

EMOTIONAL INTENSITY AND ITS EXPRESSION IN LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

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Abstract. *This study provides a theoretical investigation into the correlation between emotional intensity and lexical modalities, with an emphasis on underexplored linguistic features such as intensifiers, repetition, self-referential pronouns, and perception verbs. While the traditional focus in emotional language analysis has centered on overt emotion words, the present article argues that emotional depth and intensity are often more effectively communicated through subtle lexical choices. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from linguistics and cognitive psychology, the paper elucidates the function of these modalities in encoding affective meaning and highlights their significance for the broader understanding of emotional discourse.*

Keywords: *emotional intensity, lexical modality, affective discourse, intensifiers, repetition, emotional language, perception verbs.*

The articulation of emotion through language transcends the mere use of emotion-specific vocabulary. Rather, it encompasses a complex interplay of lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features that together convey the speaker's internal affective states. While emotion words such as happy, sad, or angry explicitly denote emotional experiences, they constitute only one dimension of emotional expression. Recent theoretical frameworks suggest that a significant portion of emotional communication is realized through what may be termed lexical modalities—linguistic features that, although not inherently emotional, operate as cues to emotional intensity and subjective involvement [Planalp, 1999].

This article examines the theoretical underpinnings of lexical modalities in emotional discourse, emphasizing how specific linguistic elements such as intensifiers, repetition, first-person pronouns, and perception verbs serve as implicit yet powerful indicators of emotional arousal. Drawing upon cognitive and psycholinguistic research, this inquiry advances the claim that these modalities are not merely stylistic devices but are functionally integral to the conveyance of affective meaning.

Emotion as a psychological phenomenon has been extensively theorized along various axes, among which intensity occupies a central position. Frijda et al. conceptualize emotional intensity as a multi-faceted construct encompassing dimensions such as arousal, goal relevance, and subjective significance [Frijda et al.,

1992]. Translating this into the linguistic domain, intensity manifests not only in the semantics of emotion words but also in the structure and modulation of discourse.

Among the most salient lexical modalities associated with emotional intensity are the following:

1. **Intensifiers.** Lexical intensifiers such as *very*, *incredibly*, or *so* serve to escalate the emotional valence of a statement. These scalar modifiers enhance the affective weight of emotion predicates. For instance, the utterance “I was very anxious” communicates a more acute affective state than “I was anxious” [Storm & Storm, 1987,]. The theoretical significance of intensifiers lies in their role as gradient indicators of arousal, allowing for fine-tuned expression of emotional magnitude.
2. **Repetition functions** as a prosodic and syntactic mechanism that reinforces emotional content. The reiteration of words or phrases—e.g., “It was horrible, horrible”—has been shown to increase perceived emotional intensity [Bucci, 2001]. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, repetition reflects cognitive processes linked to heightened emotional arousal and reduced regulation, thereby serving as an authentic marker of emotional salience.
3. **First-Person Pronouns.** The employment of self-referential pronouns (*I*, *me*, *my*) signals the speaker’s subjective involvement in the emotional narrative. Planalp argues that such pronouns indicate personal ownership of affect and contribute to the perceived genuineness of emotional expression [Planalp, 1999]. In contrast to impersonal or generalized statements, self-referencing enhances the psychological immediacy of the discourse.
4. **Perception Verbs** (e.g., *feel*). Verbs denoting internal perception—particularly *feel*—act as vehicles for experiential framing of emotion. Phrases such as “I feel devastated” or “I felt something shift” position the speaker as a perceptual agent, thereby bridging the internal-experiential and external-communicative domains [Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989]. These verbs play a central role in conveying affective states that are nuanced, evolving, or difficult to categorize under discrete emotion labels.

Taken together, these modalities construct a multidimensional linguistic profile of emotional experience. They frequently co-occur in emotionally charged texts, operating synergistically to heighten emotional expressivity and deepen affective resonance [Ortony et al., 1987, 341-364].

The incorporation of lexical modalities into the study of emotional language reflects a paradigm shift from a referential to a functional model of language. Rather than focusing solely on what emotions are named, scholars have turned attention to

how emotional meaning is enacted through discourse. Cohn et al. observe that emotional expression in spontaneous texts—such as blogs, personal narratives, or therapeutic writing—often relies more heavily on structural and functional linguistic cues than on explicit emotion terms [Cohn et al., 2004, 687-693].

Furthermore, Bucci's multi-channel theory of emotional communication posits that affective meaning is distributed across lexical, prosodic, and gestural systems [Bucci, 2001]. Lexical modalities constitute a critical verbal channel, particularly salient in written or transcribed forms of communication where nonverbal cues are unavailable. This renders them essential for both theoretical models and applied domains, such as computational affect analysis, psychotherapy, and discourse studies.

Conclusion. The theoretical implications extend beyond description to methodological application. In fields such as affective computing and sentiment analysis, the identification and quantification of lexical modalities could enhance the precision of emotional detection algorithms. In psycholinguistic research, these modalities provide measurable indicators of affective processing, self-focus, and emotional regulation strategies. This theoretical exploration has elucidated the role of lexical modalities as integral components in the expression of emotional intensity. Elements such as intensifiers, repetition, self-referential pronouns, and perception verbs do not merely embellish emotional discourse; they fundamentally shape the communicative encoding of affective experience. By transcending the limits of overt emotion vocabulary, these modalities offer a richer and more authentic linguistic representation of emotional states.

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