

# Is This a Word for an Emotion? Considering a Set of English Data

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**Abstract.** There are many words that rather clearly denote emotions, such as the nouns anger, happiness, and sadness. However, some cases are not so clear. For example, if a person feels relaxed, the adjective can refer to a physiological as well as an emotional state. It may be even more difficult to decide if a word such as the noun fun or the adjective warm refers to an emotional state. In this paper, I will discuss a list of 86 words that I collected while annotating a set of British English texts. They consisted of people's fond memories of the music of digital games, and I aimed to mark all words that referred to emotions. I made notes of words that I was uncertain about. Here, those words are considered in the light of two dictionaries, the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, and the Oxford English Dictionary online.

**Keywords:** *emotion, vocabulary, expression*

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## 1 Introduction

The workings of emotional words have been revealed by science in remarkable ways (Wagner et al., 2020). Some academics contend that the brain of humans bears the evolutionary imprint of emotions. Others contend that emotions are cultural creations that we learn the meanings of from social contact, rather than being universal. Even the perception of an emotion's worth or decency will depend on culture. For instance, consider it a shame. Shame frequently resembles a hurricane that wreaks havoc on our sense of self; it wreaks havoc on our physical appearance and leaves a scar on our memory banks. The concept of shame is frequently flavored with modesty and embarrassment elsewhere in the world, in contrast to many Western cultures where it maintains its mostly negative reputation. In many societies, shame can be a sign of propriety. For instance, in China, parents may shame their children in public to teach them appropriate behaviors. Teachers may also use shame to drive students.

This paper discusses words that might or might not be words for emotions. It is based on a set of British English stories which I annotated as regards words for emotions (Israelashvili et al., 2019). I hesitated about 86 words, which I will discuss in this paper. I will first briefly discuss

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some previous research and then describe the data and method. The analysis section will deal with verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs separately. In their classic 1984 article, Fehr and Russell claimed that emotions are a prototypical category that has both central and peripheral members (Ajjawi et al., 2020). In other words, it is easy for people to recognize some emotions, while other emotions are not such good examples of emotions. Fehr and Russell (1984, p. 469) published a list of 196 words for emotions that their informants wrote down. The twenty top words for emotions were happiness (152), anger (149), sadness (136), love (124), fear (96), hate (89), joy (82), excitement (53), anxiety (50), depression (42), frustration (39), crying (36), feelings (35), jealousy (29), disgust (27), laughter (27), elation (26), caring (24), guilt (22), and embarrassment (20). The words in brackets stand for the number of informants who produced each word.

As a point of comparison, I will mention a study that concerns Finnish. According to research, these are the ten cognitively most salient words for emotions in Finnish: *viha* 'anger, hate', *ilo* 'joy', *rakkaus* 'love', *suru* 'sadness, sorrow', *pelko* 'fear', *onnellisuus* 'happiness', *hateus* 'envy, jealousy', *huoli* 'anxiety', *väsymys* 'tiredness', and *masennus* 'depression'. Almost all these words have their correspondences in the twenty-first emotions listed by Fehr and Russell's informants (Dabamona & Cater, 2019).

According to Johnson-Laird & Oatley (2021), there are seven main categories of emotion words. Firstly, there are generic words for emotions, such as emotions and feelings. Secondly, there are words for basic emotions, such as happiness and elation. Thirdly, there are words for what they call 'emotional relations.' These include such words as love and hate. Fourthly, there are words for 'caused emotions' such as gladness and horror. Fifthly, there are causatives, words that suggest that someone or something is causing emotion in a person. Causatives include words like irritate and reassure. The sixth category, emotional goals, consists of words such as desire and avarice. Lastly, there is the category of complex emotions, featuring, among others, embarrassment, and pity (Garrison & Schmeichel, 2019).

## **2 Method**

The data for this paper comes from the Game Music Everyday Memories project, funded by the Kone Foundation. In the project, we collected texts about people's fond memories of video game music. We collected British people's stories in 2021 and received 389 stories. The mean length of a story was 173 words, and the mean age of a writer was 40.2 years. The writers comprised 195 women, 190 men, 3 others, and 1 who did not want to tell their gender. Very strictly speaking, not all these stories concerned video game music. Some stories were about TV game show music, for example. However, 367 stories were about video game music.

