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The Pragmatics of Emotion in Fiction

Abstract

Emotions are an essential part of fictional artefacts, such as novels, short stories, plays or movies. It is the paradox of fiction that readers and viewers experience emotions on the basis of what they know to be fictitious emotions presented in these fictional artefacts. A pragmatic approach helps us to describe how language is used to discursively create emotions in fictional contexts. In this contribution, I present some of the basic ways in which this is done. I will briefly introduce a process theory of emotions and distinguish between the showing mode and the telling mode of presenting emotions in fictional artefacts. Two case studies explore the emotion vocabulary that is used to describe and characterise fictional texts and how emotion vocabulary is used in the fictional texts themselves. The first case study looks at the emotion tags used on the fan-fiction website *Archive of Our Own* (A3O), and the second investigates the distribution of the most frequent emotion terms across the different registers of the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

Keywords: emotions, pragmatics, corpus pragmatics, fiction, fan fiction, paradox of fiction

Introduction

Emotions are an essential part of our daily lives. They are part of our everyday interactions in our private lives, at work and during our leisure activities. They are part of the news media, which often seem to maximise the emotional impact of their news stories. And they are also part of the many fictional worlds around us, be it in the form of movies or television series, novels, short stories or theatre plays. However, in spite of their pervasiveness, they are remarkably elusive to any empirical investigation. They are, by their very nature, fuzzy and indeterminate, and, therefore, difficult to pinpoint.

In the context of fictional texts, the problem is exacerbated because the emotions experienced by the reader or viewer may either converge or diverge, sometimes even radically, from the emotions experienced by the depicted characters. Moreover, it is one of the paradoxes of fiction that it may arouse very strong emotions in spite of the fact that readers or viewers are generally aware of the fictitious nature of the depicted events.¹

¹ I follow the convention introduced in Locher & Jucker (2021: Chapter 2) and based on Klauk & Köppe (2014) to use the terms “fiction” and “fictional” for literary genres and media and the term “fictitious” for the characters and events that are typically described in fictional artefacts.

The following three examples provide some preliminary illustrations of how fiction depicts emotions.²

Then he punched at the air in front of him as if he were pounding his fist into a wall and he shouted: “I hate that tree! I hate it! I hate it!” He covered his eyes with his arm and cried loudly. (COCA, FIC, 1995)

It wasn’t supposed to have been like this. Such reassuring things Carol had said to him, not so much recently, but she’d said them and meant them, he knew. How she felt better in his proximity. How he knew just how to bring her back to earth. When she was particularly emotional, whether stressed or happy or strung-out exhausted, she liked to be a rag doll lifted off her feet, gently swung, this way, that way. Goofy girl. She’d never thrown a bedroom slipper at him. And he hoped he’d never give her cause. (COCA, FIC, 2015)

What’s the matter with you? What’s the matter with me? You’re in front of me. That’s what’s the matter with me, you bloody idiot. (COCA, MOV, 1990)

In Extract (1), the narrator relates words that one of the characters shouts in direct speech, and with these words the character describes his emotions in relation to a particular tree. He hates it. In Extract (2), the narrator uses a narrative voice to tell the reader about emotions experienced by Carol. Her feelings are at the centre of this paragraph, and the narrator connects them to the male focaliser of this passage. The passage talks about different situations and how they affect these emotions. In Extract (3), finally, we hear the words spoken by one character to another character. No emotions are explicitly named, but the words used by the characters, including the repetition, make it clear that some strong emotions appear to be involved, presumably a mixture of anger, irritation and exasperation.

Such examples raise some interesting questions both for literary theorists and for pragmaticists. The following bullet points list some of them.

- How do fictitious characters communicate their emotions, and how are these emotions depicted by the narrator?
- How is language used to display emotions, and what other means of communication are employed to transmit emotions?
- How do emotions of characters and the depicted fictitious events combine to create emotions for the viewers or readers?
- The paradox of fiction: Why do we experience emotions at all on the basis of fictitious characters experiencing fictitious events?
- What does pragmatics have to offer to analyse emotions in fiction?

² These examples are taken from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). The references contain the abbreviation of the corpus, the section from which the extract was retrieved, and the year of the source text (FIC stands for fiction and MOV for movies).

