

*'Happiness' in cross-linguistic  
& cross-cultural perspective*

The psychologists David Myers and Ed Diener start their frequently cited article "Who is Happy" with the observation that "Books, books and more books have analyzed human misery. During its first century, psychology focused far more on negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, than on positive emotions, such as happiness and satisfaction." They note with approval that this is now changing quite dramatically.<sup>1</sup>

There is of course a good reason why books, books, and more books have been written about human misery. Misery and suffering are part and parcel of most lives, whereas happiness is not – or so it has appeared to most people at

most times. In the autobiographical novel by the Egyptian-born British writer Ahdaf Soueif, the Egyptian aunt of the Westernized heroine asks her niece why she left her husband. "We were not happy together," she replies. The aunt raises her eyebrows: "Not happy? Is this sane talk? ... Who's happy, child?"<sup>2</sup> This exchange is, I think, a characteristic clash of culturally informed thought patterns, values, and expectations.

The first century of psychology, which, as Myers and Diener point out, focused to a far greater extent on negative emotions than on positive ones, was also the century of, inter alia, the two world wars, the Holocaust, the Gulag Archipelago, the millions deliberately or recklessly starved to death in the Ukraine and elsewhere under Stalin and in China under Mao Ze Dong, and the horrors of Pol Pot's Cambodia. By the end of the twentieth century, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot were all gone, but few of those who watch the evening news on television would say that the human condition has radically changed since the time of their rule.

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1 David G. Myers and Ed Diener, "Who is Happy?" *Psychological Science* (January 1995): 10.

2 Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 747.

Against such a background, the claim of Myers and Diener that “most people are reasonably happy, but that some people are happier than others” seems rather startling. Most people are reasonably happy? Who *are* those reportedly happy people?

According to the studies they cite, North America has the greatest concentration of happy people in the world. “[I]n national surveys,” writes Myers, “a third of Americans say that they are *very* happy. Only one in ten say ‘not too happy.’ The remainder – the majority – describe themselves as ‘pretty happy.’” Europeans, Myers adds, “by and large report a lower sense of well-being than North Americans,” but they too “typically assess themselves positively. Four in five say they are ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ satisfied with their everyday lives.”<sup>3</sup>

By Myers and Diener’s account, “nations differ strikingly in happiness, ranging from Portugal, where about 10% of people say they are very happy, to the Netherlands, where about 40% of people say the same.” They emphasize that “nations differ markedly in happiness even when income differences are controlled for.”<sup>4</sup> Is it true that nations differ in happiness? Or do they differ, rather, in what they are prepared to report about the state of their happiness?

In addressing these questions, political scientist Ronald Inglehart is more cautious than Myers and Diener, in that he speaks only of differences in reported happiness rather than in happiness as such. He also seems less willing simply to take his results at face value. For example, he asks:

But exactly what is it that underlies these large and rather stable cross-national dif-

3 David G. Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), 25.

4 Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?” 4.

ferences? Can it be true that Italians, French, Germans, and Greeks really are a great deal less happy and more dissatisfied with their lives than the Danes, Swiss, Dutch, and Irish? Could fate be so unkind as to doom entire nationalities to unhappiness, simply because they happened to be born in the wrong place?<sup>5</sup>

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Trying to answer such questions, one has to address, at some point, the linguistic problem. For example, if 14 percent of Germans declare themselves to be *sehr glücklich* whereas 31 percent of Americans declare themselves to be *very happy*, can these reports be meaningfully compared if *glücklich* does not mean the same thing as *happy*?<sup>6</sup>

Inglehart considers the possibility that the words used in other languages to translate the English words *happy* and *satisfied* may not exactly match, but then he confidently dismisses the matter. His main argument for dismissing it rests on the Swiss case: regardless of the language they use – whether German, French, or Italian – the Swiss “rank very highly in life satisfaction” and “express higher levels of satisfaction than the Germans, French and Italians with whom they share a language.” But however convincing the Swiss case may be, it is hard to see how it can justify the sweeping conclusion that Inglehart draws from it: “These Swiss results alone devastate any attempt to explain the cross-national differences as artifacts of language.”<sup>7</sup>

5 Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 79.

6 See Anna Wierzbicka, *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

7 Inglehart, *Culture Shift*, 78.

It is true that the differences in self-reported *bonheur* (and its adjective, *heureux*) between the French and the French-speaking Swiss cannot be attributed directly to any linguistic differences.<sup>8</sup> But surely it doesn't follow from this that the differences in self-reporting between the French and the Americans couldn't possibly have anything to do with the semantic differences between the French word *heureux* and the English word *happy*.