I read all the stories and annotated all the occasions where people were describing an emotion. At the same time, I made notes about words about which I was uncertain. In this paper,

I ask: How are those words defined in the Macmillan English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary online? The purpose of the analysis is to see if the dictionaries suggest that those words are indeed words for emotions. Therefore, I also ask if the words emotion, emotional, to feel, feeling, or mood occurs in the definitions of the question words. I will also check the definitions for further words for emotions such as love or fear. Note that most of the words that I will discuss have many different senses. Here, I will focus on the senses that have to do with emotion.

### **3 Results**

#### **3.1 Nouns**

Let's start with the nouns, which included atmosphere, bliss, comfort, favorite, fun, desire, encourager, glee, interest, invulnerability, nostalgia, pain, phantom pain, pleasure, relief, satisfaction, sensation, sense, and worry. We will first look at the Macmillan English Dictionary. It defines atmosphere as "the mood or feeling that exists in a place and affects the people who are there". (I have underlined the words that suggest an emotion, as understood in terms of my research questions.) Strangely, I was uncertain about the noun bliss. As suggested by the Macmillan dictionary, it is a form of happiness, and thus rather clearly an emotion. Macmillan defines comfort as "a feeling of being less sad or worried about something that you were previously". A favorite is a person whom you like. A desire is defined as "a strong feeling of wanting to have or do something". Glee is "a feeling of excitement and happiness that often includes pleasure at someone else's bad luck". Interest is "a feeling of wanting to know about or take part in something". Nostalgia has to do with remembering "happy times" in the past. Pain is "a feeling of being very upset or unhappy". Pleasure is "a feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or satisfaction". Relief is defined as "a relaxed happy feeling you get because something bad has not happened or a bad situation has ended"; satisfaction is "the feeling of pleasure that you get when you achieve or obtain something you want". Sense is "a strong feeling or belief about yourself", while worry is "a problem or possibility that makes you feel worried". I will say more about sensation later; suffice it to say here that it is connected both to physical feeling and excitement.

To sum up, 10 of the 19 nouns are defined as 'feelings' in the Macmillan English Dictionary (Tissari et al., 2019). However, the noun sense is not used in the sense "a strong feeling or belief about yourself" when the British stories talk about the sense of togetherness and connection and a sense of community. This meaning of sense does not seem to occur in the Macmillan English Dictionary. There are four nouns in the list that do not seem to have any kind of emotional meaning, encourager (not included in the Macmillan English Dictionary), fun, invulnerability, and phantom pain.

The picture that we get from the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth, OED) is slightly different. It connects fun with "exciting activity" and suggests that the phrase all in good fun

means that a talk or action “is meant to be good-natured, and is not intended to cause harm, injury, or upset”. In the case of invulnerability, the OED agrees with Macmillan. A special feature of the OED is that includes obsolete senses of words. Thus, we learn that comfort used to mean “Pleasure, enjoyment, delight, gladness”. We also learn that glee has also been used as a verb meaning “to delight, gladden” and that the noun pleasure has been used in the phrase to a person’s pleasure which meant to a person’s liking.

The long definitions in the OED contain plenty of material – there is not enough space to discuss it all. However, we might pay particular attention to the noun sensation here. In addition to the excitement that was also mentioned in Macmillan, the OED names four other emotions in connection with sensation: admiration, surprise, horror, and fear, some of these senses being obsolete. I will return to this in the discussion.

To sum up the nouns then, most of them can denote an emotion or feeling. The nouns favorite, fun, and worry in their turn seem to refer to someone or something that causes emotions: there is something in your favorites that makes you like them, fun activities cause excitement, and worries cause anxiety. Perhaps one could even say that nostalgia is a feeling caused by happy memories or that reminiscing about happy times causes an emotion. The words that the dictionaries do not directly connect to emotions are encourager, phantom pain, and invulnerability.

### **3.2. Verbs**

The list of verbs included calm, care, care for, cherish, comfort, encourage, enjoy, mesmerize, and soothe. The Macmillan English Dictionary defines calm as follows: “to make someone feel more relaxed and less emotional”. The OED does not mention emotions in its definition “To make calm; to quiet, still, tranquilize, appease, pacify”. Then there is the verb care and the phrasal verb care for. Macmillan suggests that care means “to be interested in something and feel strongly that it is important”. Care for, in its turn, is defined as “to love someone, especially in a way that is based on friendship rather than sex”.

