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Reviews: Positive Emotions in Old English Language and Thought: Javier E. Díaz-Vera (2025)

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SUMMARY

As the title of the book indicates, Díaz-Vera is not only interested in the lexical semantics of positive emotions in Old English, but in how speakers of Old English experienced and understood positive emotions and how their experience and understanding of them changed in the course of time. This can be nicely summarized in Díaz-Vera's own words; he says that he combines "methods from historical linguistics and cultural psychology" (p. 290). He promotes his research by claiming that "positive emotions are understudied and in dire need of systematic attention" (p. 26).

In the brief introduction to the book, Díaz-Vera presents his three main objectives. The first one is to "reconstruct the various ways in which Anglo-Saxon authors discussed positive emotions" (p. 2). As regards this objective, Díaz-Vera emphasizes that he is interested in "semantic variation and change" (p. 2). The second objective is to investigate how people thought about emotions and how they thought about the relationships between various emotions. In this context, Díaz-Vera talks about "folk conceptualizations" (p. 2), which reminds me of the terms "folk model" (Kövecses 1990: 17) and "folk theories of emotion" (Kövecses 2000: 114–138). The third objective is to shed light on changes in Old English speakers' experiences of positive emotions.

The actual research questions are introduced in the first chapter (p. 22):

- “1. How was the Old English vocabulary for positive emotions developed? What emotion concepts were considered more relevant for communication?
2. What was the role of figurativeness (metaphor and metonymy) and embodiment in the development of this set of expressions for positive emotions?
3. What motifs were preferred by Anglo-Saxon authors to conceptualize figuratively these positive emotions?
4. Do these conceptual preferences reflect concrete aspects of Anglo-Saxon psychology and society?”

To answer the first research question, Díaz-Vera looks at dictionaries of Old English and compiles lists of words used for positive emotions. He emphasizes that this is an onomasiological approach. In other words, he studies all the lexical items that refer to positive emotions in Old English.

To answer the second research question, Díaz-Vera groups the lexical items according to what he calls “etymological themes” (p. 9). He categorises the items into literal and figurative. In Chapter One, he paves the way for our understanding of the role of embodiment in the birth of relevant lexical items by giving examples of what kind of Proto-Indo-European roots developed meanings related to emotions. One such root is *bhlei- ‘to shine, glitter’ that gave rise to words denoting joy (p. 11). He explains that a person experiencing joy may attest physical changes which suggest the conceptual domain of LIGHT.

To continue with the third research question, Díaz-Vera studies the lexical items in context to identify conceptual metaphors. As to the fourth research question, he considers “predominant beliefs regarding positive emotions according to the various theories of the mind that coexisted in Anglo-Saxon England” (p. 46). He illustrates this approach in chapter three by discussing ten emotion expressions from the Thesaurus of Old English that are categorised under “08.01.01.01 Ardour, fervour, strong feeling”. He gives examples of such words in context and explains how they relate to what he calls “cardiocentric imagery”, that is, the idea that emotions are located in the heart or, more generally, in the breast. Interestingly, his investigation suggests that positive emotions such as pride, interest, and joy could become too intense and thus uncomfortable, even leading to negative emotions. The only exception is Christian love, whose intensity can grow without such limitations.

To return to Chapter One, Díaz-Vera also discusses previous research and arrives at the decision to also consider his data in terms of the Geneva Emotion Wheel (version 3.0, henceforth GEW) introduced by Scherer (2005; see also Scherer, Schuman, Fontaine & Soriano 2013). Díaz-Vera explains that the GEW classifies emotions according to the dimensions of intensity, “[v]alence or agreeableness of the situation”, and “[i]nfluence/control over the situation” (p. 23). He returns to this theme in Chapter Five, where he discusses what he calls “clusters of meaning”, based on the “motifs suggested by the metonymies, synaesthesias, and metaphors” (p. 242) that he discusses in connection with the lexical items in Chapter Four. I will return to this. To conclude my summary of Chapter One, Díaz-Vera also discusses the nonverbal expression of positive emotions there, such as “fast speech rate”, “large smile”, and “upwards bodily movements” for joy (p. 30).

In the second chapter, Díaz-Vera explains his choice of data. He explains that he has “created [his] own annotated version of the Dictionary of Old English Corpus” (p. 32). The idea behind this is to cover as much data as possible. He then explains how he has identified and classified positive emotions. In brief, his classification is based on the “ten positive emotion families proposed by the authors of the GEW” (p. 33) on the one hand, and on Old English Dictionaries, including the Thesaurus of Old English, on the other hand. He dedicates several pages in the chapter to illustrating that this was not a simple task. Of special interest to metaphor scholars is Díaz-Vera’s Table 8, “Overall semantic classification of emotion expressions based on source domains” (p. 40), where he summarizes his understanding of the continuum from literal to metonymic to metaphorical meanings. Chapter Two ends with sections on “Corpus annotation

and markup” and “The search process”, specifying what kind of things Díaz-Vera could search for in the corpus with the help of corpus analysis software.