The glibness with which linguistic differences are at times denied in the current literature on happiness can be quite astonishing. The economist Richard Layard, for example, writes, "Of course one could question whether the word *happy* means the same thing in different languages. If it does not, we can learn nothing by comparing different countries." The problem is dismissed as soon as it is raised; the reader is assured that "there is direct evidence, for a number of languages, that the words do have the same meaning in different languages."

In support of this claim, Layard reports that "a group of Chinese students were asked to answer the happiness question, once in Chinese and once in English . . . . The students reported almost exactly the same average level of happiness in both Chinese and English." Instead of inquiring into the possible reasons for such results, Layard concludes that "since the English and Chinese languages are very far apart, this finding is highly reassuring," and that "the concept of happiness seems equally familiar in all cultures."<sup>9</sup>

8 Surely, the first hypothesis about the Swiss must be that, unlike their neighbors, they were spared the catastrophe of World War II. Frequently, happiness studies are lacking a historical as well as a linguistic and a cultural dimension.

9 Richard Layard, *Happiness: Has Social Science*

In fact, the linguist Zhengdao Ye's detailed study of Chinese positive-emotion concepts shows clearly that while there are two happiness-like concepts in the traditional list of Chinese basic emotions, both are different from the English *happiness*. The terms in question are *xi*, which Ye defines as "festive joy," and *le*, which she defines as "attainable enjoyment/contentment." Of *xi* Ye says, inter alia, that "the positive cognitive evaluation, the personal character, and the unexpectedness of the event all contribute to the sudden, intense good feeling . . . , which is usually outwardly shown via facial expressions and bodily gestures." On the other hand, *le* "seems to have a gamut of components from many 'happy-like' words in English. It is like a hybrid of *pleased*, *enjoyment*, *contented* and *having fun*." In particular, she emphasizes the active attitude of *le*, which "results in a wish to do something to keep the current situation going." Ye concludes her discussion of the differences between the ethnotheories of emotion reflected in Chinese and English as follows:

It seems that in Chinese people's perception and conceptualisation of human emotional experience in relation to good events there are two quite opposite aspects: one is due to a somewhat mysterious external force, to which the experimenter "actively" responds, experiencing a momentary, intense feeling "stirred" by external stimuli, and the other is due to human effort. Each aspect is equally important and culturally salient, and each term occupies a place in the small set of the "basic emotions."<sup>10</sup>

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*a Clue?*" Lionel Robbins Memorial Lectures, London School of Economics, March 2003, 17.

10 Zhengdao Ye, "Why Are There Two 'Joy-like' 'Basic' Emotions in Chinese? Semantic

The lack of equivalence between the Chinese and English words does not mean that Chinese and Anglo attitudes toward life cannot be meaningfully compared at all. They can be, but every comparison requires a common measure. In this case such a measure is provided by the mini-language of simple and universal human concepts that can be found in all languages. These simple and universal concepts include GOOD, BAD, KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, LIVE, and fifty or so others. They do not include, however, complex culture-specific words like *happy*, *satisfied*, or *well-being*.<sup>11</sup>

It is an illusion, then, to think that the English words *happy* and *happiness* have exact semantic equivalents in Chinese, or, for that matter, in other European languages. The differences, it turns out, are particularly striking in the case of the adjective.

In the language of simple and universal human concepts, the meaning of *happiness* can be linked with the following cognitive scenarios: a) some very good things happened to me; b) I wanted things like this to happen; and c) I can't want anything else now. By contrast, the cognitive scenario of *happy* can be represented as follows: a) some good things happened to me; b) I wanted things like this to happen; and c) I don't want anything else now. The main differences between *happiness* and *happy*, then, lie in the contrast between "very good" and

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Theory and Empirical Findings," in *Love, Hatred and Other Passions: Questions and Themes on Emotions in Chinese Civilisation*, ed. Paolo Santangelo (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, in press).

11 Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, eds., *Meaning and Universal Grammar*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002) and Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics: Primes and Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

"good" (component a) and between "I can't want anything else now" and "I don't want anything else now" (component c). In happiness one's heart is filled to overflowing and there seems to be no room left for any further (unfulfilled) desires or wishes.

