

Bilingual emotions: The untranslatable self

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Abstract

This paper is part of a broader work on the cultural construction of emotions as examined through a qualitative study with Greek/English bilingual/bicultural informants. The paper argues that there are emotions which are specific to certain languages and cultures and focuses on one example of untranslatable emotions: the Greek *stenahoria* (loosely translated as ‘discomfort/sadness/suffocation’) and the English *frustration*. The paper asserts that although a respective linguistic translation may not exist for these terms, they may, in fact, be the *cultural* translations of each other as shown by the descriptions given by bilinguals and their use in various cultural contexts. The use of bilingual informants in this research overcomes some of the methodological problems of previous work on the cultural and linguistic comparison of emotion terms. The author argues that bilinguals, as people who cross physical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, offer an optimal cross-cultural comparison of emotion terms because they subjectively experience two languages and two cultures.

Key words: bilingualism, cultural construction of emotions, discursive psychology, social constructionism.

Resumo

Este estudo forma parte dun traballo máis amplo sobre a construción cultural das emocións analizada nunha investigación cualitativa con informantes bilingües / biculturais en grego e inglés. O artigo esgrime que existen emocións que son específicas de certas linguas e culturas, e céntrase nun caso de emocións intraducíbeis: o grego *stenahoria* (traducido de maneira aproximada por ‘desacougo’, ‘tristura’, ‘abafo’) e o inglés *frustration*. No artigo afirmase que, malia non existir a correspondente tradución lingüística para estes termos, na realidade poden producirse traducións *culturais* dos mesmos, como o mostran as descrições dadas polos bilingües e o seu uso en diversos contextos culturais. O recurso a informantes bilingües nesta investigación supera algúns dos problemas metodolóxicos de traballos anteriores sobre a comparación cultural e lingüística dos termos de emoción. A autora argumenta que os bilingües, como persoas que traspasan límites físicos, lingüísticos e culturais, facilitan unha comparación intercultural óptima para os termos de emoción dado que subxectivamente conviven con dúas linguas e dúas culturas.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, construcción cultural das emocións, psicoloxía do discurso, construtivismo social.

1. Introduction¹

This paper, which draws on a larger body of work², examines bilingual people's experiences of emotions and how these experiences are connected to the larger debate on the cross-cultural variation of emotions. Current literature on language(s) and emotions is problematic in two ways: (1) the field lacks standards for comparing emotion terms, so the conclusions on the cross-cultural variation of emotions are often challenged; and (2) the samples of subjects and situations used in cross-cultural research are rarely equivalent. In what follows I aim to show that some of these methodological problems can be overcome by conducting research with bilinguals. Bilinguals, as people who cross physical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, offer an optimal population for cross-cultural comparison of emotion terms because they subjectively experience two languages and two cultures.

2. What is an emotion?: Review of the literature

Calhoun and Solomon (1984) offer a useful summary of the competing theories on emotion, discussing several models which address primarily how emotions can be distinguished from other mental phenomena and how emotions can be dissected into components or aspects. They propose five models which they refer to as sensational, physiological, behavioral, evaluative, and cognitive. I discuss all of these approaches in Panayiotou (2001); here I will focus on the cultural and constructivist approaches to the study of emotion.

Social constructionist approaches (e.g. Parrott & Harré, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1994b) argue that, while emotion may be accompanied by a bodily change, it is not constituted exclusively by that change. An emotion may be recognized in the face of another person—and even labeled as the other would label it—but the experience referred to by the label might be different if the interlocutor is from a different culture. The misreadings may even occur within the same culture, when one person's happy grin is perceived by another as an ironic smile. And across cultures, there may be an element of cultural bias in how we “read” such behaviors, that must be accounted for—hence, my support for a culture-inclusive theory.

These considerations suggest that any coherent and complete theory of emotion should include a strong linguistic and cultural element, a position supported by the

¹ The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers and the two editors of the special issue for their valuable help and comments during the preparation of this article.

² See Panayiotou (2001).

rich literature on the social construction of emotions (Kitayama et al., 1995; Rosaldo, 1980; Shaver et al., 1992; Wierzbicka, 1994a, 1998). An important argument for this position rests on the observation that emotions which are key in some cultures may be linguistically non-existent in others. Doi (1962, 1990), for example, argues that *amae*, a key emotion for understanding Japanese personality structure, cannot be directly translated into English. This emotion —loosely translated as “an interdependence arising from symbiosis and comfort in another person’s acceptance”— does not have an English equivalent because, he says, it cannot be taken out of its Japanese cultural context. Similarly, Lutz (1987, 1988) wrote that *fago*, an emotion she studied among the Ifaluk —loosely translated as ‘compassion/love/sadness’— does not have an English linguistic or cultural equivalent because the concept is non-existent in Anglophone cultures. Wierzbicka (1998) writes about *angst*, a German word she describes as “roughly a cross between ‘anxiety’ and ‘fear’ but with a touch of mystery or existential insecurity” (p. 161). *Angst*, which is not to be confused with the borrowed English term ‘angst’, is, according to Wierzbicka, more common and culturally salient than the word *Furcht* (roughly ‘fear’) —so, from a German point of view, this emotion is far more basic than fear. *Angst*, she says, is “a peculiarly German concept” (p. 163).