According to the OED, care means “To feel concerned” or “To have a regard or liking for”, and care for means “to take thought for, provide for, look after, take care of” (Das & Dutta, 2020). Thus, its definition of care does not mention emotions. Instead, the OED mentions that care has meant, among other things, “To sorrow or grieve”, and “To be troubled, uneasy, or anxious”. Similarly, the OED lists obsolete senses of cherish, which include “To hold dear, treat with tenderness and affection”, and “To cheer, gladden, inspirit, encourage”. A further sense of cherish in the OED, “To take affectionate care of (a thing)”, corresponds to the Macmillan sense “to look after someone or something because you love them very much”. The OED also suggests that

cherish can mean “[to] cling to (a hope, [or] feeling”. Macmillan explains that if one comforts someone, one makes them “feel less sad, worried, or disappointed”. This corresponds to the OED sense “To soothe in grief or trouble”. OED also mentions that comfort used to mean “to gladden”. Macmillan suggests that if one encourages someone, one gives them hope. The OED in its turn does not include any words for emotions in its definition of to encourage. Next on our list is the verb to enjoy.

Macmillan defines it as “to get pleasure from something”, while the OED suggests that it has to do with feelings such as joy and delight (Pekrun, 2022). According to the OED, to enjoy can simply mean “[to] be happy”. The definition of the verb to mesmerize does not contain any words for emotions in either dictionary (Bland et al., 2022). The OED suggests that it has to do with hypnosis, while Macmillan says that it means “to attract or interest you so much that you do not notice anything else around you”. Lastly, we have the verb to soothe, which is in the same league as to comfort and to encourage. Macmillan uses the verb to feel to explain soothe: “to make someone calmer or more relaxed when they are feeling nervous, worried, or upset”. Similarly, the OED uses the noun feeling to explain soothe: “To render (an animal, a person, the feelings) calm or quiet”. It also uses the noun passion to give soothe the additional meaning “To reduce the force or intensity of (a passion, pain, etc.)”.

In sum, it can perhaps be said that the list of nine verbs included eight verbs for emotions, firstly, care, care for, cherish, and enjoy, and, if we follow Johnson-Laird and Oatley (1989), four words for caused emotions, calm, comfort, encourage, and soothe. However, according to the dictionaries used, mesmerize does not seem to be a word for causing an emotion.

### **3.3. Adjectives**

The list of adjectives included the following 53 words: anxious, atmospheric, avid, blissful, boring, calm, charming, cheerful, cherished, comfortable, delighted, eager, elated, enchanting, engrossed, enthralling, entranced, fascinated, favorite, fuzzy, grateful, haunting, horrible, hyped, impressed, inspiring, interested, interesting, jovial, lonely, lovely, melancholic, nostalgic, obsessed, pleasant, pleased, popular, positive, relaxed, relieved, safe, satisfied, satisfying, scary, secure, shocked, soothing, stimulating, sweet, uncomfortable, uplifting, warm, and worried.

Table 1 describes the current senses of these adjectives. It shows that they were defined with the help of a word for emotion in more than half of the cases in Macmillan. The number for the OED would be higher if all obsolete cases were considered – at least 21 occurrences (39.6%). These figures do not include the adjectives in my list which are used several times to define each other. The verb to feel and the noun feeling, taken together, occur in 41.5% of the cases in

Macmillan, and 28.3% of the cases in the OED. The nouns emotion and mood, as well as the adjective emotional, occur quite rarely in the definitions.

**Table 1.** On the definitions of the adjectives.

	emotion (noun)	emotional (adjective)	feel (verb)	feeling (noun)	mood (noun)	word(s) for emotion
Macmillan	1 (1.9%)	0 (0%)	18 (34.0%)	4 (7.5 %)	1 (1.9%)	29 (54.7%)
OED	2 (3.8%)	2 (3.8%)	3 (5.7%)	12 (22.6%)	1 (1.9%)	17 (32.1%)

If one accepts the idea that the presence of these words indicates that a word refers to an emotion, then it seems that all but seven of the 53 adjectives refer to an emotion. The adjectives that do not seem to refer to emotion include avid, charming, eager, enchanting, engrossed, fascinated, and obsessed (Pekrun, 2022). However, the OED defines both charming and enchanting as “delightful”, which could be considered a word for causing an emotion. The adjectives engrossed and fascinated, and potentially even obsessed, seem close to mesmerized which was discussed in connection to verbs and that also was not a word for emotion. Macmillan defines engrossed as “so interested or involved in something that you do not think about anything else”. It is very close to its definition of to mesmerize, “to attract or interest you so much that you do not notice anything else around you”. Note, however, that the noun interest can be considered a feeling (Yeh & Tseng, 2020). Here I have chosen not to consider the adjective interested or the verb to interest as words for emotions, but if I did so, both mesmerized, engrossed, and fascinated would be words for emotions according to the Macmillan dictionary. Lastly, according to the OED, eager has previously meant “angry”.