*Happiness* can be compared, roughly, to the French *bonheur*, the German *Glück*, the Italian *felicità*, and the Russian *счастье*, because like these words it can be used to refer to an existential condition seen as a certain absolute. The adjective *happy*, however, does not necessarily imply a state of happiness. For example, if I say that "I'm happy with the present arrangements," I do not mean that I either experience or am in a state of happiness. Thus, *happy* is, so to speak, weaker than *happiness*, whereas *heureux*, *felice*, *glücklich*, and *счастливый* are not similarly weaker than *bonheur*, *Glück*, *felicità*, and *счастье*, respectively.

The semantic differences between *happy* and its putative counterparts in European languages are often flagged in bilingual dictionaries, which instruct users not to translate *happy* as, for instance, *heureux*, but to use some weaker word instead. Here are some examples from the *Collins-Robert English-French Dictionary*:

I'll be quite happy to do it. →

Je le ferai volontiers. / Ça ne me dérange pas de le faire. (I'll gladly do it. / It doesn't bother me to do it.)

I'm happy here reading. →

Je suis très bien ici à lire. (I'm very well here reading.)

I'm not happy about leaving him alone. →

Je ne suis pas tranquille de le laisser seul. (I'm not at ease about leaving him alone.)

The very fact that *happy*, in contrast to those other words, has developed such

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a weaker second meaning highlights a semantic shift that has no doubt contributed to the expansion of the term's use in English, at the expense of words with more intense meanings like *rejoice* and *joy*. *Happy* – unlike *heureux*, *sčastlivyj*, and *glücklich* – is not restricted to exceptional states (like *bliss*), but rather is seen as referring to states within everyone's reach. There is nothing exceptional about being *happy*, and this is why one can be *quite happy*, *reasonably happy*, *pretty happy*, *not at all happy*, and so on.

As I have argued in my book *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*, the very notion that a person can be pretty happy is, so to speak, a modern invention. At the time when the adjective *happy* was close semantically to the noun *happiness*, collocations like *pretty happy* did not exist in the English language, and being happy was regarded by speakers of English as something very rare, as witnessed, for example, by the following line from George Herbert's "Jacula Prudentium": "There is an hour where a man might be happy all his like, could he find it."

To some extent, *happiness* can still be seen as something rare and exclusive, as can *bonheur* and *felicità*. But *happy* has drifted away from *happiness* so far that it can almost be said to be halfway between *happiness* and *okay*; syntactic frames such as "I'm happy with the present arrangements" reflect this semantic weakening. This weakening, in turn, can be seen as a manifestation of an overall process of the dampening of the emotions – modern Anglo-American culture's trend against emotional intensity.<sup>12</sup>

12 Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

The remarkable expansion of the word *happy* has gone hand in hand with the decline of negative words like *woes*, *sorrows*, and *griefs*.<sup>13</sup> As I have tried to show in my *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures*, modern English has, so to speak, exorcised *woes*, *sorrows*, and *griefs* from the fabric of 'normal' life. In older English, *woes*, *sorrows*, and *griefs* (in the plural) were commonly used to refer to everyday life, whereas in present-day English, *grief* is restricted, by and large, to the exceptional event of the death of a loved person. At the same time happiness has come to be seen not as something rare and unusual, but as altogether ordinary; and the word *happy* has become one of the most widely used English emotion adjectives – perhaps the most widely used one of all. According to the data in the COBUILD corpus of contemporary English, *happy* is not only uttered much more frequently than *sad* (roughly 3:1) and *joyful* (roughly 36:1), but also much more frequently than, for example, *heureux* is in comparable French listings (roughly 5:2).

Stanisław Barańczak, a Polish poet who emigrated to America, gives a particularly astute account of the semantic clash between the English word *happy* and its nearest equivalents in some other European languages – an account based on his personal experience:

Take the word "happy," perhaps one of the most frequently used words in Basic American. It's easy to open an English-Polish or English-Russian dictionary and find an equivalent adjective. In fact, however, it will not be equivalent. The Polish word for "happy" (and I believe this also holds for other Slavic languages) has much more restricted meaning; it is generally reserved for rare states of profound

13 Anna Wierzbicka, "Emotion and Culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum," *Ethos* (in press).

bliss, or total satisfaction with serious things such as love, family, the meaning of life, and so on. Accordingly, it is not used as often as “happy” is in American common parlance. . . . Incidentally, it is also interesting that Slavic languages don’t have an exact equivalent for the verb “to enjoy.” I don’t mean to say that Americans are a nation of superficial, backslapping enjoyers and happy-makers, as opposed to our suffering Slavic souls. What I’m trying to point out is only one example of the semantic incompatibilities which are so firmly ingrained in languages and cultures that they sometimes make mutual communication impossible.<sup>14</sup>