The literature also points to another set of emotion terms which, although linguistically translatable, are culturally untranslatable; in other words, these emotion terms have a cultural significance and meaning that differs from culture to culture. *Shame*, for example, can be translated into many languages; however, its cultural significance varies greatly ranging from the pivotal in so-called ‘shame cultures’ to the somewhat marginal in so-called ‘guilt cultures’ where emphasis is placed on a close relative, *guilt* (Stocker & Hegeman, 1996; Walbott & Scherer, 1995). For instance, *haji*, the Japanese translation of *shame* —described by Benedict (1946, in Kitayama et al., 1995) as “constituting the Japanese ethos”— results from “the failure to meet the expectations of relevant others” (Kitayama et al., 1995: 446). The Greek translation equivalent, *ntropi*, is related to “transgressing norms” (Walbott & Scherer, 1995).

Guilt is an interesting term in the sense that, although it is linguistically translatable in many languages, some researchers see it as a primary emotion (Carroll, 1985) while others see it as multifaceted and hence non-primary (Ekman, 1972). The literature on so-called ‘guilt cultures’ supports the idea that these cultures regulate social conduct through the internalization of compliance whereas so-called ‘shame cultures’ seem to regulate social conduct through external pressure on the individual (cf. Benedict, 1946; Johnson et al., 1987; Mead, 1937). Although this discussion will be continued in the analysis, it is important to note here that countries that do not share the Protestant ethic, such as Mexico, Venezuela, India, Brazil, France, Chile, Spain, Greece or Portugal, do not see guilt in the same way as countries with a strong Protestant ethic, such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, New Zealand, or the United States (Walbott & Scherer, 1995).

I conclude this section by highlighting the two distinct categories of emotion terms that will guide my analysis: (1) emotion words that cannot be linguistically translated; and (2) emotion words that, although linguistically translatable, remain culturally untranslatable.

3. Research questions

First, in deciding what to include and exclude from my discussion of bilingual emotions, I relied on the following fundamental aspects of what defines an emotion: (1) a biologically manifested element (such as blood pressure rising), (2) bounded by a bodily experience, (3) understood as the cognitive appraisal of a situation, (4) created and learned within a particular cultural meaning-making system, (5) constituted “in context”, and (6) determined by how language describes and catalogues the element in a particular culture. In this respect, *hunger* is not an emotion as it violates the last four premises, while *stenahoria*³ is, as it fulfills all six although not necessarily sequentially. *Stenahoria* is a socioculturally determined pattern of experience and expression which is acquired and is subsequently felt in the body and featured in specific social situations. In other words, I am not claiming that emotions begin as biologically generated elements, only that at some point they are biological as well. As my findings show, it is possible to learn an emotion in a new language/culture (so 3, 4, 5 and 6 are met), at which point the new cultural element manifests a physiological component as well⁴.

Second, the important analytic questions stemming from the aforementioned literature are:

(1) How does a bilingual/bicultural person make sense of linguistically untranslatable terms? For example, if a Greek/English bilingual is able to linguistically identify both the English term ‘frustrated’, for which there is no Greek translation, and the Greek term *stenahorieme* [a mixture of sadness, discomfort, and suffocation], for which there is no English translation, how does the bilingual make sense of this experience? And, if there is a conflict arising from this untranslatability, how do bilinguals resolve it?

(2) How does a bilingual/bicultural person understand culturally untranslatable emotion terms? In other words, how does a bilingual person make sense of shame and its equivalent *ntropi*? How does he or she understand *guilt* and its distinction from the equivalent *enohi*?

In the present paper I will focus on the first question and discuss linguistically untranslatable emotions. Before continuing, however, I will discuss my theoretical frameworks.

³ A mixture of ‘sadness/discomfort/suffocation’ (in Greek).

⁴ A further discussion of these issues can be found in Panayiotou (2001).

