Review

Emotion talk across corpora
Monika Bednarek (2008)

Reviewed by Geoff Thompson

The heuristic value of 'shunting' is well established in Systemic Functional Linguistics. This has typically taken the form of shunting along the cline of stratification: that is, between strata of the linguistic model – from lexico-grammar to semantics to context, or viceversa – to achieve what Halliday calls a 'trinocular' perspective (e.g. Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 31). More recently, with the increasing use of corpora as both test-beds for the theory and as ways of exploring the characteristics of different registers, scholars have become interested in the insights to be gained from shunting along the cline of instantiation: that is, from individual texts, to register-based sample corpora, to general corpora representing 'the language as a whole', and vice versa. In a number of these studies, the corpus is used as a kind of 'echo chamber', giving an insight into the kind of communicative environment in which individual texts function, and thus providing a picture of the discourse background against which linguistic choices in those texts or small groups of texts can be better understood (see e.g. Coffin and O'Halloran 2006; Miller 2006; Thompson 2001).

Bednarek's book is perhaps the most systematic and sustained attempt to date to explore the potential of this kind of shunting. Her focus is on 'emotion talk': that is 'all those expressions in the dictionary that denote affect/emotion' (page 11), whether referring to the emotions of 1st and 2nd persons,

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or 3rd persons. Essentially, emotion talk for her corresponds to what is termed affect in the appraisal model (Martin and White 2005); and she argues that, although her approach does not draw on SFL as a whole, appraisal, and the affect categories in particular, are eminently suitable for her purposes, since they are compatible with the other methodological tools that she sets out to employ, taken from cognitive and corpus linguistics, and from pragmatics. The book is designed to move through a series of perspectives on emotion talk, ranging from automatic frequency counts in a large corpus to a detailed manual analysis of individual cases in context in a much smaller corpus. At each point, Bednarek presents and compares the findings from sub-corpora representing four different registers: conversation, news reportage, fiction and academic discourse.

After an introductory chapter which offers an impressively wide-ranging survey of researchers' insights into how people talk about emotion, the analysis proper starts in Chapter 2 with what Bednarek calls the 'emotion profiling' of the four registers as represented in a registerially controlled subset of the BNC, the 'British Register Corpus' (BRC), that she has compiled, amounting to just under 20 million words. This involves identifying for each register the relative overall frequency of occurrence of a set of 1060 lexical items which denote emotion, and the 10 most frequent of these items in each sub-corpus. This is followed by an investigation of the variation in parts of speech, operationalized by looking at the ten most frequent emotion nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs for each register; and finally an exploration of certain kinds of syntactic variation in a subset of the items, such as whether emotion nouns occur in the singular or plural. In Chapter 3, Bednarek aims to formulate a 'local grammar' (Hunston and Sinclair 2000) of affect. While the whole BRC is utilized for the searches, just 15 emotion terms are treated in depth, presumably on the grounds that the patterns identified are likely to capture more or less the full range of possibilities. General functional roles such as Emoter (the person who experiences the emotion) and Trigger (the entity, situation or event that the emotion is caused by or directed towards) are introduced. Different parts of speech and different lexical items show different configurations in terms of which roles must or may be present or are not permitted. Chapter 4 is a continuation of Chapter 3, in that it applies the functional roles and patterns introduced in the preceding chapter to the four registers, exploring in detail the most frequently-occurring configurations in which the 15 emotion terms appear in each register. We are still dealing with decontextualised stretches of text at this stage, but the inclusion of more extensive phraseologies – often more or less whole clauses – means that the registerial differences begin to become more distinctly defined.

