Documenting the language of emotions in Dalabon (Northern Australia): Caveats, solutions and benefits

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Documenting the language of emotions
in Dalabon (Northern Australia)
Caveats, solutions and benefits

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1. INTRODUCTION

Emotions play a crucial part in human communication—in fact, it is possible to argue that every linguistic message includes an emotional component. Therefore, the documentation and analysis of emotional linguistic resources should be considered a crucial aspect of linguistic description. In practice, however, such resources are rarely discussed at length, neither in grammars nor in focused articles. One of the reasons for this lack may be that the emotional aspect of language hardly surfaces in data collected under the standard constraints of language documentation. As discussed below, the task of recording emotional speech encounters a number of difficulties.

My doctoral thesis (Ponsonnet 2013; to appear) is a description of linguistic emotional resources in Dalabon, a severely endangered language of the Northern Territory of Australia (Gunwinyguan family, non-Pama-nyungan). Dalabon is spoken by about a dozen people scattered in several remote Aboriginal communities in south-western Arnhem Land. While Dalabon speakers are few, a handful of Dalabon women are very involved in language documentation. There is currently no grammar of Dalabon, but there is a dictionary (Evans, Merlan & Tukumba 2004), and some literature on the most important aspects of the language (for instance Evans, Brown & Corbett 2001; Evans & Merlan 2003; Evans 2006) as well as on more specific aspects (Evans 2007; Ponsonnet 2009; Cutfield 2011; Ross 2011; Ponsonnet 2012, amongst others). Dalabon is being replaced by Barunga Kriol, a local variety of Kriol, the Australian creole spoken by 20 to 30,000 people across northern Australia (Harris 1986; Sandefur 1986; Koch 2000; Munro 2000; 2004; Dickson 2014).

Collecting emotional linguistic data in Dalabon was by no means easy, in spite of my 15-year long experience working with the community (as a linguist and otherwise) and of relatively favourable fieldwork conditions. Thanks to a grant allocated by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme,[1] I was able to spend several weeks in the field each year between 2010 and 2013 (a total of 10 weeks over 4 field sessions). Over the years, I tested a number of methods with limited success before I eventually found adequate solutions to document emotions. Combining a number of methods presented below, I was able to constitute a rich corpus, upon which I based a thorough analysis of the linguistic resources available to Dalabon speakers to express and describe emotions. The present article discusses the problems I met when documenting emotional speech in Dalabon, the methods I tested, how successful they were and why. A number of documentation methods are transferable to other linguistic contexts. It is

therefore hoped that this account will help other researchers to produce more developed documentations of the semantics of emotions in other languages. Section 2 spells out the expected benefits of documenting emotions. Section 3 discusses the difficulties associated with collecting emotional speech, and Section 4 reviews a number of potential solutions.

2.   BENEFITS

Since emotions are an important dimension of verbal communication, documenting and analyzing linguistic emotional resources in any language significantly advances our knowledge on this language. Furthermore, it appears that approaching linguistic description and analysis with the emotional dimension in mind can highlight properties of the language that had been overlooked. In Dalabon, this was evident in several occasions, for instance concerning diminutives and the encoding of participants. I explain both examples below, highlighting in each case how the feature in question relates to emotions.

The collection of spontaneous emotional Dalabon speech immediately revealed the overwhelming frequency of two diminutives (enclitic -*wurd* and verb prefix *yaw-*) in emotionally loaded discourse. In the rest of the (non-emotional) corpus, -*wurd* was present and had been identified as a diminutive, but its relatively low frequency had not allowed linguists to understand its semantics. As for the verb prefix *yaw-*, its purely diminutive function had not been identified at all using non-emotional corpora. This prefix originated from the incorporated noun -*yaw-* 'little one', and in many instances it is impossible to discriminate whether -*yaw-* is an incorporated noun or a diminutive verb prefix. In emotional speech, however, *yaw-* is frequent enough that some tokens demonstrate its diminutive function, to the exclusion of the nominal function. This discovery reveals a process of verb prefix formation, and may shed light on the behavior of a cognate form in Bininj Gun-wok (Evans 2003:473–479; Ponsonnet & Evans to appear).