4. Theoretical framework

In this study I am making some assumptions that could, admittedly, be controversial. To begin with, I am affirming ‘culture’ as a valid and indeed indispensable construct (Wierzbicka, 1999: 240). According to Wierzbicka (1999: 240-241), “there can be no quarrel with the statement that cultures are not separate monads, but rather, heterogeneous, historically changing, interconnected and, quoting Wolf (1994), ‘continually exchanging materials’”. In fact, as Wierzbicka (1999: 241) also notes, “no one is more acutely aware of the reality of cultures than a bilingual who lives his or her life in two languages and two cultures (...)”. If, Wierzbicka says, bilinguals can attest to the existence of two languages, then, in the same manner, bicultural witnesses can confirm the reality of different cultures. I believe then that, while I may be treating ‘culture’ as a valid construct with which to conduct my analysis—thus sometimes giving the impression that I am using a ‘static’ tool—my informants, through their very act of crossing from culture to culture and switching from language to language, make this construct anything but static. Culture then in this study is defined as acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and to generate social behavior. This knowledge forms values, creates attitudes, and influences behavior. I am assuming, therefore, that culture is learned, shared by people who define themselves as members of a particular group, passed from one generation to the next, based on the human capacity to symbolize, adapt and change, and that it has a logic and structure of its own (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976).

In addition, the whole premise of my study is that every language contains its own “naïve picture of the world” including its own ‘ethnopsychology’ (Apresjan, 1974, in Wierzbicka, 1999: 34). As Wierzbicka (1999: 35) writes, by relying, uncritically, on ordinary English words we unwittingly fall prey to the “naïve picture” that is reflected in them. While this is precisely what I tried to establish in my study by showing that even the emotion terms we take for granted, like *love*, *shame*, and *guilt*, are culturally constructed, by writing up my findings I ran into the very problem that I am trying to counteract—that is, presenting bilingual findings in a monolingual form. While I have knowingly tried to circumvent some of these issues by providing “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the emotion terms in question, inevitably something may be “lost in translation” (Hoffman, 1989).

5. Research design

Since the focus of the study was the manifestation of linguistic phenomena, I used a case-study approach in which the primary focus was the language used by the participants. In this respect, my analysis lies within the framework of discursive and cultural psychology which sees emotions as psychologically equivalent to statements (Harré & Gillett, 1994).

My data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, one in Greek and one in English with each participant, a list of untranslatable emotions, and two scenarios. To get to the different ‘loci’ of emotions I supplied the participants with two lists of untranslatable emotions (Greek and English) as they emerged primarily through the first and second interviews. I then asked them to translate the words to the nearest possible meaning in the other language. This task was accented through the use of linguistically translatable but culturally untranslatable emotions, such as *anger* (Averill, 1982) or *love* (Derne, 1994) and by a subsequent question regarding both the Greek and English lists: “Where in your body do you feel this emotion?”.

A method similar to that employed by Hoffman and colleagues (1986) with Chinese/English bilinguals, was used to present a scenario to the bilinguals in this study. The story involves, in its two cultural versions, Andy, an American, and Andreas, a Cypriot who live, respectively, in the United States and Cyprus. I asked the participants to assume that Andy/Andreas is a person close to them⁵. The first reading of the scenario was in English and the participants were asked to describe their emotional reaction to the story. After the second interview, the participants were told the same story in Greek (with some changes to make it culture-appropriate) and questioned again about their emotional reaction (see also Tannen, 1986). A subsequent brief interview inquired about any possible differences in the two accounts. The story is given in Appendix A.

6. Findings

In this paper I focus on the findings from the interviews and, more specifically, on the untranslatable emotions of *frustration* and *stenahoria*.

6.1. Interviews

My findings from the interviews, presented below show an agreement both with the literature and with an earlier pilot study (Panayiotou, 1999).

⁵ I also asked who they were assuming this person to be —a friend, a brother, a cousin, etc.— as the participant’s definition of ‘closeness’ may also indicate a relevant cultural value that is related to his or her emotional reaction. Since an earlier pilot study indicated that the definition of closeness may be culture-specific, I did not want to bias the results by forcing Andy/Andreas to be either a friend or family member.