At this point, there is a marked change of focus, with a shift of orientation from corpus linguistic methods to discourse analysis. One should not downplay the methodological connections between the two parts: the corpus studies in Chapters 2 to 4 have pushed increasingly towards identifying functional characteristics of the four registers, and relating these to the socio-cultural contexts of the types of discourse; and Chapter 5 is still based firmly on corpus evidence. But the movement is now away from concordance lines and towards text. As with Chapters 3 and 4, Chapters 5 and 6 form a pair, with the first chapter of the pair setting out a system of choices, and the second applying the system to data. In this case, the system is that of affect categories: based on a manual analysis of a subset of the BRC (the 'BRC baby'), with roughly 20k words in each of the four registers, Bednarek proposes changes to the model of affect described in Martin and White (2005). While accepting the validity of the model as a whole, she argues for three main alterations. First, she suggests that 'surprise' should be included as a separate subcategory on a par with the three original sub-categories of un/happiness, dis/satisfaction and in/security, mainly on the basis that corpus evidence shows that surprise can be represented as both a positive and a negative emotion (rather than just negative as Martin and White class it). Second, she argues that the realis/irrealis distinction (whether the feelings relate to existing 'triggers' or to future ones) can be seen as applying to all categories of affect. In Martin and White, irrealis affect is categorised separately as dis/inclination (e.g. *wanting* vs. *fearing*); but Bednarek reinterprets dis/inclination in terms of un/willingness (*wanting* vs. *not wanting*) and reassigns a number of emotions to other irrealis categories: for example, *fearing* is categorized as irrealis insecurity. This leads on to the final insight: that realis and irrealis only apply in the case of directed affect (in that it is the Trigger which already exists or lies in the future). In the final chapter, this modified model is employed in performing a manual analysis of the BRC baby, focusing especially on affective key (the co-occurrence of particular syndromes of evaluation options across texts) and stance (which is here reinterpreted as how patterning of affect choices across texts relates to the construal of a persona – either of the author or of a third person such as a character in a novel). Bednarek points out that she is not looking at how affect contributes to the development of individual texts ('logogenesis'), which would represent the extreme end of the cline of instantiation. Instead, she aims at 'laying out a 'road-map' for further research into affect' (page 183) – clearly a more ambitious goal, and one which fits in with the aims of the book as whole, to not only demonstrate a multi-pronged approach in action but also set an agenda for research in this field by elaborating and justifying the approach.

This therefore invites an assessment of how far the ambitions have been successfully realized. The chapters which strike me as the most successful are those in which Bednarek engages in model building. Her local grammar of affect in Chapter 3 is persuasively presented and appears admirably comprehensive. The three factors summarized on page 95 (the presence/absence of an Emoter, the presence/absence of a Trigger, and whether the emotion is overt or covert) offer a neat and workable way of capturing a number of the major differences in the patterns used in emotion talk, and bring out unexpected similarities across apparently very different phraseologies. It is particularly worth noting the introduction of the concept of 'covert affect': that is, affect expressed by count nouns or noun modifiers which do not in themselves denote an emotion but characterize an event in terms of the emotion that it causes – e.g. *a surprise* – or that is the cause of the event – e.g. _hate_ *mail*. The amendments to the affect categories that are suggested in Chapter 5 are explicitly motivated by textual evidence: for example, one of the ways in which Bednarek justifies the inclusion of surprise as a separate category is by using a simple but effective survey of the emotion terms with which surprise is conjoined in the corpus (e.g. *surprise and pleasure*, *sad and surprised*), showing that positive and negative emotion terms appear in roughly equal proportions. She deftly teases out a number of aspects that I have certainly found problematic in analyzing affect – especially the boundaries between some of the subcategories of in/security, and the place in the model of the realis/irrealis distinction; and it looks as though her revised categories will be easier to apply. Admittedly, she does not directly tackle two aspects of affect in the appraisal model that remain controversial. The first is the question of how third-person affect operates in text: should it be treated as essentially the same as affect ascribed to the speaker or hearer (in which case it is not easy to see how this enters directly into the interpersonal negotiation between interactants that is at the heart of appraisal), or should it be seen as typically functioning as a token of judgement of the person portrayed as feeling that emotion (in which case it is doubtful whether it should be counted as affect proper)? The second issue is whether or not undirected affect should be included in the model: if it is included, it sits oddly in a model of appraisal, since 'appraising' must have a target. Furthermore, it marks affect as very different from judgment and appreciation, which both involve targets (the type of target is one of the main criteria by which these two categories are differentiated). However, since Bednarek is looking at emotion terms as a whole rather than concentrating on their place in the appraisal model, she is able to largely sidestep these issues, which helps to give the map of emotion talk that she builds up a satisfying coherence.

