

# The Conceptual Structure of Happiness

Zoltán Kövecses

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

*In this paper, I will make several specific suggestions concerning the concept of happiness. First, I will suggest that the conceptual structure of happiness/joy can be usefully described in terms of four cognitive components: conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, related concepts, and cognitive/cultural models. Second, I will claim that the concept of happiness/joy shares a number of force-dynamically constituted metaphorical source domains with emotion concepts in general. Third, I will propose that happiness/joy and emotion concepts in general are characterised by what I call evaluative and phenomenological metaphors. Fourth, I will propound that phenomenological metaphors are based on distinctive causes and expressive, physiological and behavioural responses that characterise happiness. Fifth, I will argue that a top-down approach can provide us with a fairly detailed though very tentative overall cognitive structure for concepts, but, at the same time, I will also argue that a top-down approach needs to be supplemented by a bottom-up approach.*

My chief goal in this paper is to answer the following question: How is the concept of happiness structured? Based on my previous work on emotion concepts in general and happiness in particular, I will make a specific proposal concerning this issue. I will proceed as follows. First, I will provide a very short characterisation of the approach to concepts that I will employ in this study; second, I will briefly describe the conceptual structure of emotion concepts in general; third, I will outline the structure of happiness/joy; and fourth, I will draw some tentative conclusions based on my findings.

## Top-down and Bottom-up Approaches to Concepts

We can approach concepts in essentially two ways: “bottom-up” and “top-down.” Top-down approaches to concepts find certain language data, make particular generalisations given that data, and suggest global cognitive structures (such as conceptual metaphors) that underlie and explain the data. This is what many

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cognitive linguists in the tradition of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have customarily done in their work. By contrast, bottom-up researchers begin with an extensive (not selective) set of data, make minimal generalisations about the data, and are much less in the business of suggesting global cognitive structures that account for the data (see, e.g., Dobrovolskij and Piirainen 2005). Cognitive linguists in the tradition of Lakoff and Johnson emphasise the importance of global cognitive structures, while bottom-up researchers lay stress on finding much less general and global conceptual machinery that is needed to account for the total meaning of each and every individual linguistic expression relating to a particular domain (such as that of emotion) and whose meaning could not be explained with the help of global cognitive structures alone. In other words, there is a problem with both approaches: Figuratively speaking, top-down researchers do not see the trees for the forest, and bottom-up researchers do not see the forest for the trees. In this paper, I will knowingly commit the former mistake, in that I will be primarily concerned with global cognitive structures on the basis of an incomplete set of language data. (On the debate between proponents of the two approaches, see, for example, Stefanowitsch 2007 and Kövecses forthcoming.)

## The Conceptual Structure of Emotion Concepts

In my previous research on emotion concepts, I have found that emotion concepts are composed of four distinct conceptual ingredients: conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, related concepts, and cognitive models (see Kövecses 1986; 1988; 1990; 2000). My suggestion in all this work was that the conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, and related concepts constitute the cognitive models. It is the cognitive models that we assume to be the conceptual representation of particular emotions, such as anger, love, fear, happiness, etc. Let us now look at some representative examples for each of these.

### Conceptual Metaphors

By conceptual metaphor I mean a set of correspondences between a more physical source domain and a more abstract target domain (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980 and Kövecses 2002).

Some of the most typical conceptual metaphors that characterise emotions include the following:

EMOTION IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER

EMOTION IS HEAT/FIRE

EMOTION IS A NATURAL FORCE

EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

EMOTION IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR

EMOTION IS AN OPPONENT

EMOTION IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL

EMOTION IS A FORCE DISLOCATING THE SELF

EMOTION IS A BURDEN

The overall claim concerning such conceptual metaphors was that they are instantiations of a general force-dynamic pattern (see Kövecses 2000), in the sense in which this was outlined by Leonard Talmy (1988). Given the force-dynamic character of these conceptual metaphors and given that they can be said to make up a large part of the conceptual structure associated with the emotions, it can be suggested that emotion concepts are largely force-dynamically constituted (Kövecses 2000).

