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Does "craving" carve nature at the joints? Absence of a synonym for craving in many languages

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Craving is a term commonly used by North American lay people, and is also used as an important category in psychological and addiction research. However, difficulties in defining craving suggest that it may not be a natural category.
Methods: Assuming that lexicalization of a concept is an indicator of its importance and/or universality, the presence of synonyms for craving is examined in a range of natural languages, using both dictionaries and native speaker informants. Related words, such as "love," "like," "urge," "desire," "adore" and "addiction" are also explored in 20 languages, in terms of meaning and the domains of life to which these words are applied.
Results: Based on automated translations, 64% of 25 languages have a craving synonym, and based on native speaker, only 17% of 20 languages lexicalize craving; when there is a synonym, it seems to mean a desire for a potential ingestant or a drug, that is, it is a desire restricted to certain domains of activity.
Discussion: The concept of "craving" appears to be limited in its importance and relevance in languages and cultures outside of English and North America. This finding has important implications for the understanding of "craving" as a natural category in the study of drug and other addictions. A similar though less extensive lack of synonyms for "addiction" is also reported.

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1. Introduction

A craving is an "urgent desire, longing, [or] yearning."[1] To crave is to want something with such a strong sense of urgency that it is difficult to keep thoughts focused on anything other than the object of the craving. An individual in the midst of a craving episode will go out of his or her way to obtain that which is craved.

The use of the word "craving" in the English language dates back to at least the 1300s. Its original meaning was an "accusation [or] persecution," or an "earnest or urgent asking, begging," but the word has been used more specifically to refer to intense desires or urges since the early 1600s (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). The etymology of "craving" is not clear, though it is generally assumed that it is derived from the Old Icelandic or Norse word "krefja," and in turn the Old English word "crafian" and Middle English term "craven," meaning "to beg" or "to demand" (Various, 2000, 2007).

The word "craving" is relatively common, ranked at 21,998 in the list of 86,800 most frequently used words in British English.[2] Related words, such as "want" (rank 151), "need" (158), "like/liking" (67 and 9584), "love" (384), "desire" (1869), "urge" (5720), "addiction" (10,307), and "compulsion" (12,627) tend to be used somewhat more frequently. "Craving" is also a rather specific term, now used almost exclusively in reference to strong urges. Virtually all targets of craving are potential ingestants, with the exception of drugs administered by injection (which could of course be considered just another way of "ingesting"). In spite of a narrowing of the use of the word over time, as of now there is still no clear, agreed-upon definition of "craving" in English (Drummond, 2001), and the use of the word in English-language scholarly papers varies widely. In the context of drug addiction, "craving" has been described as "intensely wanting" (Robinson & Berridge, 1993), as a "profound desire" (Childress et al., 1999), or simply as "a subjective state associated with drug addiction," with poorly understood characteristics and determinants (Killen & Fortman, 1997). Of note, many definitions of food and drug cravings are quite similar linguistically; in addition, there is evidence for common neural pathways (Pelchat, 2002).

Craving is a term of major importance in research on addiction, which by some definitions includes tolerance, withdrawal, craving, and lack of control (Rozin & Stoess, 1993). Interestingly, if one weighs each of these attributes equally, cigarettes and chocolate emerge as the most common addictions among Americans (Rozin & Stoess, 1993). Much like cravings for drugs, a food craving has been described as "a desire so strong that an individual will go out of his or her way to satisfy it" (Rozin, Levine, & Stoess, 1991), or "an intense, periodic motivation aimed at gaining the craved substance" (Bruinsma & Taren, 1999). Very common and largely benign, cravings for specific

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[1] The Oxford English Dictionary/OED online, 2nd ed., http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:2192/cgi/entry/50053387, retrieved 01-15-08.

[2] WordCount, http://wordcount.org/, retrieved 08-02-08.

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foods are generally not considered instances of true addictive behaviors (Rogers & Smit, 2000). According to one estimate, in the United States (U.S.) food cravings occur in 94% of female and 75% of male undergraduate students (Zellner, Garriga-Trillo, Rohm, Centeno & Parker, 1999). Prevalence of food cravings in Canada has been shown to parallel that in the U.S., with 97% of women and 68% of men in a sample of Canadian undergraduate students reporting having experienced any food cravings (Weingarten & Elston, 1990). A survey of 18 to 45 year-old women in New Zealand, on the other hand, found only 58% had experienced any food cravings (Gendall, Joyce & Sullivan, 1997). This suggests varying actual prevalence rates of food cravings, and/or variations in how they are defined, in Anglophone countries, with the highest incidence occurring in North America.

Chocolate is the most commonly craved food in the U.S. (Rozin et al., 1991), and has been studied in some detail. Amongst American undergraduates 91% of women have experienced any chocolate craving, compared to only 59% of men (Osman & Sobal, 2006). Regular chocolate cravings were reported by 45% of U.S. undergraduate women and 17% of American undergraduate men (Zellner et al., 1999). These figures suggest high prevalence among women, and significant gender differences in the occurrence of chocolate craving in the U.S.