On the other hand, the analysis chapters are in some respects disappointing. There are certainly valuable insights scattered through them. To take a few

examples at random: in Chapter 2 it is interesting to see which of the 10 most frequent emotion terms in each register are shared with other registers (I would definitely not have predicted some of them – nor the fact that none of the terms appear in all four registers); at a more detailed level, the relatively high frequency of the string *surprised the* in news reportage is linked neatly with news values of novelty (Chapter 4); and, at a discourse level, Chapter 6 argues that affective key is connected with an intriguing set of groupings of roles such as 'Mentor' and 'Arguer' that the author may adopt or ascribe to others in academic discourse. However, some of the points that emerge in the findings and interpretation are not particularly original – for example, the finding that in fiction emotion verbs are predominantly in the past tense (that is true of most verbs in narrative), and the comment that fiction writers use emotion terms to influence the reader's attitude towards characters. The first analysis chapter (Chapter 2) as a whole does not entirely avoid the feeling of inconsequentiality that arises with some corpus studies, a sense that the wider aim of characterizing registers, by means of frequency (and infrequency) of occurrence, has been partially overtaken by a focus on what can be counted – which, as the saying has it, may not always be what counts. The discussion of the analyses seems in general to present a sequence of interesting *aperçus* rather than incrementally building up a comprehensive account of how emotion is talked about in the four registers. Each analysis chapter is more or less free-standing, with only occasional cross-references to the findings in other chapters. One of the payoffs that one can expect from shunting along the cline of instantiation is that the process provides a series of different perspectives on the same linguistic areas, so that a richer understanding emerges; but, for this to happen, the connections and complementarities between the insights gained at each stopping point on the cline need to be highlighted, in a way that is largely missing here.

One issue that interests me in studies of this kind relates to the degree of register specificity that is appropriate in collecting or selecting a corpus. This is a swings-and-roundabout dilemma that rears its awkward head in any corpus-based investigation of registerial characteristics. If the sample is rigorously circumscribed so that all texts are clearly of a similar kind along as many socio-cultural dimensions as possible, the linguistic claims that can be made are more secure – but at the same time potentially less generalizable. On the other hand, if the sample is more loosely delimited, the claims may be generalizable across a wider range of discourse, but are less likely to be valid for any particular text within the sample. This question was raised for me by some examples in Chapter 4 of academic discourse which were included as unproblematically representative of how emotion terms are used in the register, but which struck me as untypical. I tracked down the sources of some of these and found that, for

example, one was from a book published in 1949 (admittedly still in print, but markedly unlike current academic discourse in a number of ways); and another from a highly personal first-hand account of life in the Glasgow slums by a celebrated activist (although published in an academic journal, its impact came precisely from the non-academic style). Bednarek is not, of course, responsible for such anomalies (and indeed in an appendix available online at the author's website, she discusses some of the limitations of the corpus); but this evidence that the corpus is rather more heterogeneous in nature than might be expected does suggest that caution needs to be exercised in using the sample to make claims about expressions of affect in the register.

Thus, overall, I have some reservations about the extent to which the ambitious goals that Bednarek sets herself have been fully achieved. Nevertheless, she has succeeded in a number of her aims: in particular, she demonstrates the potential value of shunting between a wide-angle and a close-focus perspective on registers; and she offers refined and workable models of analysis at the phraseological and textual levels. In doing this, she does indeed, as she claims, set up a viable framework for future research into emotion talk.

Book reviewed

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