	Linguistically untranslatable emotions		Culturally untranslatable emotions	
	<i>Identified by respondents</i>	<i>Identified by researcher</i>	<i>Identified by respondents</i>	<i>Identified by researcher</i>
Single words	frustration resent alone/lonely <i>marazi</i> <i>ypohreosi</i> <i>talaporimenos-i</i> ⁶	<i>stenahoria</i>	love/ <i>agape</i> & in love/ <i>erotas</i> anger/ <i>thymos</i> shame/ <i>ntropi</i> embarrassment/ <i>ntropi</i> <i>ntreponne</i> / feel shy appreciation/ <i>ektimisi</i> gratitude/ <i>evgnomomyi</i>	guilt/ <i>enohi</i> jealousy/ <i>zilia</i> <i>rezili</i> / made a fool of myself <i>syginisi</i> moved nostalgia/ nostalgia
Expressions	need privacy	<i>Eho</i> <i>adynamia</i> <i>ston/stin...</i>	"enna perasonne" (living vs surviving; <i>katadikasmenos-i</i> ; optimism in US vs passivity in Cyprus) find/feel self/ lose self (unrestricted freedom; independence in US; everything is possible) sense of duty <i>ikogenia</i> <i>patriotismos</i> basic/ raw emotions	

[Greek words, as well as all Greek translations of English terms, are in *italics*. **Bold** is used to note those terms which were identified by more than one interviewee and which could also be tied into the existing literature].

Since there is a wealth of information in my interviews, in the present paper I focus mainly on the terms discussed by more than one interviewee and those that could be tied into existing literature⁷. Below, I briefly present two of the terms given above⁸.

6.2. Linguistically untranslatable emotions

6.2.1. Frustration

An English-Greek dictionary, *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek* (1998), translates *frustration* into Greek as *apogotepsi* [disappointment], *empodizo* [to hinder or to present an obstacle] or *mateosi* [to cancel]. Although ‘hinder’ and

⁶ ‘Tired’, ‘exhausted’, ‘worn out’. (Since Greek has a masculine and feminine form, these are noted here).

⁷ These are given in **bold** in the chart above.

⁸ A further discussion of these and other terms is given in Panayiotou (2001).

‘disappointment’ are given as synonyms by *Webster’s Thesaurus* (1999), I argue that the linguistic translation is, again, inexact. For example, in trying to find translations for these terms I feel very frustrated, but I am neither disappointed nor hindered in my goal. It is also interesting to note here that in my daily conversations with other Greek-English bilinguals, we all code-switch from Greek to English specifically to use the word *frustrated*, when describing a frustrating experience, as in “*Imoun polla frustrated me tin katastasi*”⁹ [I was very frustrated with the situation]. In fact, I have never heard a bilingual who is comfortable with code-switching opt for the aforementioned Greek words, when he or she could use *frustrated*.

Julia, an American in her late forties, who has been living in Cyprus for the last three years¹⁰, identified the term ‘frustration’ amidst talking about her experiences in Cyprus in our first interview:

It’s absolutely amazing that I don’t think I have met a single Cypriot who speaks English who is willing to speak Greek to me... and that’s frustrating. That’s very frustrating. I don’t think it’s just what I just told you, it’s not just that, it’s also... it has to do with their identity as a Greek speaker and someone who speaks English very well, they need to constantly assert that. That is a part of the identity that needs to constantly be negotiated and asserted. “I’m the Greek who speaks English, I’m the Greek Cypriot who speaks English very well, I’m well educated, and you, as a foreigner, are never going to speak my language as well as I speak yours”. There is a little bit of exclusion in that and a lot of self-confirmation. And that’s very frustrating to deal with. [Interview conducted in English]

Continuing to talk about this exclusionary experience that she has as an American Greek speaker in Cyprus, Julia kept stressing the word *frustration* and then brought up the issue of untranslatability:

Julia: I don’t think I ever felt at a loss in Greek when I was living there [in Greece]... for words or expressions to express myself emotionally... there’s some well known words that can’t be expressed though...

Alexia: Like what?

Julia: Well, I know one... because we were talking about that the other night... frustration... there’s no word for that in Greek and there isn’t an adequate way to say it...

Alexia: What would you say then in Greek?

Julia: Um... we were talking about this the other night... I suggested... you couldn’t say one word... you would say... I think I always used to say... something like *apogoteftika kai tsantistika* [disappointed and upset]. Because you can’t say *mplokharistika, empodistika* [blocked, hindered]... there’s nothing that you can say that would have the actual original meaning

⁹ Greek transliterations are given in *italics*, codeswitching is noted in **bold**, translations are by the author.