Scrutinizing emotional predicates also brought interesting discoveries with respect to the encoding of participants. In Dalabon, syntactic arguments are obligatorily cross-referenced on predicates by means of a person prefix (Evans, Brown & Corbett 2001). There are two series of prefixes. The intransitive series encodes just one argument (1).[2] With the transitive series, prefixes may be associated with an enclitic which encodes the second argument of the verb (2), or they can be portmanteau prefixes, where the prefix alone encodes both arguments (3). The morphological valence of verbs is lexically defined and does not vary in bare constructions, regardless of the semantics of the sentence (in (3) for instance, the theme is semantically backgrounded, but still encoded on the verb, which is lexically defined as transitive).

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[2] Abbreviations used in glosses: BEN: benefactive; DEM: demonstrative; du: dual; EMPH: emphasizer; ERG: ergative case; FILL: morphological filler; GEN: genitive case; incl: inclusive; INST: instrumental case; INTJ: interjection; IRR: irrealis mood; NEG: negation; pl: plural; POSS: possessive; PP: past perfective; PR: present tense; PRIV: privative suffix; R: realis mood; sg: singular.

(1)   *Woy*   ***dja**-h-dokka-n*   ***ngarra**-h-bo-niyan.*
       INTJ.hey   **2sg**-R-get.up-PR   **1pl.incl**-R-go-FUT
       'Hey, get up, let's go.'

(2)   *Bulu-ngokorrng-yih*   ***ngorr***   *ka-h-yang-buyhwo-n,*
       father-1pl.inclPOSS-ERG   **1pl.incl**   **3sg>1**-R-language-show-PR

       Nunda   *yang-ngu*   *dja-h-yenjdju-ngiyan.*
       DEM   language-2sgPOSS   2sg-R-talk-FUT
       'Our father God taught us languages, so you speak your language.'

(3)   *Ngale*   *langu-yih-ke-kun*   *kardu*   ***bula**-h-ngu-n*
       INTJ.constat   hand/finger-INST-EMPH-GEN   maybe   **3pl>3**-R-eat-PR

       bala-h-burn-dih.
       3pl-R-spoon-PRIV
       'Ah well, apparently they're eating with their fingers, they have no spoons.'

Dalabon has semi-regular causative alternations, and two applicative constructions license the addition of an argument—benefactive or comitative. As shown in (4), where the second clause is a benefactive applicative construction, applicative participants are cross-referenced by the person prefix of the verb, like lexically licensed arguments (thus in (4), *bulnu bula-*, third plural over third plural; intransitive third plural would have been *bala-*). Applicative constructions are by far the most common way to encode non-lexically-licensed arguments. They are normally used when an animate participant is not lexically subcategorized for by the verb.

(4)   *Barra-h-kangu-yerrk-minj.*   *Nah-no-burrng-kun*   *bulu-burrng…*
       3du-R-belly-release-PP   mother-FILL-3duPOSS-GEN   father-3duPOSS
       feel.better

       kakkak-burrng   ***bulnu***   ***bula**-h-**marnu**-kangu-yerrk-minj.*
       parallel.grandkin-3duPOSS   3pl   3pl>3-BEN-belly-release-PP
       feel.better

       'They felt relieved. Their mother, their father… their grandmother, they felt relieved for them.'

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[3] The codes before each example are the reference of the recordings and ELAN transcript that contain the example, indicating the date, the initials of the speaker, and the annotation number in ELAN if applicable. Data collected between 2007 and 2009 are stored in the AIATSIS audio-visual archive (Canberra). Data collected between 2010 and 2012 are stored in ELAR (Endangered Language Archive, London: http://elar.soas.ac.uk/deposit/ponsonnet2012dalabon). The codes between square brackets after the recording reference specify the type of data, with the following categories: [ContEl]: contextualized elicitation; [El]: standard elicitation; [RPF]: comment on the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

However, an alternative construction occurs with some regularity with emotion verbs. In this construction, a possessive enclitic is added after an intransitive predicate denoting an emotional state, as in (5). With emotion predicates, the possessive enclitic cross-references the person and number of the stimulus participant. Note that unlike benefactive objects, this participant is not cross-referenced by the person prefix of the predicate.