In this paper, I will not be able to answer all of them, instead I want to explore a number of different inroads that pragmatics has to offer to explore emotions in fictional contexts. In a first step, I will briefly outline a pragmatic approach to emotions and introduce the difference between the showing mode and the telling mode in connection with emotions in fiction. In two illustrative case studies, I then turn to the vocabulary of emotions, i.e. some of the key terms that are used by authors of fictional texts to characterise their work, and terms that are used in the fictional artefacts themselves either by the fictitious characters or by the narrators. I will first explore the emotion tags used on the fan-fiction website *Archive of Our Own* (A3O), and second, I will explore the emotion vocabulary in the fiction registers of the one-billion-word *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) in contrast to the other registers in the same corpus.

What are Emotions?

Emotions are notoriously difficult to define and a classification of different types of emotions appears to be even more difficult. They are not empirically accessible with the methodologies that are currently available (Langlotz & Locher 2013: 91). However, one way of capturing the essence of emotions is the so-called process theory of emotions which goes back to Scherer (1984) and which describes emotions as interacting components of evaluative processes (see Planalp 1999, Langlotz 2017, and Locher & Jucker 2021: 175–177 for a more detailed presentation). First, emotions usually have a cause, something that triggers them. This can be an event, an object or indeed another emotion. We may feel happy about unexpectedly meeting a friend, we may feel angry about our computer which refuses to do what we would like it to do, or we may feel annoyed about our own or somebody else's impatience. In fictional contexts, these causes must be discursively constructed.

Second, there is a process of appraisal which regulates the extent to which a potential cause affects us. On one day, a small traffic incident on our way to work may not be enough to disturb our cheerful mood while on another it may seriously affect our emotions and lead to irritation, outrage and exasperation. The appraisal is the result of a cognitive process of evaluation and depends on several aspects, including the assumed intentionality of the cause (why did the other motorist block my way?), the effect this has on us (how much time will I lose as a result?), our previous emotions (in good spirits or anxious and worried about the day ahead?), and so on.

Third, the appraisal of a certain cause may lead to physiological changes, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, muscular tension, or perspiration. However, not all emotions lead to such physiological changes and not everybody experiences the same changes. Moreover, such changes may be indistinguishable from the effects of drugs, sex or exercise (Planalp 1999: 26).

Fourth, emotions create action tendencies, they urge us to act in certain ways or, in fact, to abstain from action. Fear may induce us to run away, anger may prompt us to attack, and panic may render us incapable of doing anything at all. But we do not always give in to these action tendencies. And indeed, the fifth component regulates the immediate urge to act. I may decide that it is probably not a good idea to get out of the car and insult the other driver and, therefore, suppress my action tendency and continue on my way to work. This process of regulation is not only the last component of the process description of emotions. It is present at each stage of the process. At the appraisal stage it may help me not to get too emotional about a certain cause, and it may help me to try to stay calm and not get into a sweat as a result of the physiological changes.

In our everyday lives, we are sometimes acutely aware of our emotions and may even be able to name them, and sometimes they are much vaguer and uncertain. This is true not only for the mundane traffic situation alluded to above but also for our reaction to fictional artefacts. We may have very strong or very limited emotions about a novel or a movie. They may be quite specific or largely undetermined. Case study 1 below will focus on a context in which such emotions about fictional texts are made explicit. Fan-fiction websites use identification tags for each fictional text in their archives in order to characterise each text and to make it more easily retrievable for readers interested in specific topics. Among these identification tags there are many which name specific emotions.

Emotions in Fiction: The Showing Mode and the Telling Mode

In the introduction, I have briefly outlined two different modes of presenting emotions in fictional texts. Emotions may be presented in the showing mode or in the telling mode. In the showing mode, the reader or viewer experiences the emotions of the characters as an observer. In performed fiction, actors perform the emotions with more or less the same resources that are available in everyday life. They may use their tone of voice, body posture, facial expressions, affective vocabulary and so on to display certain emotions. The choice of specific resources depends on the specific art form. Movies can show small details in the facial expressions of an actor in close-ups. In large theatres, on the other hand, actors have to rely on resources that are recognisable even at a distance, such as voice quality and body posture. In written fiction, the showing mode is also possible. Dialogues between the characters let us experience their emotions at first hand, but there is generally also a narrator who is in control and tells the reader about the emotions.

