Introduction: The present study investigates the concept of SHAME from a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective. This concept, overarching the field of negative self-evaluative emotions, is operationalized through two lemmas realizing it: ‘shame’ and ‘embarrassment’. Their usage is analyzed in four communities of British English, American English, French and Polish. The study has two goals, one descriptive, the other methodological. Firstly, it aims to identify the conceptual structuring of the two lexical categories relative to their respective socio-cultural contexts. The result will be four sets of culture-sensitive usage profiles. Secondly, the study further advances corpus-driven quantitative methodology for the description of intersubjectively-grounded abstract concepts (Krawczak 2014, 2015). This work is complementary to the GRID method adopted in social psychological studies (Fontaine et al. 2013) or collocation-based analyses (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Wilson 2014).

Hypothesis: With respect to the descriptive dimension, the study will test a specific hypothesis concerning cross-cultural variation in conceptualizing SHAME. The ideas of individualism and collectivism (Triandis 1995) are expected to affect the way in which SHAME events are conceptualized and externalized. Accordingly, in the Anglo-Saxon world, whose members are relatively more independent, such emotions are more likely to be experienced as a result of one’s own actions and regardless of the presence of audience. In the comparatively more interdependent society of Poland, by contrast, negative self-evaluation and the resultant emotions, will more commonly arise due to other people’s deeds and in the presence of witnesses. Finally, in France, which is a Western community and yet, historically, predominantly Catholic, the conceptualization of SHAME is expected to be a combination of individualistic and collectivistic values.

Methodology & Data: To test the above hypothesis and to identify the culture-specific construals of the lexical categories, the study employs usage-based methodology. More specifically, the method used can be termed configurational, profile-based or multifactorial usage-feature (Geeraerts et al. 1994; Gries 2003; Glynn 2009; Gries & Stefanowitsch 2006; Glynn & Fischer 2010; Glynn & Robinson 2014) analysis. The method permits the identification of frequency-based patterns of language use, taken to be indicative of conceptual and cultural tendencies in profiling reality. The data were extracted from the fiction components of the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the Polish National Corpus and Frantext. Equal numbers of the most frequent instantiations of ‘shame’ and ‘embarrassment’ in the four communities were extracted from the corpora, amounting to approx. 800 contextualized observations. The data were manually analyzed for a range of usage-characteristics that served to operationalize the constructs of individualism and collectivism: cause, temporal scope of the cause, emotion and cause type, audience. Next, multivariate statistical modeling was applied in the form of exploratory (correspondence analysis) and confirmatory (logistic regression analysis) techniques. This produced verifiable language- and culture-specific profiles of SHAME.

Results: The results provide quantitative support for the hypothesized cultural continuum ranging from the English communities through France to Poland along the dimension of individualism-collectivism. Among some unexpected patterns of use is the approximation in usage between the Polish exponents of ‘shame’ and ‘embarrassment’, both of which emerge as based in the immediate interactive situation.

References