### Conceptual Metonymies

Conceptual metonymies can be of two general types: CAUSE OF EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION and EFFECT OF EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION, with the latter being much more common than the former. (On metonymy in the cognitive linguistic view, see Barcelona 2000 and Panther and Radden 1999.) Below are some representative specific-level cases of the general metonymy EFFECT OF EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION:

BODY HEAT FOR ANGER

DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE FOR FEAR

CHEST OUT FOR PRIDE

RUNNING AWAY FOR FEAR

WAYS OF LOOKING FOR LOVE

FACIAL EXPRESSION FOR SADNESS

These specific types of conceptual metonymies correspond to physiological, behavioural, and expressive responses associated with particular emotions. Thus, BODY HEAT FOR ANGER and DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE FOR FEAR are conceptual representations of physiological responses, CHEST OUT FOR PRIDE and RUNNING AWAY FOR FEAR are those of behavioural responses, and WAYS OF LOOKING FOR LOVE and FACIAL EXPRESSION FOR SADNESS are those of expressive responses.

### Related Concepts

What I call related concepts are emotions or attitudes that the subject of emotion has in relation to the object or cause of emotion. For example, friendship is an emotion or emotional attitude that the subject of love prototypically has toward the beloved. If someone says that he or she is in love with someone, we can legitimately expect the subject of love to also exhibit the emotional attitude of friendship toward the beloved. In this sense, friendship is a concept inherent in the concept of romantic

love. (Related concepts display different degrees of relatedness—inherent concepts are most closely related to a particular concept.)

It can be suggested that such inherent concepts function as conceptual metonymies. After all, by mentioning one such inherent concept I may refer to the whole concept of which it is a part. In the example, friendship may indicate romantic love. This explains why the words girlfriend and boyfriend can be used to talk about people who are in a romantic love relationship. Such uses of related concepts can be taken to be PART FOR WHOLE metonymies.

### Cognitive Models

Following Lakoff (1987), we can think of a category as constituted by a large number of members, with some members being central. The mental representation of such central members can be given in the form of prototypical cognitive models. Such cognitive models can be metaphoric or metonymic.

Emotions are conceptually represented as cognitive models. A particular emotion can be represented by means of one or several cognitive models that are prototypical of that emotion. This emerges from the Roschean idea that categories have a large number of members, one or some of which being prototypical and many of which being nonprototypical (see, for example, Rosch 1978). Prototypical members of emotion categories are represented by prototypical cognitive models, whereas nonprototypical members are represented as deviations from the prototypical model (or models).

The conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, and related concepts all converge on such a prototypical model (or models) for particular emotions. Such convergence can occur in at least three different ways. In one, the conceptual ingredients jointly constitute a cognitive model. In another, they are based on a previously existing cognitive model. And in the third, some of them constitute and some of them are based on a prototypical cognitive model. In the discussion to follow, I will not take sides on this issue (but see Kövecses 2000; 2005).

Prototypical cognitive models can be thought of as folk theories of particular emotions (Kövecses 1990). As I have suggested previously (Kövecses 2000), the most schematic folk theory of emotions in general can be given as follows:

Cause of emotion → emotion → (controlling emotion → ) response

In other words, we have a very general idea of what emotions are like: There are certain causes that lead to emotions, and the emotions we have make us produce certain responses. Commonly, there are certain social constraints on

which responses are socially acceptable. Societies may impose different sets of control mechanisms on emotions.

This general folk theory of emotions derives from the application of the generic-level conceptual metaphor CAUSES ARE FORCES. The metaphor applies to both the first part and the second part of the model. In the model, whatever leads to an emotion is conceptualised as a cause that has enough force to effect a change of state, and the emotion itself is also seen as a cause that has a force to effect some kind of response (physiological, behavioural, and/or expressive). As a matter of fact, it is the presence and double application of this generic-level metaphor that enables a force-dynamic interpretation of emotional experience.

## The Concept of Happiness

The description of the concept of happiness in this section is largely based on Kövecses (1991).

### Metaphors of Happiness

The concept of happiness is characterised by a large number and various types of conceptual metaphors. Specifically, three types of conceptual metaphor can be distinguished: general emotion metaphors, metaphors that provide an evaluation of the concept of happiness, and metaphors that provide much of the phenomenological nature or character of happiness. The particular conceptual metaphors are given below, each with a linguistic example.