¹⁰ A brief description of each interviewee is given in Appendix B.

of frustrate... (pause). I know that most Greeks in Greece would translate it as *apogoiteftika* [disappointed] but I know that that's not enough because you don't have the frustration, frustration has this tension and that's not expressed in *apogoiteftika* but you get that in *tsantistika* but then in that it's almost like you are leaving the problem, I think, isn't it? So you can't get too close to it... [Interview conducted in English]

Struggling with the translation, Julia identifies two major points about 'frustration': its in-built tension and the disappointment. In fact, it is not only *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek* (1998) that translates *frustration* as *apogoitefsi* [disappointment] but also *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1984: 563) which defines the verb *to frustrate* as "to disappoint, deceive; to cause to have not effect; bring to nothing; counteract; prevent from achieving an objective". *Webster's* (1984: 563) also adds that in psychological terms, the verb means "to prevent from gratifying certain impulses or desires", while its synonyms "imply a depriving of effect or a rendering worthless of efforts directed to some end". It seems that Julia, who is also an English teacher, is picking up on these linguistic distinctions whereas the other interviewees have definitions of their own. Christina, a Greek Cypriot who lived in New York for ten years, says:

Eknevrismos, aghos, agonia [irritation, stress, anxiety or agony] but it's not that, is it? I too find that English because it's more with the times... it can express several things with one word... Like I'll fax something... fax not *tileomiotypo*, you need five minutes to say this in Greek... English is more convenient whereas Greek is more about philosophy, *pio kallitehnika* (more artsy or poetic). [Interview conducted in English]

Christina, then, sees English as a "more convenient" language, a language of shortcuts in which complicated notions may be expressed with simple, single words. In several instances during the interview she stresses that "language is just a tool" and the only difference for her is one of numbers: "I just have to use more words to explain something but then at the end of the day it's the same thing".

Leonidas, a Greek Cypriot who spent the first few years of his life in the US, noted that *frustrated* for him also encompasses a degree of anger and confusion:

Htiziamsenos [pissed off], no, *taragmenos* [disturbed]... *thymomenos* [angry]... *thymomenos* [angry] but not the kind that goes away but anger that marks you with a more permanent irritation... *syghysmenos* [confused] I guess... [Interview conducted in English]

This is a very different understanding of frustration, one that most likely resembles the Western psychological understanding of the word: a definition that has to do with anger and possibly aggression rather than disappointment and hindrance. What is very interesting is Leonidas' comment after I asked about the word *stenahoria*:

I don't think there is a word for this in English but could it be 'frustrated'? Now that I think about it, maybe that's it, maybe they are one word then... one word that covers both these feelings. [Interview conducted in English]

Lydia, a Greek-English bilingual in her late thirties, added another element to this description:

I had never thought about this before but now that we are talking about it maybe it, 'frustration', is like *stenahoria* because I feel both of them in the same place... like here [pointing to the middle of her chest]... it's like I feel constricted here... for both... here... [pointing].

[Interview conducted in Greek]

Stenahoria is examined below but a possible translation that I offer —following Lutz's (1987, 1988) designation of untranslatable emotions— is 'sadness/discomfort /suffocation'. I was surprised to see the connection drawn between the two terms which I always saw as very different. Possibly, the common thread here is (1) the constriction or tightness that Lydia describes and which Lila, an English/Greek bilingual in her early forties, sees as a "restriction", and (2) the element of disappointment or lack of fulfillment that both may encompass. When Leonidas was asked to comment further on his comparison of the two terms, he just said that "he had not really thought about it" but maybe the idea of *stenos horos* [tight space] which is the root of the word *stenahoria* is what makes him equate the term with *frustration*. An important distinction, however, between the two is that *frustration* seems to encompass the notion of 'moving', as one of the interviewees in my pilot study mentioned (Panayiotou, 1999), and which Julia and Lila picked up as blockage or hindrance. There is a certain force in *frustration*, an outside force in fact, which is not evident in *stenahoria* which seems more static. If there is a force in *stenahoria* it is an internal one, something blocking the person from inside (i.e. constricted space, suffocation) rather than an external force which blocks movement. Therefore, when Leonidas was asked where he locates *frustration* in the body, he said that "it's in the chest but it's in the hands or arms also, maybe because I want to do something about it, like punch someone". Again, I suggest that this statement points to an external force present in *frustration*, a force that needs to be dealt with, preferably physically.

What emerges then from my analysis is that *frustration* is a very complex term which works differently for each respondent¹¹. While there is a concurred upon notion of tension in the term that cannot be grasped by equivalent Greek terms, the term also includes elements of disappointment, anger, irritation, blockage, hindrance, anxiety, confusion and stress. These are manifested mainly as a tightness in the body, giving a physical sense of tension, and located in the arms, the throat,

¹¹ In the future, it would be interesting to examine whether monolingual English speakers also show a similar range of associations to *frustration*.

the stomach, and the core of the body. The force behind *frustration* is also an external force acting on the person to cause *frustration*. On the contrary, it seems that *stenahoria*, which also seems to encompass the notion of ‘force’, is caused by an internal force to which the person cannot react. Given the equation of the two terms by some respondents, I am wondering whether *stenahoria* is the result of *frustration* but not described or located as such by Greek speakers. I return to this discussion at the end of the following section.