20120708a_000_MT 099 [El]

(5)   *Nga-h-kangu-dadj-minj-**bulng**,*
          1sg-R-belly-end-PP-3plPOSS
                  lose.temper

bah	*mak*	*bulu*	*nga-kakku-marnu-kangu-dadj-mi.*
But	NEG	3pl	1sg>3-really-BEN-belly-end-IRR
			lose.temper

'I lost [was about to lose] my temper with them, but I didn't really lose it against them.'

This construction occurs very sporadically on non-emotional predicates. I found only a couple of occurrences throughout all corpora, and they had previously been overlooked. With emotion verbs, this construction was somewhat more frequent: I collected at least a dozen tokens, which allowed the assessment of the construction as a proper, regular syntactic option. The reason why this construction is more frequent on emotion predicates is because of their semantics. Emotions are states, and as such they are often described by intransitive verbs. On the other hand, emotions often involve a second animate participant, namely a stimulus. This semantic structure is reflected by the 'possessive argument marking' construction in (5). Arguably, particularities of that sort may occur with any semantic domain. From that angle, this kind of syntactic discovery may occur whenever we take a closer look at any narrower semantic field. On the other hand, Dalabon displays a clear preference for encoding animate participants on the verb, and emotions often involve animate stimuli (i.e. emotions are often triggered by people). This is why emotion predicates often attract 'possessive argument marking', and this is also what makes emotions practically, socially, conceptually and linguistically important.

   The linguistic importance of emotions mirrors their importance in people's lives, from a personal and a social point of view. As such, emotions are studied by a number of disciplines, for instance anthropology or psychology. Documenting and analyzing linguistic emotional resources can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in these disciplines. In addition, emotions are central in speakers' lives and play a structuring role in local moral frameworks and social grids. Emotion words may encapsulate important values. As such, documenting emotions is relevant to speakers, and therefore in the case of endangered languages, it is an aspect of the language that is worth preserving not only for scientific purposes but also for the benefit of speakers' communities.

3. ISSUES WITH DOCUMENTING EMOTIONS

3.1 Ethical issues
In spite of the above conclusions, some Dalabon speakers were reluctant to produce emotional linguistic data, for various reasons, several of them cultural. As explained below, some of these reasons relate to what speakers consider worth documenting; other relate to their sensitivity and emotional comfort.

A first reason why some speakers were reluctant to document emotions was that emotions are not part of the domains culturally construed as 'prestigious'. In the Dalabon conceptual realm, some issues, and some topics of conversation, are deemed culturally 'significant', endowed with some particular importance. In Kriol, these things are said to have *mining* (<Eng. 'meaning'), and to be part of *koltja* (<Eng. 'culture'). This corresponds, in Dalabon, to those things construed as codified by the ancestral law, *walu-no*. Kinship is typically very 'significant', but so also are traditional stories, paintings, and music. More mundane, but clearly codified and well-identified spheres of knowledge such as *savoir-faire* related to artefacts, or ethnobotanic knowledge, are also 'culturally significant'. These significant spheres of knowledge constitute appropriate contents to be communicated to outsiders, for instance to linguists, anthropologists, tourists and others. They are also appropriate contents for recording and archiving information. Prototypically 'significant' are creation stories and narratives related to the 'traditional law'. Minor domains of significance tend to evolve, in particular under the influence of exchanges with visitors.

Emotions, while they are obviously omnipresent in everyday life, as well as being expressed and discussed in 'ordinary' conversations, do not belong to this set of 'significant' topics. For this reason, it is not considered worthwhile instructing outsiders in the emotions. In the course of language documentation, Dalabon speakers naturally turned to 'prestigious', 'culturally significant' domains, and expressed their surprise with respect to my interest for emotions. Nevertheless, speakers were always very willing to discuss emotion words and provide definitions based on imaginary scenarios, which demonstrated their interest for the matter. Emotional story-telling, on the other hand, was more difficult, especially in the first years. Later on, one of the speakers became accustomed to emotional story-telling and seemed to enjoy it. However, as she had internalized this practice as a practice related to documentation, she was very clearly performing for the microphone—at the cost of spontaneity.