#### General emotion metaphors

HAPPINESS IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER *She was bursting with joy.*

HAPPINESS IS HEAT/FIRE *Fires of joy were kindled by the birth of her son.*

HAPPINESS IS A NATURAL FORCE *I was overwhelmed by joy.*

HAPPINESS IS A PHYSICAL FORCE *He was hit by happiness.*

HAPPINESS IS A SOCIAL SUPERIOR *They live a life ruled by happiness.*

HAPPINESS IS AN OPPONENT *She was seized by joy.*

HAPPINESS IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL *All joy broke loose as the kids opened their presents.*

HAPPINESS IS INSANITY *The crowd went crazy with joy.*

HAPPINESS IS A FORCE DISLOCATING THE SELF *He was beside himself with joy.*

HAPPINESS IS A DISEASE *Her good mood was contagious.*

Some of the examples may at first sound strange. For example, an anonymous reviewer expressed doubts concerning the example given for the CAPTIVE ANIMAL

metaphor. But a Google search shows that it can be used of happiness or joy: “Then all joy broke loose. The music started, colourful decorations were put up and the sanctuary became a place of celebration.”

The conceptual metaphors above are called general emotion metaphors because each applies to some or most emotion concepts, not only to happiness.

#### Metaphors providing an evaluation of happiness

HAPPINESS IS LIGHT He was *beaming* with joy.

HAPPINESS IS FEELING LIGHT (not HEAVY) I was *floating*.

HAPPINESS IS UP I'm *feeling* up today.

HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN I was in *seventh heaven*.

Not surprisingly, the metaphors above provide a highly positive evaluation for the concept of happiness. Having light, not being weighed down, being up, and being in heaven are all very positive, unlike their opposites (dark, being weighed down, and being down), which characterise the opposite of happiness: sadness, or depression. However, being in hell does not seem to characterise the contemporary conception of sadness (Tissari 2008).

#### Metaphors providing the phenomenological character of happiness

HAPPINESS IS AN ANIMAL THAT LIVES WELL I was *purring* with delight.

HAPPINESS IS A PLEASURABLE PHYSICAL SENSATION I was *tickled pink*.

HAPPINESS IS BEING DRUNK It was an *intoxicating* experience.

HAPPINESS IS VITALITY He was full of *pep*.

HAPPINESS IS WARMTH What she said made me feel *warm* all over.

These conceptual metaphors give the feeling tone of happiness, that is, they depict the way happiness feels to the person experiencing it. The latter two types of conceptual metaphor may be correlated: For example, feeling warmth is normally evaluated as a positive experience.

### Conceptual Metonymies of Happiness

The specific conceptual metonymies that apply to happiness correspond to behavioural, physiological, and expressive responses, as can be seen below:

#### Behavioural responses

JUMPING UP AND DOWN FOR HAPPINESS

DANCING/SINGING FOR HAPPINESS

### Physiological responses

FLUSHING FOR HAPPINESS  
INCREASED HEART RATE FOR HAPPINESS  
BODY WARMTH FOR HAPPINESS  
AGITATION/EXCITEMENT FOR HAPPINESS

### Expressive responses

BRIGHT EYES FOR HAPPINESS  
SMILING FOR HAPPINESS

Happiness often manifests itself through such behavioural, physiological, and expressive responses. We can indicate our own or another person's happiness by making reference to any one of these responses (see, for example, Wierzbicka 1999). For example, smiling is prototypically taken to be a sign of being happy. Furthermore, interestingly, we can find some degree of cultural variation in such responses. For example, in Buddhism, happiness is associated with reduced, rather than increased, heart rate (suggested by an anonymous reviewer).

### Related Concepts

Similar to many other emotion concepts, happiness also consists of several related concepts—that is concepts that are inherent in or closely related to the concept of happiness. These include:

(FEELING OF) SATISFACTION  
(FEELING OF) PLEASURE  
(FEELING OF) HARMONY

In prototypical cases, happiness assumes being satisfied with a certain outcome. Happiness also entails a feeling of pleasure. Finally, when we are happy, we tend to feel harmony with the world.

