Are you a cold person? Maybe it's not your fault! (The role of Language in Emotional Intelligence)

July 6 2021, by Amer Hamad Issa Abukhalaf, Jason Von Meding

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The term "emotional intelligence" was popularized in the millennial era. It means having the capacity to express emotions and handle human

interaction wisely and empathetically. Having [this ability](#) allows people to build stronger relationships and achieve personal as well as career goals. [Many factors play a role](#) in shaping emotional intelligence, including genetics, cultural differences, personal life experiences, but perhaps most interestingly, language complexity.

[Vocabulary size](#) is the most important measure for language complexity, and the hardest one to measure. The English language, for example, has a very rich vocabulary, with [more than 1 million words in total](#), more than [160,000 words in current use](#), including [3,000 words used](#) specifically for describing emotions. So why, with all of these words, do people still say things like "I love it, but I don't love it love it," when they are unable to identify how they feel about something? What possibly could be missing?

In [recently published research](#), we studied the psychological dominion behind several languages in an attempt to understand how language affects emotional intelligence; our data revealed considerable variations in people's emotional intelligence based on their mother languages.

Emotions vary across languages

Cultures develop a richer vocabulary for things they care about the most; Scots, for example, have [400 words for snow](#); in Arabic, there are [200 words for camel](#) and [300 words for lion](#). And the same concept applies to emotions.

When describing the feeling of sunlight while walking between trees, English-speaking people might say "warmth" or "peace," but these are approximations, because there is no specific word to describe that phenomenon in English. However, in Japanese there is: "[Komorebi](#)." When you meet someone for the first time and you feel the potential of falling in love soon, there is a Japanese word for that, too:

"Koi-No-Yokan." In German, there is a word for taking pleasure from other people's misfortunes: "Schadenfreude," and there is a word for experiencing sadness due to other people's happiness: "Freudenschade."

In Arabic, there are 14 words describing different stages of falling in love. The word "Hawa" describes the inclining of the heart toward someone, while the word "Ishq" means blind desire, followed by "Huyam," which describes a complete loss of logic and reason. However, many people think of love as a yes/no question—it exists or doesn't exist. If the different stages of falling in love existed in all languages, to what extent would it help people to express how they really feel, and based on that, to make important decisions in life, like marriage proposals?

And if people can't agree on such a basic feeling as love, how do we assume that we have the same complex emotions, such as the sense of urgency or sense of security?

The power of language

Language is more than a communication tool that we use to vocalize our thoughts and emotions; in fact, we think using language. This makes our intelligence, to some extent, limited by the language we speak. Our emotions and overall thinking process can't be more sophisticated and precise than our language. Even if we assume that our brains were more precise, that additional precision would be lost when we communicate our emotions and thoughts to others.

The role of language in shaping people's reality has been observed in different studies. People from Namibia speaking the Otjihimba language are literally unable to see blue because they don't have a word for the color in their language. Similarly, people from Brazil speaking the Múra-Pirahã language face difficulties distinguishing between numbers like 10 and 15, because they have no words for these numbers in their language.

So if you don't have a word for a certain emotion, you won't be able to express it words, and it's possible that you won't even be able to feel it.

Emotional intelligence is a [skill that can be worked on and improved](#). Still, there is no doubt that language can put you head and shoulders above others just for its pure nature, or it can limit you and be the reason why your emotional intelligence isn't developed as it should be.

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More information: Amer Hamad Issa Abukhalaf et al, Integrating international linguistic minorities in emergency planning at institutions of higher education, *Natural Hazards* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s11069-021-04859-7](#)

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