In the book entitled *The Pursuit of Happiness*, the American David Myers asks: “How happy are people?” Given the widespread assumption that the word *happy* can be readily translated without any change of meaning into other European languages, it is interesting to note that the question raised in the title of that chapter cannot be translated into many other languages at all. One simply can’t ask in these languages the equivalent of “How happy are people?”:

\*Comment (\*combien) heureux sont les gens?

\*Come felici sono gli uomini?

\*Kak sčastlivy ljudi?

The reason why all of the above sentences are infelicitous is that unlike the word *happy*, the words *heureux*, *felice*, and *sčastlivyj* are not gradable. They all refer to something absolute, to a peak experience or condition that is not considered a matter of degree. To be asked to measure one’s *bonheur* or one’s *sčastie* on a scale from one to ten is like being

14 Stanisław Barańczak, *Breathing Under Water and Other East European Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 12.

asked to measure one’s bliss on such a scale.

Inglehart, speaking of research into reported happiness carried out in Europe and based on the so-called Eurobarometer Survey, has maintained that the questions adapted from American research – e.g., How are things going these days? Would you say you are very happy, fairly happy or not too happy? – have “been found effective in measuring feelings of happiness [in Europe].” The phrase “feelings of happiness” is as problematic here as the idea that such feelings can be effectively measured.

Using French and Russian again as examples, I will note that *bonheur* and *sčastie* suggest, roughly speaking, an existential condition rather than a momentary feeling, and that the phrase “feelings of happiness” cannot be translated literally into French or Russian (\**les sentiments de bonheur*; \**čuvstva sčastia*). Incidentally, for this reason, the economist Daniel Kahneman’s idea that happiness can be studied more effectively by focusing people’s attention on the subjective quality of their current circumstances, rather than on any overall assessment of their lives, may be more applicable to English than to other languages.<sup>15</sup> For example, in French, momentary good feelings occurring in the course of an ordinary day would normally be linked with *plaisir* (pleasure) rather than with *bonheur*; and in Russian, they would be linked with *udovol’stvie* (roughly, pleasure) rather than with *sčastie*.

In happiness studies, it is often assumed that people’s subjective well-being can be reliably estimated on the

15 Daniel Kahneman, “Objective Happiness,” in Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener, and Norbert Schwarz, eds., *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

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basis of their self-reports. Doubts about the reliability of such reports are sometimes acknowledged, but they tend to be minimized.

For example, Layard, having dismissed the question “whether the word ‘happy’ means the same in different languages,” writes, “But again, might not people in some countries feel more impelled to report high or low levels of happiness, because of local cultural norms? There is no evidence of this – for example no clear tendency for individualistic countries to report high or collectivist cultures to report low.”<sup>16</sup>

Strikingly, the reliability of the classification of countries as either individualist or collectivist is taken for granted here, and since there emerges no clear correlation between individualism (as measured by such classifications) and self-reported happiness, it is assumed that self-reports can reliably measure the actual well-being of people across languages and cultures.

Myers strikes a more cautious note about self-reports, but his caution does not include any cross-cultural perspective. He begins by stating that everyone is the best judge of his or her own happiness: “if *you* can’t tell someone whether you’re happy or miserable, who can?” He continues as follows: “Still, even if people are the best judges of their own experiences, can we trust them to be candid? People’s self-reports are susceptible to two biases that limit, but do not eliminate, their authenticity.”<sup>17</sup> One of the biases, according to Myers, has to do with people’s momentary moods: “By coloring people’s assessments of the overall quality of their lives, temporary moods do reduce the reliability of their self-pronouncements. Their happiness

16 Layard, *Happiness*, 19.

17 Myers, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 27.

thermometers are admittedly imperfect.” The other bias is people’s “tendency to be agreeable, to put on a good face.” People, Myers says, “overreport good things” – they “are all a bit Pollyannish.” However, “this poses no real problem for research,” because “we could downplay people’s happiness reports by, say, 20 percent and still assume that our ‘happiness thermometers’ are valid as relative scales.”<sup>18</sup>

I do not wish to question Myers’s assumption or conclusions as far as the subjective well-being of Americans is concerned. One should be careful, however, to distinguish between all Americans and all people. It may indeed be reasonable to assume that our “happiness thermometers” are valid as relative scales – if one is comparing individuals who speak the same language and share, or are familiar with, the same cultural norms. When it comes to cross-cultural comparisons, however, the situation is very different.