### 3.4. Adverbs

The last group of words that may and may not refer to emotions is adverbs (Kanerva & Viimaranta, 2018). I only identified five problematic adverbs in the data, comfortably, desperately, romantically, unfortunately, and wonderfully. Let’s discuss each word in turn. The Macmillan entry of comfortable does speak of someone feeling something, but it stresses that it is a physical rather than an emotional feeling. (It would indeed be possible to write a separate paper on the nuances of the words to feel and feeling.) The OED mentions the obsolete senses “delightfully” and “happily” for comfortably (Grandinetti et al., 2013). As to desperately, its Macmillan entry is “in a very worried or angry way”. The OED gives the sense of “hopelessly”. Macmillan does not have an entry for romantically but defines romantic as “making you have feelings of love and excitement” and as “involving love and sex”. The OED used the adjective

romantic to define romantically, so the entry did not have any other words that could stand for emotions. According to Macmillan, unfortunately, is “used for saying that something is sad or disappointing”, while the OED suggests that it could mean “unhappily”. The Macmillan definition of wonderfully boils down to the very concise definition of wonderful, “extremely good”.

The OED in its turn rephrases wonderfully as “To excite wonder”, and even mentions an obsolete sense, “With wonder or admiration”. If one considers wonder to be a word for an emotion, then it seems that wonderfully is another such word. Desperately and romantically also clearly seem to be words for emotions. Unfortunately, is perhaps best described as a word for causing emotions. Comfortably does not seem to be a word for emotion.

Language also holds hints for unraveling the complexity of our inner environments. 24 emotion terms from 2,474 languages were analyzed in a recent study that was published in Science (Hauer & Kondrak, 2020). The findings suggested that biological and cultural factors affect how we perceive and experience emotions (Pekrun, 2022). Almost all language speakers experience both pleasurable and unpleasant emotions, as well as feelings of high or low physiological arousal (Nothhaft, 2016). However, the significance of particular emotions varies depending on where you are in the world.

The feelings that people wish to feel will in turn influence various aspects of people’s life (Barkhuizen, 2017). For example, the way people regulate their emotions, what they pay attention to, and which consumer products they use. They will even play a role in your perception of other people. According to research published in the journal Emotion, we are more likely to choose physicians whose face displays expressions that match how we ideally want to feel.

#### **4 Conclusion**

To sum up, most of the 86 words that I was uncertain about can be considered words for emotions if all their senses are considered. Only 12 or 14.0% of the words were not words for emotions. If we briefly compare with Fehr and Russell’s study (1984, p. 469), their list of 196 words for emotions collected from Canadian informants does not include any adverbs. This suggests that adverbs are not central or prototypical members of the category words for emotions. Indeed, adverbs were also the smallest category in my list. Roughly speaking, their list of 196 words for emotions contains 19 words that were in my list of 86 words. I say, “roughly speaking”, since they may have listed the word in a different form (de Ruiter et al., 2019). For example, they list *elation* and *caring*, while my list contained *elated* and *to care*. This nevertheless means that native speakers would consider at least 22 % of the words in my list words for emotions, which

admittedly is not very much. Interestingly, Fehr and Russell's (1984) list also contains the noun *vulnerability*, while I concluded that *invulnerability* is not a word for emotion.

As to the limits of this paper, note that most of the words that have been discussed above have several senses, and not all of these senses relate to emotions. Moreover, something that is very important but that I have only briefly mentioned is the context where the words occur. As regards context, here is one example of the noun *sensation*: "Lots of music was fast-paced so it captured the *sensation* of racing the cars quickly." In the light of the *Macmillan English Dictionary*, one could say that *sensation* here means "physical feeling". However, the same dictionary also includes the sense as "an event that causes a lot of excitement and interest". The OED also says that *sensation* can mean "a physical meaning" but adds that it can mean an "emotion; the feeling characteristic of a particular circumstance or situation". In addition, the OED names four other emotions in connection with *sensation*: admiration, surprise, horror, and fear, some of these in obsolete senses of *sensation*. The question then remains if *sensation* is a word for emotion in this context.

Be it as it may, it would be interesting to continue the study of words that may or may not be words for emotions. There is plenty of linguistic research on words on emotions, but there is not so much research on words that are on the borderline of being or not being words for emotions. Culture influences how we speak about and experience the universe in more ways than we understand, from comedy to happiness and from "high-arousal" phrases to "untranslatable."

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