In addition to these cultural difficulties, and even more crucially, discussing and recording emotional speech often constitutes a threat to speakers' well-being. Privacy matters are an obvious risk: if access to recordings is not adequately controlled, some emotions—speakers' or others'—may be inappropriately disclosed. In addition, talking about negative emotions is contrary to Dalabon's standard emotion regulation strategies, which consist mostly of avoiding negative emotional triggers. Thus, in general, speakers avoid discussing painful matters, because this revives emotional pain. Given this strategy, and considering the frequency of emotional traumas related to violence or to loss (suicides, murders, diseases…) among the Dalabons and other Aboriginal groups (Glaskin et al. 2008), forcing speakers to discuss traumatic episodes represents a serious threat to their emotional balance and even to their health.

To summarize, Dalabon speakers were not readily willing to discuss emotions, and doing so constituted a potential threat to their social and personal safety. In the view of these conclusions, it may seem that there are no ethical grounds to document emotional linguistic resources in Dalabon. However, I believe that, in the case of an endangered language (like Dalabon), the importance of the emotional values encapsulated in such resources is precious enough to override these barriers—if it can be done with respect and sensitivity. In the case at stake, the solution lay in communication with speakers. Explaining why emotions are important was partly successful. More effective were thorough clarifications about access conditions and reassuring speakers that the stories would be protected. With respect to speakers' emotional well-being, it was possible to select appropriate topics, and/or to set up stimuli and tasks where privacy and speakers' sensitivity were not at risk. These are detailed in Section 4.

3.2   Methodological issues

The ethical issues outlined above cumulate with methodological issues. Speakers' reluctance is a methodological problem as such, and so is the lack of spontaneity inherent to the context of documentation. The use of emotional expressive features requires spontaneity, but language documentation relies on performance. In addition, I have often met interpretative problems resulting from the fact that emotions are not directly visible. For instance, early in the documentation process, Dalabon speakers enjoyed defining emotion words by making up short scenarios, corresponding to emotional cultural scripts (e.g. 'being fed up' is when a husband keeps scolding his wife and she can't stand it, usually with a few more details, sketching a small story in a few clauses). Unfortunately, these were only partially usable, because these scenarios lay entirely in speakers' minds, with no tangible grounds for me to interpret them. Likewise, in spite of my efforts to devise detailed emotional anecdotes for the purpose of semantic elicitation (e.g. contrasting two scenarios to demonstrate a semantic feature), these anecdotes often remained vague. Some room was left for misunderstanding, which resulted in leaky tests.

4.   SOLUTIONS

4.1   Narratives

One aspect of the solutions I implemented consists in encouraging speakers to record emotional narratives of ethically and methodologically appropriate content. These were for instance:

- Biographic events which I had attended, so that I had some grounds for interpretations. I found that even when I had witnessed the event relatively remotely, this helped greatly in understanding the emotional aspects of speakers' accounts.
- Biographic events which were potentially traumatic but affected someone else (for instance, the death of a child from a distant family, or of a white acquaintance). These allowed speakers to express emotions without reviving traumas. The main speaker only recorded such narratives once she registered the fact that access to the recordings was restricted. After this, she enjoyed recording these accounts—which highlights the benefits of clarifying the status of recordings.

- Recent anecdotes shared during field-work (for instance a petty argument, a mildly frightening situation).
- My own biographic stories, so as to share the burden of emotional involvement. The main speaker has witnessed some aspects of my emotional life when I lived and worked in the community. Even when speakers' access to an emotional event in my life was limited to my own accounts, the prospect of a real event (e.g. a loss I had experienced in recent past) seemed to facilitate elicitation and semantic tests.

4.2   Ready-made stimuli

Another successful strategy in documenting emotions is visual stimuli, either ready-made, or tailored for the occasion. I tested a number of existing stimuli. In this section, I explain how I used them, and assess their benefits and drawbacks. I each case, I highlight the reasons why, in my view, they succeeded or failed, thus outlining general principles for the assessment or application of stimuli in the purpose of documenting emotions.