Thus, when Myers and Diener state that “nations differ strikingly in happiness, ranging from Portugal, where about 10% of people say they are very happy, to the Netherlands, where about 40% of people say the same,” a move is made, imperceptibly, from differences in self-reports to differences in actual well-being. In fact, Myers and Diener themselves acknowledge that in some societies “norms more strongly support experiencing and expressing positive emotions.”<sup>19</sup> But if so, then how can cross-national and cross-cultural differences in self-reports be equated with differences in happiness?

Somewhat disconcertingly, Myers and Diener state that “collectivist cultures report lower SWB [subjective well-

18 *Ibid.*, 28.

19 Myers and Diener, “Who is Happy?” 12.

being] than do individualist cultures,” whereas Layard claims, as we have seen, that there is no clear difference in this regard between so-called individualist and collectivist countries. Even more disconcerting, however, is Layard’s confident rejection of the possibility that “people in some countries [might] feel more impelled to report high or low levels of happiness because of local cultural norms.”

There is plenty of evidence that local cultural norms do produce different attitudes to expressing happiness or, more generally, good feelings. Evidence of this kind cannot be elicited through surveys based on self-reports; it can, however, be gained by other methods. In particular, there is a growing body of evidence emerging from cross-cultural autobiographies, and there is extensive linguistic evidence.

In her memoir *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Country*, the Polish-born writer Eva Hoffman, who emigrated with her parents to North America at the age of thirteen, contrasts two cultural scripts by describing two different rituals of farewell, as experienced first in Poland and then, two years later, in America:

But as the time of our departure approaches, Basia . . . makes me promise that I won’t forget her. Of course I won’t! She passes a journal with a pretty, embroidered cloth cover to my fellow classmates, in which they are to write appropriate words of good-bye. Most of them choose melancholy verses in which life is figured as a vale of tears or a river of suffering, or a journey of pain on which we are embarking. This tone of sadness is something we all enjoy. It makes us feel the gravity of life, and it is gratifying to have a truly tragic event – a parting forever – to give vent to such romantic feelings.

It’s only two years later that I go on a month-long bus trip across Canada and the United States with a group of teenagers, who at parting inscribe sentences in each other’s notebooks to be remembered by. “It was great fun knowing you!” they exclaim in the pages of my little notebook. “Don’t ever lose your friendly personality!” “Keep cheerful, and nothing can harm you!” they enjoin, and as I compare my two sets of mementos, I know that, even though they’re so close to each other in time, I’ve indeed come to another country.<sup>20</sup>

A similar autobiographical account of a clash between Polish and American cultural scripts comes from Laura Klos Sokol, an American woman who married a Pole and settled with him in Warsaw:

To some extent, Poles enjoy the upbeat American pom-pom skating cheer. Who would dare claim that cheerfulness is bad? However, sometimes Poles balk at American-style frothy enthusiasm. Ask a Pole to imitate American behavior and chances are the result will include a wide smile, an elongated “Wooooow!” and “Everything is fine!” with a thumbs-up.

One Pole said, “My first impression was how happy Americans must be.” But like many Poles she cracked the code: “Poles have different expectations. Something ‘fantastic’ for Americans would not be ‘fantastic’ in my way of thinking.” Another Pole says, “When Americans say it was great, I know it was good. When they say it was good, I know it was okay. When they say it was okay, I know it was bad.”<sup>21</sup>

20 Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 78. For discussion, see Mary Besemeres, *Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002).

21 Laura Klos Sokol, *Shortcuts to Poland* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IPS, 1997), 176.

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Looking at her native American culture from a newly acquired Polish point of view, Klos Sokol satirizes: “Wow! Great! How nice! That’s fantastic! I had a terrific time! It was wonderful! Have a nice day! Americans. So damned cheerful.”

In addition to verbal routines like those mentioned above, and to the frequent use of untranslatable key cultural words like *fun* and *enjoy*, the differences between the two sets of cultural scripts are also reflected in nonverbal communication, particularly in smiling:

A Pole who lived in the States for six years recently returned to Poland for a visit. During a round of introductions to some people in a café, she immediately spotted the American by his smile. “There’s a lack of smiling here ...” says the Pole. Another Pole says, “Americans, in general, smile all the time. Here, people in the streets look worried.”<sup>22</sup>

Noting that “Americans smile more in situations where Poles tend not to,” Klos Sokol observes: “In American culture, you don’t advertise your daily headaches; it’s bad form; so you turn up the corners of the mouth – or at least try – according to the Smile Code.”

