

The problem is that most of the times, these studies do not investigate to what extent the equivalent translations express comparable concepts. There have been documented many cases in which there are unique emotional terms like *amae* in Japan (Doi, 1973) that do not have equivalent translations in many languages and there is also evidence that suggests that emotional experience is categorized in similar and different ways across cultures (Russell, 1991).

However, it is not clear that these differences in the level of the concepts necessarily imply differences in the level of the emotional experience. The fact that there is not an English word equivalent to *amae*, does not necessarily mean that there cannot be a similar emotional experience or that a similar concept can exist but without a word to express it (see Niiya, Ellsworth & Yamaguchi, 2006). At the same time, if we find similar raw elements in an emotional experience in different cultures, the categorization of this experience into different cultural concepts or concepts that might be hypercognized in one culture and hypocognized in another (Levy, 1984) might influence the different components of the emotional experience.

Our research (Hurtado de Mendoza, 2007) highlights the problems and risks of conducting studies that rely only on emotion words and one-to-one translations. We analyzed the internal structure of the concept of *shame* in the US and the concept of *vergüenza* in Spain in order to see to what extent both categories overlap and not to assume in a direct and unproblematic way that *shame* and *vergüenza* express the same or comparable categories.

We asked five bilinguals to list the translations of *vergüenza* to English and they provided different terms. *Shame* was the translation mentioned more frequently, followed by *embarrassment*, *disgrace*, *shyness*, and *bashful*. In the first study, participants provided free descriptions of the concept of *shame* in US and the concept of *vergüenza* in Spain. Based on this study, we asked participants from both countries to

rate several of the previous mentioned features depending on their degree of typicality within the category of *shame* in the US and the category of *vergüenza* in Spain.

Our findings suggested that the categories of emotion “*shame*” and “*vergüenza*” enclose different features or they share features with very different degree of typicality within each category, as we found significant differences in the typicality ratings of 25 out of 29 features. There were features such as moral transgression, humiliation, guilt, wrongdoing, regret or incongruence that were rated as most typical or very typical features of *shame* whereas they were rated as among the least typical or somewhat typical of *vergüenza*. On the contrary, features such as blush, ridicule, shyness, reluctant or presence of others were among the ones rated as most typical or very typical for *vergüenza* whereas they were rated as least typical or somewhat typical for *shame*.

There were some features that were similarly rated for *shame* and *vergüenza* either as very typical for both categories (unpleasant, uncomfortable, vicarious *shame/vergüenza ajena*, disappear, inhibited, social conventions), or as least typical or somewhat typical for both categories (such as anger, reprobation, virtue, to be the centre of others’ attention, punishment or family *shame*). But even these more similar features presented, in most cases, statistically significant differences between their average ratings of typicality.

Our results highlight the important divergences in the internal structure of the category *shame* and the category *vergüenza*. This type of study allows to analyze what are the typical and peripheral features of each category and to see to what extent and in which ways it might differ and overlap with other emotion concepts in other cultures. Once we have this analysis we can try to establish meaningful comparisons in the level of the features or in the level of the scripts.

With this argument we do not want to imply that it is only a problem of translation and that there is not cross-cultural variability in emotion concepts. We want to highlight, from a conceptualist approach, the necessity of conducting careful studies of everyday emotion categories and not to assume in an unproblematic way that equivalent translations express comparable categories because they are running the risk of comparing completely different features or scripts or scripts that differ in their degree of typicality.

Choi and Han on Shimcheong

Choi & Han’s description of *shimcheong* illustrates the complexity of everyday emotion concepts and how the meaning can change in different contexts. The authors explain that *shimcheong* is a Korean word that denotes a state of aroused mind concerning a particular situation occurred in a relationship. Normally it is related to a violation of expectations so it normally has a negative valence, as it is illustrated by its most common expressions (e.g. disappointed *shimcheong*, unfairly treated *shimcheong*)

but it can also be positive when desires are fulfilled in the context of a close relationship. However, the prototypical script of *shimcheong* has a negative connotation. In the prototypical script *shimcheong* arises when one perceives that another person does not behave as he or she would be expected in the context of a close relationship (e.g. failing to help). *Shimcheong* is described as a combination of initial emotion induced by the behavior of the partner and secondary emotion induced by negative evaluation of the self. As we can see *shimcheong* expresses a complex everyday concept that is formed by various features or scripts and its use depends on the specific context.