Bednarek (2008: 11) has the same distinction in mind when she talks about “emotional talk” and “emotion talk”. Emotional talk signals the emotions experienced by the characters without actually naming them, as in “What the bloody hell is she doing here?” (COCA, FIC, 2007), which presumably signals the speaker’s irritation and anger. Emotion talk, on the other hand, explicitly denotes the emotion, as in “and for no reason at all, I was as happy as I’ve ever been” (COCA, FIC,

1994). Kim and Klinger (2019) are mainly interested in what here is called emotion talk. They analyse a set of fan fiction short stories plus a short story by James Joyce and identify triplets consisting of a character feeling an emotion, the emotion itself (based on a classification proposed by Plutchick 2001) and a non-verbal channel of emotion expression, such as facial expressions, gestures or body posture, and they find that joy is more commonly expressed through facial expressions and voice characteristics whilst trust is more often expressed through gestures and body postures.

The showing mode and the telling mode can also overlap. This happens when a narrator describes the relevant emotion cues, for instance the voice quality or the facial expression that display a character's emotion. And it also happens when characters talk about their emotions and thereby also display them. Extracts (4) and (5) provide relevant examples.

“No,” Sam said, but Justin nodded. A brief angry look crossed Sam’s face, and then he looked accusingly at Charlie. (COCA, FIC, 2015)

Ginger: “Yes, I want to kill you! I hate your fuckin’ guts!” (COCA, FIC, 1994)

In (4), the narrator describes Sam’s facial expression and the way in which he looks at Charlie. Both the facial expression and the look show Sam’s emotion, and the narrator tells us about them. In (5), a character called Ginger uses strong language to show her emotions, and at the same time she explicitly names them. In the second case study, I will explore the emotion vocabulary that is used in fictional texts to denote specific emotions, i.e. Bednarek’s emotion talk.

Two Case Studies

The paradox of fiction describes the paradoxical situation that consumers of fictional artefacts (readers, theatre or movie audiences, etc.) very regularly experience real – and sometimes very strong – emotions on the basis of fictitious characters experiencing fictitious emotions as a result of fictitious events (Locher and Jucker 2021: 189–192). There is no easy explanation for this paradox, and there does not seem to be a direct link between the (fake) emotions portrayed by a skilful actor, for instance, and the emotions experienced by the audience. In some cases, the viewers, or at least some of them, may experience emotions that are similar to those of particular characters. We may sympathise with the sadness of a character suffering tragic events, but in other cases, our emotions may diverge considerably when we laugh at the misfortunes of a clumsy character, for instance.

Here, I am interested in the two levels of emotions. The emotions experienced by the audiences of fictional artefacts and the emotions described and experienced by the fictitious characters within these artefacts. In the first case study, I investigate the emotion tags used in a fan-fiction archive to characterise fictional texts, and in the second case study, I am going to focus on the emotion vocabulary used by authors, scriptwriters and playwrights in their fictional artefacts.

Case Study 1: Fan Fiction

How do people choose what to read, which theatre play or movie to watch? There are many possible answers to these questions, including recommendations from friends, prescriptions of the school curriculum, published reviews, famous directors or actors, particular genres and so on. And it is very likely that emotions that we want to experience also play a role. Archives of fan fiction appear to be a particularly interesting testing ground to explore some of the motivations that people have for reading fictional texts. Such archives consist of thousands and even millions of works of fiction. The *Archive of Our Own* (A3O) is one such archive. It consists of fan-created fictional texts. In March 2024, it boasts 6,826,000 users and 12,650,000 works. In its narrow sense, fan fiction refers to fictional texts created by fans of original works of fiction that are published in the traditional way. The texts written by the fans may use some of the characters or events of the original story and develop them in new ways. They may provide a sequel or a prequel of the original story, or they may set the characters of the original story into an entirely new context. Fan fiction may also be based on real-life celebrities and invent fictitious events for the celebrity. Fictitious interactions between the celebrity and the author of the text appear to be particularly popular. A search for Harry Potter, for instance, retrieves almost half a million texts on A3O, a search for the video game *Minecraft* almost 125,000 and a search for the American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift about 43,000 (March 2024). But many texts on A3O are fictional texts without an obvious link to an original work or a celebrity. Thus, the term fan fiction is used in a broader sense and basically refers to non-commercially published texts on dedicated websites (see Locher and Jucker 2021: 28–33 for an overview and a distinction between fan fiction and spin-offs).