### Prototypical Cognitive Models of Happiness

The theory of cognitive models applies to happiness as a category in the following way: The conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, and related concepts mentioned above jointly converge on one or several prototypical cognitive models of happiness. (The details of this joint convergence are spelled out in Kövecses 1991 and 2002.) They either constitute the prototypical cognitive model(s) or are based on it (them). I suggest that the general concept of happiness is best described as having three prototypical cognitive models and many nonprototypical

ones clustering around the three prototypes. The three prototypes are happiness as an immediate response, happiness as a value, and happiness as being glad.

In other words, the suggestion is that it is these three senses of the word happiness that stand out among the many shades and kinds of meaning that the word happiness may be used to denote. They seem to be the most salient meanings—but, as we will see below, each for a different reason.

### **Happiness as an Immediate Response**

In happiness as an immediate response, a person responds with a form of happiness to a desired outcome. The form of happiness that is involved is commonly referred to as joy. I do not suggest that this is the only meaning of the word joy (see, for instance, Fabiszak 2000, 299–303), but it is the one that I analyse here. This joy/happiness can be characterised by the following cognitive model.

Cause of joy:

You want to achieve something.

You achieve it.

There is an immediate emotional response to this on your part.

Existence of joy:

You are satisfied.

You display a variety of expressive and behavioural responses including brightness of the eyes, smiling, laughing, jumping up and down.

You feel energised.

You also experience physiological responses, including body warmth and agitation/excitement.

The context for the state is commonly a social one involving celebrations.

You have a positive outlook on the world.

You feel a need to communicate your feelings to others.

The feeling you have may spread to others.

You experience your state as a pleasurable one.

You feel that you are in harmony with the world.

You can't help what you feel; you are passive in relation to your feelings.

The intensity of your feelings and experiences is high.

Beyond a certain limit, an increase in intensity implies a social danger for you to become dysfunctional, that is, to lose control.

It is not entirely acceptable for you to communicate and/or give free expression to what you feel (i.e. to lose control).

Attempt at control:

Because it is not entirely acceptable to communicate and/or give free expression to what you feel, you try to keep the emotion under control: You attempt not



to engage in the behavioural responses and/or not to display the expressive responses and/or not communicate what you feel.

Loss of control:

You nevertheless lose control.

Action:

You engage in the behavioural responses and/or display expressive responses and/or communicate what you feel. You may, in addition, exhibit wild, uncontrolled behaviour (often in the form of dancing, singing, and energetic behaviour with a lot of movement).

It is debatable whether the part attempt at control is just as important with happiness as with other negative emotions. It seems to me that in Western culture intense forms of emotions are in general negatively valued, which would explain the need to control even as regards positive emotions. It can certainly be found in romantic love as well (Kövecses 1988). However, this topic deserves further investigation.

We can think of the emergence of this model from the metaphors, metonymies, and related concepts in the following way: Take, for instance, the idea that when we are very happy, there is some loss of control involved. An indicator of this idea is given in a number of conceptual metaphors, such as HAPPINESS IS A NATURAL FORCE, HAPPINESS IS AN OPPONENT, HAPPINESS IS A CAPTIVE ANIMAL, and HAPPINESS IS INSANITY. The typical linguistic examples of these metaphors suggest that the person who is intensely happy is likely to undergo some loss of control (we are overwhelmed, we are seized, we go crazy, etc.). Thus, the language we use about happiness reveals the way we think about happiness, and the way we think about it is given in a prototypical cognitive model. This is the general methodology that I will follow in the remainder of the paper.

The immediate response model is a salient one due to its high degree of noticeability. It is dominated by highly noticeable behavioural, physiological, and expressive responses (i.e., conceptual metonymies) and also by conceptual content that is provided by conceptual metaphors suggesting intensity and control, leading eventually to a loss of control. This yields happiness as a basic emotion that conforms to the general force-dynamic pattern of intense emotional events. Other basic emotions have a similar force-dynamic pattern, each with its characteristic response profile as reflected in language using conceptual metonymies.