6.2.2. *Stenahoria*

The definitive dictionary of modern Greek by Bambiniotis (1998) defines *stenahoria* as “an unpleasant psychological condition” and proceeds to give examples that clarify this description: “I did not know that my news would cause you so much *stenahoria*”; “She will get sick from her *stenahoria*”; “She has many *stenahories*”. For the verb, the active form *stenahoro* is defined as “to cause *stenahoria*” and the example given is: “He did not tell him the truth because he did not want to *stenahoresi* him”. The passive form of the verb *stenahorieme* is defined as synonymous to feeling sad and the example given by Bambiniotis is: “*Stenahorethika* by his inappropriate behavior”. Interestingly, the adjective *stenahoros* refers to both someone or something that causes *stenahoria* and to someone that experiences *stenahoria*; in other words, the adjective is the same for the giver and the receiver of *stenahoria*. As mentioned earlier, literally, the definition of *stenahoria* is ‘constricted space’ (*stenos* + *horos*) and *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek* (1998) translates *stenahoria* as “lack of space; depression; vexation; worry”. Given the difficulty of defining the word in Greek, I am not surprised that the English translations given are rather inexact.

Interesting data emerged from my interviews regarding *stenahoria*, particularly because most respondents said that this is not a term they often use but one they often hear. For instance, Sofia, a multilingual who has been living in Cyprus for the last seven years, said:

Sofia: *Stenahorieme*, what does it mean? I’ve heard it so many times, but, yeah its something that you are um worried yeah like you’re sad, and you worry and it’s something that doesn’t have a translation in English, not even in Spanish I think but people in Cyprus you know you worry like things you worry, I mean you are... you are sad and you feel sort of hopeless and you can’t really help somebody... I thought it’s something that old people use though like my mother-in-law, but erh that’s something that older people use all the time... I heard the word many times but as I said I don’t... because I don’t hear it in my house, you know, you see this is not... I don’t even think Andreas has ever used that word. Yeah, yeah yeah. He would only use *ntropi* a lot, but not this other one, I don’t know why. So I understand it has to do with sadness and erh depression —yeah but it’s not it’s not worried... I mean... (pause) yeah it’s also part of worry like um you could say um

stenahorieme because you know my husband has an interview and I'm sort of worried that... but it's also like I'm feeling kind of hopeless because I can't really help... help him... um but, there's no equivalent in Spanish or English... Well you know certainly we have a word that that that means you know that when you want to say that you worry or you're... it's the same as as worried. No, no worry, no it's not like concerned, like you're concerned you're... but it's not even that no yeah I would say, I wouldn't say it's worry. You know that you have you you have this... this concern...

Alexia: What context do you see it in then?

Sofia: You use it say you're about someone, you know ok someone's health? About someone's health, about someone's condition, someone's eh situation, maybe financial problems... you use it, I'm concerned about you know... but also worrying... [Interview conducted in English]

It seems that Sofia is picking up on two important elements of *stenahoria*: the sadness and worry but also the care that is encompassed in the term. She also points, in my view, to another issue worth examining: the degree of usage by younger Greek speakers. Noting that this is a term that she hears often but that neither she nor her Cypriot husband use, Sofia places the term as "something used by older people". Considering that none of my interviewees were over fifty and most were, in fact, in their late thirties, it is possible that there is a generational aspect of the term that I had not considered. If *stenahoria* encompasses a specific set of ethics, social obligations, and rules as noted above, then the generational view of the term makes sense, given the fast-changing social context in Cyprus and the rapid 'Europeanization' or even 'Americanization' of the youth (Christodoulides, 1990).

Lydia identifies *stenahoria* as sadness or depression but then locates it in a very specific part of the body, the chest, and describes it as an external force pressing on the chest which, in turn, becomes internalized:

Lydia: I was first thinking **sad** which is really *lypimenos* though, that's the easiest, then I thought **down** or **feeling blue** but sadness is more like *lypi*... I guess **I feel down** is the closest...

Alexia: And where would you say you feel *stenahoria*?

Lydia: In the chest, tight in the chest...

Alexia: And where would you say you feel I am down?

Lydia: That's interesting because it would not be there... I don't know where it would be... but *stenahoria* is always something in the chest, in the middle of the chest... like there's a stone on top of you and you cannot breathe, like it's crushing you...

Alexia: So you would have difficulty breathing then?