Given the large number of texts in their archives, such websites need to provide some signposts for their readers to choose appropriate texts. Typically, there are various ways of organising the material, but for our purposes a particularly interesting access route consists of the tags that authors attach to their works of fiction. These tags serve the purpose of characterising the text with relevant keywords rather than a full summary. Some of these tags clearly denote emotions.

In a small exploratory study, I categorised the 200 most frequently used tags of A3O into four rough categories: emotions, relations, sex and violence. They comprise about half of the 200 tags. The other half of the tags consist of smaller categories, such as particular genres (fluff, humour, science fiction & fantasy), or entirely idiosyncratic labels that are difficult to classify (e.g. I wrote this instead of sleeping).

Table 1 provides an overview of the categorisation of these tags with relevant examples.

Table 1: Tag categories in A3O (based on <https://archiveofourown.org/tags>, accessed 11 March 2024)

Tag category	Illustrative examples	Number of tags in category
emotion	angst, boys in love, crying, falling in love, guilt, homophobia, humiliation, jealousy, love, panic, roughness, sad, trauma	33
relation	break up, children, dating, family, flirting, marriage, polyamory, romance	22
sex	beds, fingerfucking, incest, kissing, orgasm, porn, sexual content, threesome	21
violence	abuse, biting, blood, crimes & criminals, fights, self-harm, suicide, violence, weapons	20
other	alcohol, canon related, clothing, disability, ficlet, fluff, humor, I wrote this instead of sleeping, light-hearted, out of character, science-fiction & fantasy, sports, teenagers, weather	104
Total		200

The frequency of tags per category says nothing about the number of works that are linked to each tag. The three tags that are linked to the largest number of works are fluff (2.41 million works), alternate universe (2.29 million works) and sexual content (1.74 million works). It is interesting that the most frequent tag, fluff, relates to a particular genre of writing, i.e. writing that is perceived to be somewhat trivial or superficial.

The 33 tags in the emotion category total slightly more than 8.5 million linked works. The most popular tags are angst, hurt/comfort and love. Table 2 provides an overview of all relevant tags and the number of works bearing this tag (figures retrieved on 11 March 2024).

Table 2: Emotion tags and number of tagged works in A3O

Tag	No of works	Tag	No of works	Tag	No of works
angst	2 039 523	feels	176 326	self-esteem	98 966
hurt/comfort	1 090 144	feelings	161 827	crying	97 468
love	703 171	falling in love	154 429	crushes	94 457
happy ending	474 534	loss	144 254	horror	91 402
pining	371 004	homophobia	140 082	awkwardness	88 627

hurt	312 742	dreams and nightmares	137 334	hatred	80 542
protectiveness	295 833	jealousy	130 300	I'm sorry	63 180
sad	282 201	idiots in love	128 886	hugs	62 345
trauma	272 931	comfort	126 679	humiliation	61 917
cuddling & snuggling	199 621	anxiety	110 019	guilt	60 035
roughness	179 783	panic	108 268	boys in love	54 308

Table 2 shows a picture that may be surprising in many respects. It contains many of the traditional emotion terms, such as *love*, *sad*, *jealousy*, *anxiety* and *guilt*, but it also contains more creative ones like *cuddling & snuggling*, *idiots in love* or *boys in love*. Generally, negative emotions appear to dominate (*angst*, *hurt*, *sad*, *trauma*, *roughness*, *homophobia*, *dreams and nightmares*, *jealousy*, *anxiety*, *panic*, *crying*, *horror*, *hatred*, *humiliation* and *guilt*), but there are positive ones as well (*love*, *protectiveness*, *cuddling & snuggling*, *comfort*). However, it is again difficult to assess the true values of these emotions. The authors of these works presumably use the tags to help potential readers to decide whether or not to read this particular piece of fiction. In most cases, authors use a fairly large number of tags. This may help potential readers to retrieve this particular text if they search for one of the tags, and it provides readers who have already accessed this text with a rough idea of what kind of content they might expect. Thus, the tags fulfil multiple functions as advertisers, classifiers and search items, and emotions appear to play an important part in the classification of fictional texts and in the decision process of readers in the search for fictional texts they want to read.