- Ekman Faces (Ekman 2011)[4]

Ekman faces are sets of (often black and white) pictures showing white people displaying emotional expressions. They were initially designed to test the universality of facial-expression decoding across cultures. The speaker seemed to find the pictures readable (with some variation as compared to my own interpretations) and did record a lot of new vocabulary with respect to facial expression. Upon my request, the speaker also elaborated on related emotional scenarios, but given the lack of context I was mostly unable to interpret them.

- *Mind Reading: The interactive guide to emotions* (Baron-Cohen 2004)

These are short videos produced in order to help identify emotions (Figure 1). Actors enact emotions such as fear, love, sadness in scenes that last about 20 seconds or less. The main problem was that the videos were culturally inappropriate, featuring for instance a man offering flowers to a woman, or a woman climbing on a chair in fear of a mouse. Because of the discrepancy in cultural codes, the speaker struggled to make sense of what happened—it wasn't obvious to her what offering flowers means, or why a mouse may provoke fear. The data became useful where the acting failed, so that the speaker questioned what was emotionally happening to the characters. Younger speakers (mostly speakers of Kriol rather than Dalabon) enjoyed these videos a lot more.

Figure 1
Screen-shot extracted from one of the *Mind Reading* videos

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[4] http://www.paulekman.com/product-category/research-products/

- *The Bears* (Deal & Woods 2010)
This is a set of 48 cards featuring teddy-bears in various emotionally suggestive postures (Figure 2). Younger speakers enjoyed these cards and devised related scenarios. The older (and most reliable) speaker, on the other hand, felt awkward about the cards. Nevertheless, they offered a wide range of postures, allowing for successful contrastive semantic tests.

Figure 2
Two of the 48 teddy-bear cards[5]

- The *Jackal and Crow Picture Task* and the *Family Problem Picture Task* (Carroll, Evans & Hoenigman 2009; Carroll, Kelly & Gawne 2011; San Roque et al. 2012)
These are tasks created by the Social Cognition research group (Australian National University/ University of Melbourne) in order to elicit social cognition features. They consist of series of vignettes that speakers are asked to put in order so as to reconstruct a story. The *Jackal Crow Picture Task* (Figure 3, left) is cognition-oriented and yielded few results with respect to emotions. The *Family Problem Picture Task* (Figure 3, right) is emotion-oriented. Due to recent traumatic events in the life of the main Dalabon speaker, I did not implement it myself. My colleague Sarah Cutfield did record it some time later, on behalf of Nicholas Evans for the Social Cognition project, and I was able to use the data. Some of it was useful, but the design of the task (the speaker was asked to do things in a certain order, to repeat the story several times etc.) encouraged performance rather than spontaneous emotional speech.

Figure 3
Left: One of the 9 vignettes of the *Jackal and Crow Picture Task*
Right: One of the 16 vignettes of the *Family Problem Picture Task*

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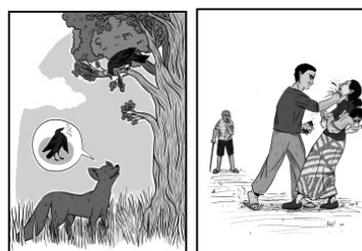
[5] Reproduced from a card set called *The Bears*, with the permission of the publisher, St Luke's Innovative Resources: www.innovativeresources.org

Overall, ready-made stimuli were useful in that they provided material for exploration and tests. The amount of data I was actually able to use was low, but it was sometimes important, and the stimuli were ultimately helpful.

4.3   Tailored stimuli
However, existing stimuli had clear limitations. In order to avoid some of them, I devised 'tailored' stimuli. These are stimuli that I produced for the specific purpose of eliciting emotions in Dalabon, or existing material not designed for elicitation, that I selected and adapted in the view of an elicitation task. I now describe these methods and their benefits.