### **Happiness as a Value**

By contrast, happiness as a value is not characterised by a forceful emotion interacting with an opposing self. Instead, this form of happiness is constituted by a quiet state with hardly any noticeable responses or even a clearly identifiable specific cause. (This is why some of its typical vague and general causes are given

in parentheses below.) Such a form of happiness is often captured by the following conceptual metaphors.

HAPPINESS IS LIGHT He was *beaming* with joy.

HAPPINESS IS FEELING LIGHT (not HEAVY) I was *floating*.

HAPPINESS IS UP I'm feeling *up* today.

HAPPINESS IS BEING IN HEAVEN I was in *seventh heaven*.

HAPPINESS IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY You can't *buy* happiness.

HAPPINESS IS A DESIRED HIDDEN OBJECT At long last I have *found* happiness.

The cognitive model based on these metaphors can be given as follows:

Causes of happiness:

(freedom, health, love)

Existence of happiness:

Happiness is a state that lasts a long time.

It is associated with positive value.

It is a desired state.

It is pleasurable.

It gives you a feeling of harmony with the world.

It is something that you can spread to others.

You have a positive outlook on the world.

It exists separately from you and is outside you.

It is not readily available; it either requires effort to achieve it or comes to you from external sources.

It takes a long time to achieve it.

It is just as difficult to maintain as it is to attain.

This is the kind of happiness that comes closest to the one represented by the phrase “the pursuit of happiness”, which can also be taken as a linguistic example of the HAPPINESS IS A DESIRED HIDDEN OBJECT conceptual metaphor. Normally, happiness as a value is not characterised by highly salient emotional responses and a force-dynamically constituted control aspect. (On the shifts in the use of the word *happy*, see Diller, this volume.)

### Happiness as Being Glad

Happiness as being glad most commonly occurs as a mild positive emotional response to a state of affairs that is either not very important to someone or whose positive outcome can be taken to be a matter of course. In such a situation, people do not produce highly visible responses and do not have to control themselves. We can represent this form of happiness in the following way:

Cause of joy:

You want to achieve something.

You achieve it.

This causes you to have an immediate rational response (i.e. to have positive thoughts).

Existence of joy:

You are satisfied.

You may exhibit some milder responses like brightness of the eyes and smiling.

You may also experience some milder physiological responses like body warmth and increased heart rate.

You may have a positive outlook on the world.

You feel that you are in harmony with the world.

This form of happiness is extremely common. We say "I'm glad you came," but we are not led to intense emotional responses and we do not have to struggle (for control) with the emotion we feel. It is the very commonness of such a form of happiness that makes it salient, and hence prototypical.

## Conclusions

In light of the preceding analysis of happiness, it seems reasonable to draw the following conclusions.

First, I suggested that the conceptual structure of happiness/joy can be usefully described in terms of four cognitive components: conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonymies, related concepts, and cognitive/cultural models. It is the cognitive/cultural models that can be thought of as cognitive representations of the concept. Three of these have been identified for happiness/joy: happiness as an immediate response, happiness as a value, and happiness as being glad.

Second, the concept of happiness/joy shares a number of force-dynamic metaphorical source domains with emotion concepts in general, as well as many nonemotional concepts within the scope of these source domains. This suggests a great deal of similarity in the structure of a large number of concepts that do not belong to the same general area of experience.

Third, a new finding of this paper is that happiness/joy and emotion concepts in general are characterised by what I have called evaluative and phenomenological metaphors. Evaluative metaphors provide a particular appraisal for happiness, while phenomenological metaphors describe its phenomenological character.

Fourth, phenomenological metaphors seem to be based on the distinctive causes and expressive, physiological and behavioural responses that characterise happiness. For metaphorical conceptualisation to be based on distinctive causes and effects associated with a concept seems to be a general property of our cognitive apparatus.

Fifth, a top-down approach can provide us with a fairly detailed though very tentative overall cognitive structure for concepts. It is clear that a top-down approach needs to be supplemented by a bottom-up approach (including, e.g., corpus linguistic studies) for a fuller, more detailed, and more precise characterisation of prototypes of happiness, and very likely, for that of many other concepts. The challenge that lies before us is to combine the two approaches to the mutual satisfaction of both researchers who work top-down and researchers who work bottom-up.

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