Lydia: Yeah, maybe because of the word... *stenos horos* [constricted space]... I don't know, I had not thought about it before... [Interview conducted in Greek]

Julia also notes the words ‘sad’, ‘troubled’, and ‘worried’ but despite recognizing the lack of an accurate translation, she notes that this emotion is not necessarily a unique Greek experience:

Just because you finally realize that *stenahorimenos* means a lot of different things doesn’t mean that you have tapped into a meaning, not a new emotion... you just realize that you need to express different words to express this in English not just one so... [Interview conducted in English]

At a later point during the interview, Julia also made the comparison between *stenahoria* and *frustration* that Leonidas had noted:

Frustration is such an amazing word, the lack of it in a language is so amazing because it carries with it the word ‘frustrate’ to stop to block... so the outside force is carried in that word, it’s not just what you feel it’s the way you feel because an outside force that is blocking you and you don’t have that in Greek... to a certain extent *stenahorimeni* if you want to use it in that extent, there you have it because the *steno-horo* could be from someone else although sometimes YOU make your *steno-horo*... so I don’t know...
[Interview conducted in English]

Again, in Julia’s description it seems that there is a similarity in the two terms — that of a certain force acting on a person— but for *stenahoria* this force is not only overwhelming and defeating (“like a stone on top of one’s chest”) but also, possibly, leading to feelings of depression, rather than anger and irritation, as in *frustration*. It may be then that *stenahoria* is, at least to some degree, the result of ‘frustration’ when ‘frustration’ is combined with a sense of helplessness. Although I could not make any definitive claims here about cultural differences between Greek-Cypriots and Americans, I am wondering whether the two emotion terms are indicative of greater social and psychological structures in the two cultures. One of the differences noted, for example, in regard to the bilinguals’ experiences in the two languages and cultures, is that of having a sense of optimism in the United States versus the feeling of passivity in Cyprus and, similarly, the feeling that “everything is possible” in the US and the feeling of *katadikasmenos/i* [doomed] in Cyprus. If bilinguals get a sense of ‘productivity’, ‘action’, ‘being in control’ while being in the US but feel that Cyprus is on many levels restrictive and “cuts off one’s wings” —descriptions given by nearly all respondents— I am wondering whether the two emotion terms described here are, again on some level only, indicative of these broader cultural differences. It is possible that *frustration*, while being tied to ‘anxiety’ and ‘irritability’ due to pressure from an outside force, encompasses an Anglo-American notion of being able to do something about this pressure, of taking action, of being, ultimately, in control. *Stenahoria*, also tied to pressure from an outside source, results in internalized feelings of hopelessness that may lead to inability to react, to a sense of doom (*katadikasmenos/i*). Finally, and again without wishing to make any grand claims, it

seems that *frustration* is more of an individualistic emotion, something that one experiences alone. *Stenahoria*, belonging in the more collectivist cultures of Cyprus and Greece, is an emotion that must be experienced amongst people and, in fact, people who care about each other. It is not, in other words, an individualistic emotion. Even the Greek word for ‘emotion’, *syn + esthima* [to feel with...], implies relationality, and *stenahoria* is no exception.

Finally, the somatic manifestation of the two emotions is equally interesting. The description and metaphor used for *stenahoria* —that of suffocation, of not being able to breathe, not having enough space— is, as explained to me by several British and American monolinguals, an uncommon bodily experience for people from these cultures. On the contrary, as a Greek, I often feel ‘suffocated’, in the sense of (metaphorically) not being able to breathe. I suggest that these descriptions of bodily experiences reflect the nature of the force behind the two emotions: mostly external for *frustration* and internal (like suffocation) for *stenahoria*.

7. Conclusions

What my study has shown then is that what is universal is not the understanding that crying, for example, is indicative of sadness but the ability to learn that when a person in a particular context and in a particular culture cries it is indicative of something which that culture names *sadness*. Furthermore, what seems to be universal is not certain emotions such as *anger* or *sadness* or even *love*, as some theorists claim, but the ability to learn emotions, with the term ‘learning’ used in the sense of acknowledging their importance in a specific cultural context and adopting their use, even their manifestation. In this sense, emotions are, like most concepts in psychology, not an either/or construct —they are both universal and specific: universal, because as human beings we are prewired to have emotions and even to learn emotions, but also specific because emotions we do have are influenced by the culture and language in which we live.

Clearly, this is an exploration with many questions still left unanswered. My purpose was to document the untranslatability of certain emotion terms and to explore bilingual people’s experiences of emotions by raising questions which are not addressed in the existing literature. In an expanding Europe with an increasing number of multilingual states, the necessity of intercultural knowledge and cross-cultural communication is greater than ever. This research hopefully contributes not only to cross-cultural research on emotions and to the understanding of what it means to be a bilingual or multilingual person, but also to the current discussions on language policy where language is tied both to politics and identity.