- Emotional behavior vignettes
I devised and produced several dozen small vignettes like the ones in Figure 4. These featured myself, my husband, and other characters presented as my kin. The scenes are culturally relevant as well as semantically relevant (focused on the emotions I was interested in, sometimes designed to implement contrastive semantic tests). They occur in series, offering the opportunity for speakers to devise scenarios.
Speakers responded very positively to these pictures. They elaborated various scenarios and comments. This was easier for them than on other stimuli, because they identified me and my kin on the pictures, which renders the scenes more personal, real, and sometimes endearing. They were able to point at the relevant characters while commenting on the vignettes, which helped me in recovering the story and interpreting the data. These stimuli were particularly useful for documenting body- and behavior-related emotion words. The set may possibly be used in another cultural context, and in any case, the principle could be adapted and applied to other languages.[6]

Figure 4
Two of the c.110 vignettes designed and produced for the purpose[7]
of emotion and emotional behavior elicitation in Dalabon

- Comments on movies
In the last year, after two field-sessions dedicated to emotions and a number of more or less successful attempts and experiments, I asked two speakers to comment on three Australian feature films. I carefully selected three well-known and high quality Australian movies related to Aboriginal history or daily life. These are *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce 2002), *Ten Canoes* (De Heer & Djigirr 2006), and the first 30 minutes of *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009). Speakers had seen these movies before, the first

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[6] I am happy to share the picture set and/or provide advice to produce adequate sets. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further discussion.

[7] I thank Laurent Benaïm for his technical support, as well as the friends who appear on the photos.

two being emblematic films among Dalabon speakers and other Dalabon community members. The selection covered a broad range of emotions including fear, compassion, romantic love, family-oriented love, anger, indignation…

The main speaker commented very abundantly and fluently, providing explanations, interpretations, and spontaneous emotional responses relating to the characters and stories. I was often able to respond in Dalabon, sometimes in Kriol. I repeated the experiment with another speaker who could not provide such abundant comments, but offered a useful control set.

The movies were screened to speakers from my computer, usually in the company of other family members (often children). I video-recorded the sessions, making sure to include the computer screen as well as the speaker in the frame (Figure 5). In this way, I was able to identify the scenes when interpreting the data, and to monitor the speaker's gestures and facial expressions. I interrupted the video or fast-rewound it whenever necessary to discuss a point or another, and took longer breaks so as to divide the film into chunks covering about 15 minutes of film. Watching a single movie was often spread over several sessions. I also recorded the main speaker re-telling the stories based on a series of photos I had extracted from the films. These recordings contain less emotional speech, but more vocabulary.

Figure 5

Pictures extracted from the video-recordings of the screening sessions
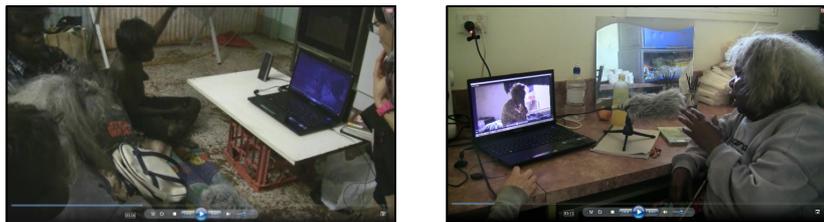
The approximately 8 hours recordings of speakers commenting on movies contain a wealth of spontaneous emotional speech, highly interpretable thanks to a very detailed context. This data allowed me to analyze expressive features such as interjections and prosodic contours, and in this respect provided a considerable breakthrough. Such features do occur in narratives, but they are usually less spontaneous, and importantly, the number of tokens is usually too low to grasp semantic regularities. Speakers' comments on movies also contain highly contextualized information on emotional lexical items. The data is highly comparable between speakers, and easily transferable to other Australian contexts. Some of the movies, like *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, could probably be used in other countries as well, although other more appropriate local films would probably offer better support for comparable tasks.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Documenting emotional resources in Dalabon was difficult. I encountered a number issues of ethical and methodological nature. I tested various existing stimuli, the advantages and drawbacks of which I have assessed here. I also devised and produced

sets of tailored stimuli, which proved successful. Altogether, combining the methods presented and discussed above, I did gather significant emotional data. Based on this extensive documentation, I was able to present a comprehensive and detailed account of emotional language in Dalabon in my PhD thesis (Ponsonnet 2013, to appear), and to discover some properties of the language that had been overlooked. Several of the methods are transferable and/or adaptable to other linguistic context. It is hoped that this account will help other researchers to produce extensive documentations of emotions in other languages across the world, as emotions constitute a culturally important and linguistically significant semantic domain.

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