Observations of this kind cast doubt on the validity of statements like the following: “When self-reports of well-being are correlated with other methods of measurement, they show adequate convergent validity. They covary ... with the amount of smiling in an interview.”<sup>23</sup> Statements of this kind don’t take into account that the amount of smiling, too, is governed to some extent

22 Ibid., 117.

23 Ed Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, “National Differences in Subjective Well-Being,” in Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz, eds., *Well-Being*, 437.

by cultural norms, and that the norms for smiling are closely related to the norms for verbal behavior (including verbal self-reports).

From the perspective of immigrant writers it seems clear that Anglo-American culture fosters and encourages cheerfulness, positive thinking, and staying in control. To quote Eva Hoffman’s memoir again:

If all neurosis is a form of repression, then surely, the denial of suffering, and of helplessness, is also a form of neurosis. Surely, all our attempts to escape sorrow twist themselves into the specific, acrid pain of self-suppression. And if that is so, then a culture that insists on cheerfulness and staying in control is a culture that – in one of those ironies that prevails in the unruly realm of the inner life – propagates its own kind of pain.<sup>24</sup>

Such assessments of the psychological costs of “obligatory” cheerfulness may or may not be correct, but few commentators would disagree with the basic idea that something like cheerfulness is encouraged by American culture.

Let me adduce here one more autobiographical testimony to the perceived differences between Polish and Anglo-American cultural scripts concerning happiness and good feelings – a fragment of Stanisław Barańczak’s poem “Small talk” (translated from the Polish by the poet):

How Are You, I’m Just Fine; who says  
there is no chance  
for any conversation between us, who says  
there’s no communication between the  
grey stone wall,  
or the trembling of a window frame, or  
the rainbow-hued oil  
spilled on the asphalt, and myself; how on  
earth could

24 Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, 271.

my dialogue with them be a lie, how could  
it be mute,  
this talk between the hydrant, fog, stairs,  
bough, screech of tires  
and me, whom they approach – on every  
path, in every passing  
always the same and invariably friendly  
inquiry,  
What’s The News, Everything’s OK.<sup>25</sup>

For immigrants like Barańczak, English conversational routines like “How are you, I’m just fine” constitute barriers to genuine heart-to-heart communication – and, as we have seen earlier, so does the wide use of the word *happy*. From this perspective, the tendency of Americans to declare themselves as happy in the surveys that aim to assess their subjective well-being must be seen as linked, to some extent, with the same norms that encourage the social smile, the cheerfulness, the use of *Great!* and so on.<sup>26</sup>

25 Stanisław Barańczak, *The Weight of the Body: Selected Poems* (Evanston, Ill.: Triquarterly Books, 1989).

26 While I have looked at Anglo-American norms from a Polish perspective, other perspectives yield comparable outcomes. For example, see Eunkook M. Suh, “Self: The Hyphen Between Culture and Subjective Well-Being,” in Ed Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, eds., *Culture and Subjective Well-Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000). In his contribution to this important recent volume, Suh, a Korean American scholar, notes “dramatic differences between North Americans and East Asians in their levels of SWB [subjective well-being] and positive self-views.” He elaborates that “North Americans report significantly higher levels of SWB than East Asians. For instance, compared to 36 percent of Japanese and 49 percent of Korean men, 83 percent of American men and 78 percent of Canadian men reported above neutral levels of life satisfaction in Diener and Diener’s study [Ed Diener and Marissa Diener, “Cross-Cultural Correlates of Life Satisfaction and Self-Esteem,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995): 653 – 663].”

In conclusion, progress in cross-cultural investigations of happiness and subjective well-being requires a greater linguistic and cross-cultural sophistication than that evident in much of the existing literature on the subject. To compare meanings across languages one needs a well-founded semantic metalanguage; and to be able to interpret self-reports across cultures one needs a methodology for exploring cultural norms that may guide the interviewees in their responses. I believe that the natural semantic metalanguage, based on universal human concepts, can solve the first problem and that the methodology of cultural scripts can solve the second – and that together they can bring significant advances to the intriguing and controversial field of happiness studies.

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