It remains unclear to what extent the authors and their potential readers share the same associations with each of these tags, but the fact that all of the above emotion tags appear within the 200 most popular tags of A3O suggests that they are found to be useful both for authors and readers. Visitors of A3O can be understood as a large community of practice in the sense of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). A community of practice is a group of people who share a mutual engagement. This may include ways of doing things, beliefs and values, and crucially a common vocabulary pertaining to their mutual engagement (see Jucker and Kopaczyk 2013 for a summary). Thus, some of these tags may have specific meanings within this community of practice which are not immediately clear to outsiders.

What is relatively clear, on the other hand, is that the tags refer primarily to emotions experienced by the fictitious characters. The readers may identify with the characters and share their emotions of anxiety, horror or comfort, or they may have a more distanced attitude to at least some of the characters. Planalp (1999: 54–67; for a summary see Langlotz 2017: 543 or Locher and Jucker 2021: 191–192) suggests five levels of emotional connection with fictional artefacts. On the first level,

the recipient merely recognises that one of the fictitious characters is experiencing an emotion without being able to specify the nature of the emotion. On the second level, the reader is able to identify the emotion experienced by the character but is unable to determine what caused the emotion. On the third level, the recipient has a broader understanding of the emotion, which also includes an understanding of its cause. On the fourth level, the recipient feels for the character without, however, actually sharing the emotion. On the fifth level, finally, the recipient feels with the character and shares the emotion.

These levels are helpful in talking about different reactions experienced by different recipients and about different reactions that one recipient may have about different characters. While one particular reader may share the emotions of the heroine of a particular text, he or she may understand the darker emotional motives of the villain without, however, condoning or even sharing them.

Case Study 2: The Vocabulary of Emotion in Fiction

In the second case study, I am going to focus on the emotion terms that are used in fictional artefacts. Bednarek (2008) carried out a large-scale study of what she calls “emotion talk” across different registers of British English. As data, she used a subpart of the *British National Corpus* consisting of 4.2 million words of conversation, 2.6 million words of news reportage, 6.7 million words of fiction and 6.0 million words of academic discourse. She searched this corpus for 1060 terms denoting emotions derived from *Encarta Thesaurus* and carefully checked to exclude non-emotion homonyms (Bednarek 2008: 20–23). The four registers provided different frequencies of emotion terms and different preferences for specific terms. The ten most frequent emotion terms in the register of fictional texts were *love* (verb), *love*, (noun), *happy* (adjective), *enjoy* (verb), *fear* (noun), *feeling* (noun), *worry* (verb), *hate* (verb), *surprised* (adjective) and *pleasure* (noun). These ten emotion terms are the starting point for my own exploratory study.

In a first step of the analysis, I checked the frequency of these terms in the different registers of the one-billion-word *Corpus of Contemporary American English*. It contains eight different registers, each containing roughly 125 million words of texts from 1990 up to 2019. Two of the registers contain fictional texts, i.e. the dedicated register of fiction with a mixture of short stories, plays from literary magazines, first chapters of longer fictional texts and fan fiction, and the register of TV/Movies with material from the TV Corpus and the Movie Corpus, which in turn consist of TV and movie subtitles thought to represent spoken colloquial English. It has to be remembered, however, that the colloquial and spontaneous nature of this material is largely a constructed spontaneity and that subtitles are a relatively poor substitute for careful transcriptions (see Locher and Jucker 2021: Chapter 7 for details).

The heatmap in Table 3 provides an overview of the frequency per million words of each of the top ten emotion terms according to Bednarek (2008: 20–23). It has to be remembered, though, that Bednarek’s list was drawn up on the basis of British English while COCA consists of American English. The equivalent of Bednarek’s list for American English might well look a little different, but I use it here as a convenient starting point for my investigation.