Research on food cravings in non-English speaking countries has been minimal. A survey of Spanish college students found that 89% of women and 86% of men experience food cravings (Zellner et al., 1999), pointing to a high overall incidence, but a striking absence of the gender differences in craving prevalence commonly observed in North American countries. Chocolate and sweet cravings, while very common in the U.S., appear to be essentially absent in non-English speaking countries. Egyptian respondents, queried in Egyptian, were much less likely to indicate cravings for sweet as opposed to savory foods, even though both are equally readily available; only 1% of young Egyptian men and 6% of young Egyptian women reported cravings for chocolate (Parker, Kamel & Zellner, 2003). On the other hand, in Spain 29% of undergraduate women reported regular chocolate cravings, but 22% of Spanish undergraduate men did the same (Zellner et al., 1999). In Japan, women indicated rice as their most craved food (Komatsu, 2008), exemplifying the influence of culinary tradition on the perceived desirability of foods.

Differences in the types of food cravings reported, overall chocolate craving prevalence, and the absence in other countries of the gender differences in craving that are characteristic of the U.S. are findings that have yet to be addressed in models of food cravings. Currently, these models frequently attribute craving to physiological mechanisms and cannot explain the wide variation in chocolate and other food cravings found in cross-cultural studies. Furthermore, in many instances authors of these cross-cultural studies cite difficulties translating the term "craving" from English to the language of interest (Parker et al., 2003). In the apparent absence of precise synonyms they often have to resort to the use of a phrase to try and describe the phenomenon of craving to subjects in non-English speaking countries (Parker et al., 2003; Cepeda-Benito et al., 2000).

Based on the puzzling findings of varying prevalence rates of craving, and the methodological difficulties in studies involving translated materials one can entertain the possibility that craving does not describe a natural category. The implications of the hypothesized absence of lexicalization of a common English term in other languages – including its effects on research findings – so far has received little attention, even though it has clear influences on determining in how far "craving" is a natural, important and universal category of life within and outside of the U.S.

The idea that one feature of important and legitimate concepts is that they are widely lexicalized has been proposed previously, for example in Wierzbicka's (Wierzbicka, 1999) writing on "emotions" versus "feelings," and the way in which terms from each category are expressed in different languages. Her analysis casts some doubt on the validity of the category suggested by the word "emotion" (Wierzbicka, 1999). Of course there are other criteria besides lexicalization to establish validity, but clearly one should be skeptical about the universality and naturalness of a category that is lexicalized in relatively few languages.

According to Wierzbicka (Gendall et al., 1997), many common psychologically relevant words, such as "want" or "feeling" are likely to be universally lexicalized. However, there are legitimate categories of life or in psychology that do not lexicalize in many languages, including English. For example, unlike Hindi ("samdhi/samdhan") or Yiddish ("mekhutonim"), English does not lexicalize the relationship between a person and his or her daughter- or son-in-law's parents. Similarly, English does not lexicalize one's pride in the success of one's children or other close individuals (unlike Yiddish "naches"). Also, while we know in psychology that there is a fundamental difference between "flavor" (the mixture of oral and of olfactory sensations) and "taste" (the output of oral taste buds only), many languages do not make this distinction (Rozin, 1982). So exceptions to the widespread lexicalization of universal and/or natural concepts exist, though they may be quite rare.

The degree of lexicalization of any term probably provides an indication about important aspects of life in a given culture. Hindi and Jewish families traditionally have complex relationships with their children's in-laws, which encourages descriptive words that may not be "culturally relevant" in other countries. Thus, the extent of their lexicalization in various languages should correlate highly with the importance of certain ideas.

It is our sense that the English word "craving" refers to periodic strong desires, but more specifically than that, is restricted in its use to potential ingestants or injected drugs. In other words, it singles out a set of substances or activities subject to strong desires, and lexicalizes this subset. It is not at all clear that this subset has any unique psychological or physiological properties.

We here postulate that craving is a culture-specific and culture-bound phenomenon, principally characteristic of the U.S. or North America. We test this hypothesis by assessing the degree of lexicalization of "craving" in a wide range of languages in two ways. First, we look up dictionary synonyms for the English word "craving" and note if the back translation of these words refers back to "craving." Second, we discuss the existence of a synonym for "craving" with native speakers of non-English languages.

2. Study 1

2.1. Methods

We selected 28 different languages to represent a range of linguistic origins, most of the major groups of languages in the world, and languages spoken by the great majority of human beings (Table 1), in part based on languages considered in a previous study employing similar methods (Rozin, Berman & Royzman, 2009).

There were no English-target-language dictionaries available online for three of the languages selected (Malayam, Oriya, and Sinhalese). For each of the remaining 25 languages we located an online dictionary (via a Google search for "English Amharic Dictionary," etc.) in which we could look up target words in English, and find their equivalent in the language in question. In cases where the first dictionary generated by the search did not provide the opportunity for back-translation into English we then went to the next dictionary and so on. We always took the first word offered as a translation, unless there were two or more words of equal status, in which case we considered several translations for that language. We then back-translated all the words suggested as initial synonyms into English, using the reverse search mechanism in the same dictionary.

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