Appendix A

The English story is the following:

Andy, a person close to you, is a 30-year old Harvard graduate. He has an MBA (Master's in Business Administration). He is an accomplished, successful and driven young man who is currently working as a business analyst for a large multinational corporation in Boston (or another city in the United States with which the interviewee is familiar). He says that he is very ambitious and that his ultimate goal is to manage his own company. He works late hours and, at the sacrifice of his friendships and family obligations, including his elderly divorced mother and his girlfriend, he has devoted all of his time and energy to his work. He says that this is absolutely necessary if he is going to become successful.

To give a culturally appropriate account in Greek, the main character, Andreas, was an honors graduate from the Athens Polytechnic¹²:

Andreas, a person close to you, is a 30-year old engineering graduate of the Athens Polytechnic. After completing his graduate studies in London, he returned to Cyprus and now works for a large construction company in the private sector in Nicosia. He is successful for his age and has many prospects. He works hard and often stays at his job until late at night, so he does not spend enough time with his elderly widowed mother, his childhood friends or his fiancée. He says that this is absolutely necessary if he is going to become successful and start his own company¹³.

The two questions after each story were:

- (a) What would you say to Andy/Andreas if he were a person close to you?
- (b) How do you feel about Andy/Andreas?

Appendix B: Descriptions of participants¹⁴

Leonidas

Leonidas is a thirty-year-old Greek Cypriot who spent the first few years of his life in the United States and then went back for his university studies at the age of twenty. As a child, he spoke English with his family, even upon returning to Cyprus, but stopped doing so a few years after entering elementary school. He completed his

¹² The story was made culturally appropriate with the help of a focus group.

¹³ The story, presented here in English, was read to the participants in Greek.

¹⁴ All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

undergraduate and graduate studies in the US and then worked for a well-known East Coast consulting firm for several years. Currently, his home is in Cyprus where he works as an accountant; he is married to a Greek Cypriot.

George

George is a Greek Cypriot who attended English-speaking schools all his life. He is an engineer who studied and then worked in the US for nearly ten years. Recently married to a Greek Cypriot, he had just returned to Cyprus when I interviewed him.

Nefeli

Nefeli is a Greek Cypriot artist living in the US. She is married to a Greek Cypriot and is a mother of a young bilingual girl. She learned English at the age of five when she moved with her family to the US for a few years. She spoke English with her sister and parents until she graduated from high school.

Lydia

Lydia is a Greek Cypriot architect in her late thirties. She has two young children and is married to a Greek Cypriot. She learned English in the US at the age of eleven when her family moved there for three years and then returned to the US as a college student for an additional five years.

Christina

Christina is a Greek Cypriot who had learned English in Cyprus at a young age and lived in New York for ten years as an adolescent and young adult. In her late thirties, she says that she feels like a New Yorker at heart and had it not been for family circumstances she would have lived there “for ever and ever”. She has a young son to whom she speaks only in English. Christina runs her own company and is married to a Greek Cypriot who only recently learned English.

Sofia

Sofia’s first language is Spanish since she was born in South America. She learned English as a child when her family immigrated to the US and had lived in the US until she married her Greek Cypriot husband. She speaks several languages and has lived all over the world. She has been living in Cyprus for the last seven years with her husband and two children. Sofia holds a degree in the social sciences and is in her early forties.

Lila

Lila was born in Lebanon to a Lebanese father and a German mother. Her first languages were, therefore, Arabic and German but all of her education was in English, even while attending a Cypriot high school for three years. She has lived all over the world and moved to the US when she was an adolescent. There she met her Greek Cypriot husband and, after living in the US for seven years, they moved back

to Cyprus. She has been living in Cyprus for the last thirteen years and is a lecturer at a private college and a businesswoman. She is in her early forties and a mother of two trilingual children. Lila speaks several languages.

Julia

Julia is a multilingual American in her late forties, married to a German and has lived in Cyprus for the last three years. She is a language teacher who learned Greek in her early twenties when she met her first husband, a Greek. Before going to Cyprus she lived in Greece for ten years and then in various countries around the world.

Camille

Camille is an American in her late thirties who has been living in Cyprus for the last four years. She is married to a Greek and before coming to Cyprus she lived all over the world. She is a mother of a toddler whom she is raising as a bilingual Greek-English speaker. Camille holds advanced degrees in the humanities from a US university and is a researcher.

Jackie

Jackie is an American who has been living in Cyprus for the last twelve years after her marriage to her Greek Cypriot husband. She is a mother of three bilingual children and runs her own business. She holds a Bachelor's in the Social Sciences from a university in the US.

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