Table 3: Heatmap of normalised frequencies of emotion terms across the COCA registers

	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
LOVE_v	555.87	451.75	916.64	446.59	379.69	282.76	209.60	53.93
LOVE_n	211.82	265.43	351.79	148.06	244.69	191.58	135.46	94.30
HAPPY	200.40	162.56	334.86	194.44	191.65	126.89	108.74	31.90
ENJOY_v	206.90	177.30	118.23	78.50	108.27	148.00	116.04	76.34
FEAR_n	100.87	93.48	56.34	87.25	116.43	88.82	82.69	86.81
FEELING_n	123.17	119.18	126.43	107.40	137.46	102.59	75.86	112.61
WORRY_v	94.67	76.12	290.16	128.59	145.67	87.58	95.63	27.03
HATE_v	137.82	104.30	244.40	70.72	143.60	46.85	38.71	11.70
SURPRISED	57.46	44.52	47.97	55.32	89.17	34.24	37.48	11.73
PLEASURE_n	29.65	41.16	69.81	52.95	69.44	39.84	19.42	35.16
	1718.63	1535.80	2556.63	1369.83	1626.07	1149.15	919.64	541.51

The heatmap uses dark red for the cells with the highest frequencies and dark green for the lowest frequencies. Orange, yellow and light green shades cover values between the two extremes. The first column of the table lists the search terms that were used in this investigation. They are written in capital letters. In COCA’s search interface, expressions in capitals retrieve both the base form and morphologically related forms. Thus, LOVE_v retrieves all instances of *love*, *loves*, *loved* and *loving* used in a verbal function while LOVE_n retrieves *love* and *loves* used as a noun.

The heatmap shows clearly that TV/Movies stands out as the register with the highest frequency of these top emotion terms and Academic texts as the register with the lowest frequency. The Fiction register also shows high frequencies, but it is surpassed by Blog entries. The difference between TV/Movies and Fiction is interesting because both of them contain fictional texts, and they even overlap to some extent in that Fiction also includes play texts. The overall frequency of these terms in TV/Movies is almost 60 per cent higher than that of the Fiction texts. This may be related to the fact that the TV/Movies register consists almost entirely of dialogues while fiction texts in general are composed of dialogues as well as narrative passages. Emotion terms are likely to occur in both elements, but the figures suggest that they are significantly more frequent in the dialogues. The following Extract (6) shows a relevant example.

It is a passage from Delia Owens’ *Where the Crawdads Sing*, a coming-of-age story about Kya, who grows up in the isolation of the marshes of North Carolina first with her drinking and abusive father and later entirely on her own. In this

extract, she is reunited with Tate, her childhood friend who had left her when he went to college.

He waited for her to walk to him, then took her shoulders and held her against his chest. Then pushed back.

“I love you, Kya, you know that. You’ve known it for a long time.”

“You left me like all the others,” she said.

“I will never leave you again.”

“I know,” she said.

“Kya, do you love me? You’ve never spoken those words to me.”

“I’ve always loved you. Even as a child—in a time I don’t remember—I already loved you.” She dipped her head.

“Look at me,” he said gently. She hesitated, face downcast. “Kya, I need to know that the running and hiding are over. That you can love without being afraid.”

She lifted her face and looked into his eyes, then led him through the woods to the oak grove, the place of the feathers. (pp. 357–358)

The passage is full of strong emotions, not only love, but also uncertainty and even fear. The reader learns about the emotions mostly through the direct speech of the protagonists. They explicitly talk about their love for each other. The emotion term *love* is used five times within just a few lines. But Tate also voices his uncertainty about Kya’s love. He talks about Kya’s possible fears, and he wants her to be able to love him without being afraid. Here, we have a combination of the telling mode and the showing mode. The narratorial voice is backgrounded, but it adds some significant descriptive details in the showing mode. Tate embraces Kya showing tenderness and then pushes her back, which indexes his uncertainty and need to know from Kya that she loves him, too. We learn that he speaks gently while Kya is described as dipping her head and with a downcast face. When she lifts her face and looks into his eyes, the reader understands that she relents somewhat on her anxiety and allows her feelings of love to take the upper hand. Finally, she leads him through the woods to her secret place, and the reader immediately understands how much this means to her. Emotion cues such as these (Locher and Jucker 2021: 182–183) do not unambiguously display specific emotions, but in this context, they help to reinforce the emotional content of the passage.