Choi & Han (this issue) describe *shimcheong* using various levels of analysis “*shimcheong* is a vital indigenous concept of Korean culture” (p.13), “*shimcheong* is a complex cultural emotion” (p. 1) or “*shimcheong* as a psychological experience” (p. 15). It is not clear if the authors are analyzing *shimcheong* as a concept or as an experience. However, most of the data they present is based on self-reports and people’s understandings of *shimcheong*. They analyze the meaning of the term based on dictionaries, the relation of *shimcheong* with other cultural concepts, *shimcheong* discourse, the prototypical script, folk beliefs, or people’s attribution of *shimcheong* to other persons. Therefore, we consider that this article is focusing mainly on the description of the everyday category of *shimcheong* and not on the level of the experience.

One of the remarkable aspects of this article is that the authors engage in a profound analysis of the concept of *shimcheong* focusing on various aspects of the concept and they use diverse sources of information like self-report studies, studies of attribution, dictionaries or newspapers. The article is full of examples and little vignettes extracted from newspapers or other sources which are very illustrative and it constitutes a promising perspective for the study of emotion concepts, which goes beyond the classical approach to emotion concepts. However, we think that it would have been worth to engage in a more systematic analysis of the newspapers or people’s understandings of the vignettes to further understand the concept of *shimcheong* (see Casado, 2003).

Choi & Han did not address in an explicit way the debate about translations in the context of the cross-cultural research about emotion concepts. Throughout the article the authors always use the Korean word *shimcheong* but they offer three possible translations “*empathy*”, “*compassion*” and “*sympathy*” that could be problematic.

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005) defines *empathy* as the ability to share someone else’s feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in their situation. It defines *sympathy* as an expression of understanding and care for someone else’s suffering and it defines *compassion* as a strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for the suffering or bad luck of others and a desire to help them.

As we see, the three concepts relate to situations in which the focus is the other person and they imply that the other person is suffering or in need.

The authors explain that *shimcheong* involves a process of “reading other people’s mind” that can be related to *empathy* and some examples like the president *shimcheong* that could also be linked to the English concepts of *sympathy* and *compassion*. However, in the prototypical script, *shimcheong* arises when a person perceives that a close person falls short in their behavior and therefore, *shimcheong* is described as a combination of initial emotion induced by the behavior of the partner and secondary emotion induced by negative evaluation of the self, which is illustrated by the most common uses “rejected *shimcheong*” “disappointed *shimcheong*” “treated unfairly *shimcheong*”. Therefore, in the prototypical *shimcheong* script the other person is not suffering or in need (as in *empathy* or *compassion*), but quite the opposite, the other person normally falls short in their behavior and is the one that is causing the suffering. Therefore, the fact that the authors refer to *empathy*, *sympathy* or *compassion* as possible translations makes the understanding of *shimcheong* confusing. Does it mean that it is not possible or desirable to try to find possible translations? How could we compare emotion concepts across cultures?

Our research illustrated the differences in the internal structure of the concept of *vergüenza* and its most feasible translation, *shame*. It also highlighted the problems of conducting cross-cultural research relying on emotion terms and simple and direct translations because they run the risk of comparing different concepts. However, even if one-to-one translations are problematic it is possible to find a cloud (set) of possible translations that might overlap in different degrees and in different ways. For example, in the case of the prototypical *shimcheong* script probably other translations such as “*hurt*” or “feeling of *injustice*” could be explored. In fact, Choi & Han (2008) report one study in which students had to list experiences of *shimcheong*, but in this case they translate it as *hurt* (p.8). Nevertheless, the concept of *shimcheong* might be broader than the concept of *hurt* and it seems to include other features related to the concept of *empathy* or *sympathy*. However, as we saw *empathy* and *sympathy* also present important differences with the prototypical script of *shimcheong*. As we can see, concepts are complex and they might include different features or different scripts which makes one-to-one translations problematic. For that purpose, it is necessary to conduct detailed studies of the everyday concepts and its possible translations to other languages but from a probabilistic perspective. One of the ways of comparing possible translations is through the analysis of the internal structure of a set of possible translations in order to see to what extent and in which ways they overlap.

Conclusions

Choi & Han’s approach will be very useful and relevant because they provide a detailed and in depth analysis of *shimcheong* by explaining various aspects such as the

prototypical script, discourse, people's attributions and its relation to other cultural concepts. This type of approach will allow the establishment more meaningful comparisons of emotion categories across cultures. The cross-cultural comparisons that they establish would be better achieved with a systematic comparison between the concept of *shimcheong* and its most feasible translations. Choi & Han's article is an important step because they conduct a detailed and non-reductionist analysis of an everyday category, which illustrates the need to consider everyday concepts in different cultures as an object of study in itself.

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