It is not clear whether this passage is typical in a statistical sense for fictional texts at large, but it illustrates how the showing mode and the telling mode combine to discursively display character emotions and create an emotional passage for the reader. The emotion vocabulary here is concentrated in the character dialogues whilst the narratorial voice adds descriptions of relevant emotion cues, such as facial cues (downcast face), vocal cues (gentle voice), body cues (head dipping, lifting her face) and action cues (embrace, pushing back, leading him through the woods).

Discussion and Conclusion

A pragmatic approach to emotions in fiction helps us to analyse the different ways in which language is used to discursively create emotional content even if we may not be able to resolve the puzzle why the recipients of fictional artefacts, whether they are readers of written fiction or audiences of performed fiction, experience emotions on the basis of fictitious events and fictitious characters with their fictitious emotions.

Emotions are difficult to define and to classify. They are fuzzy and indeterminate. I have proposed a process theory of emotions (based on Planalp 1998; Langlotz 2017 and Locher and Jucker 2021) as a substitute to disentangle the different components of emotions, consisting of object and causes, appraisal, physiological changes, action tendencies, and regulation. In addition, I have introduced the difference between the showing mode and the telling mode (again based on Locher and Jucker 2021) in order to show how emotions are discursively constructed in fictional contexts. The characters show their emotions through the words they use and – in the case of performed fiction – through more or less the same range of emotion cues that people use in non-fictional contexts, i.e. facial expressions, voice quality, body posture, gestures, and so on. The narrator tells us about the emotion by naming them explicitly. And in many cases, the two modes overlap when the characters explicitly talk about their emotions or when the narrator describes some of the emotion cues of the characters.

In the two case studies above, I have shown how authors of fan fiction use emotion tags to characterise their own pieces of fiction and what kind of emotion vocabulary is used most frequently in fictional artefacts themselves. A particularly noteworthy result of the two studies is the fact that the two lists of emotion terms shows only partial overlaps. The fan-fiction authors of the texts in *Archive of Our Own*, use both relatively straightforward terms, such as *angst*, *love*, *guilt* or *jealousy*, and terms that appear to be more creative, such as *cuddling & snuggling*, *idiots in love* or *crushes*. The fact that even these more creative terms are included in the top 200 tags of the entire website with tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands of linked texts indicates that within this community of practice, these terms appear to be well established. It is also noteworthy that the list of 33 emotion tags included in the 200 most frequent tags on A3O includes a fair number of what might be considered to be negative emotions, such as *angst*, *hurt*, *trauma*, *loss*, *homophobia*, *jealousy*, *panic*, *horror*, *hatred* and *guilt*, with *angst* being by far the most frequent one (over two million linked works). The ten emotion terms of the second case study were borrowed from Bednarek (2008), who had identified them as the most frequent emotion terms in her data drawn from the *British National Corpus*. They also include negative emotions (*fear*, *worry* and *hate*), but the list is dominated by positive ones (*love*, *happy* and *enjoy*).

The second case study showed that the emotion vocabulary is particularly frequent in the fictional registers of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (together with the register of Blogs), but it is considerably more frequent in the register of TV/Movies, consisting almost entirely of dialogues between fictitious characters, than in the Fiction register, which consists predominantly of written fiction, which regularly includes narrative passages in addition to dialogues between characters. It appears that the relevant emotion terms occur mainly in the dialogues whilst the narrative passages describe emotion cues, such as facial expressions, voice quality, body posture, gestures and so on without explicitly naming the associated specific emotions. It is left to the reader to make the connection between the cues and the emotions. However, more research would be needed to substantiate these tentative findings.

Data sources and Corpora

Archive of Our Own (A3O). <<https://archiveofourown.org>> (last accessed 28 March 2024)

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