I have already mentioned Chapter Three, which discusses “Rivalling cultural models for positive emotions in Old English texts”. Here, Díaz-Vera returns to “folk conceptualizations” (p. 2), which he now calls “folk models” and compares with scientific knowledge. He writes, above all, about the humoral theory and about the idea that emotions can be experienced as heat inside the body.

Chapter Four, “The expression of positive emotions in Old English” (pp. 66–241), forms the bulk of the book. There, Díaz-Vera discusses each of the emotion families in turn: INTEREST, AMUSEMENT, PRIDE, JOY, SENSORY PLEASURE, CONTENTMENT, LOVE, ADMIRATION, RELIEF, and COMPASSION. Instead of discussing the families in alphabetical order, he follows the GEW clockwise, beginning from the “emotion family with the highest subjective degree of control and power by the subject affected by this emotion, i.e. interest” (p. 66). He first introduces interest by defining what it is and discussing what kind of nonverbal behaviour it goes together with. He then introduces the “lexico-semantic structure of OE INTEREST”, which means that he tells the readers how he has identified the relevant lexical items and where they come from. He continues by discussing two distinct kinds of interest, “positive and negative interest”, underlining that in Old English times, “eagerness for knowledge” could be seen as an “intellectual vice” (p. 69). Thereafter, he treats “OE metaphors of interest” such as the idea that “this emotion was conceptualized as A PHYSICAL FORCE by some Anglo-Saxon poets” (p. 71). Before rounding up with a discussion, he deals with what he calls “Minor interest expressions”, such as the word “carfulnes” that “is used to gloss L curiositas ‘curiosity’ in a list of sins recorded in a form of confession” (p. 73). In the discussion section, he summarizes “Literal and figurative expressions for INTEREST in the Old English corpus” (table 10, p. 74). He concludes that although there is little data on INTEREST in Old English, the results are of value.

To give another example, Díaz-Vera begins his discussion of OE PRIDE by defining it and relating it to the GEW: “Pride is considered an emotion with a relatively high level of control by the individual affected by this emotion; however, pride is less controllable than interest and amusement.” (P. 86.) He then considers the evolutionary origins of pride and goes on to discuss its nonverbal and verbal expressions. In the next section, he discusses how pride is presented in the Thesaurus of Old English and quite rightly points out that OE PRIDE has been studied by Fabiszak and Hebda (2010). Quoting their research, he presents Table 12, which lists “[c]auses, [behavioural] reactions and consequences of pride in Old English religious and non-religious texts” (p. 89). He then dedicates around ten pages to the “lexico-semantic structure of OE PRIDE” (pp. 89–100), discussing various lexical items referring to pride, their numbers of occurrences, their etymologies, and their meanings in context. After that, he focuses on the literal pride expressions “ofermod”, “gylp”, “oferhygd”, “wlanc”, and “pryd”. He concludes that they have a “relatively wide semantic scope” and that, although “most of them” have negative connotations, a “more positive conception of pride survives in non-religious texts and, especially, in epic poetry” (p. 105). Moreover, he deals with the triggers of pride (e.g. good looks), behavioural reactions to pride (e.g. bragging), and metaphors and symbols of pride (e.g. PRIDE IS SWELLING). Lastly, he provides his readers with a discussion section which summarizes his findings and relates them to previous research. He concludes that this analysis “confirms the strong preference for literal emotion expressions, and the relative importance of metonymy, rather than metaphor, in terms of the understanding of this emotional experience” (p. 117).

In Chapter Five, Díaz-Vera combines the linguistic research presented in Chapter Four with the GEW and with previous research by Uchida and Kitayama (2009). Based on the motifs that he has identified in his linguistic data, he identifies six “meaning clusters” that are: positive hedonic experience, negative hedonic experience, personal achievement, social harmony, transcendental reappraisal, and social disruption (see table 24 on p. 243). He discusses each of these meaning clusters separately, providing his readers with six figures which show which percent of the cluster is contained by which emotion family. For example, AMUSEMENT covers more of the cluster “positive hedonic experience” than any other emotion family (19.32%), while SENSORY PLEASURE

(18.33%) and JOY (17.24%) closely follow it. INTEREST, on the other hand, is the emotion family that covers least of the cluster “positive hedonic experience” (0%). (Figure 2 on p. 247.)

As regards “positive hedonic experience”, Díaz-Vera points out, among other things, that the experience can be either bodily or mental. Similarly, when he discusses “personal achievement”, he points out that people could have plenty of either “material” or “spiritual goods” (p. 253). “Negative hedonic experience” plays a small role in the conceptualization of positive emotions but can be of interest. One relevant emotion in this regard is compassion, which yields such motifs as PITY, MENTAL PAIN, PHYSICAL PAIN, and LAMENT (p. 249).

The cluster “transcendental reappraisal” may not be very translucent. Díaz-Vera characterizes it as follows (p. 259): “[T]he perceiver takes into consideration different strategies of regulation of the emotional experience, aimed at rethinking, hiding, or suppressing it.” Quite fittingly, Díaz-Vera discusses this cluster after “Social harmony” and before “Social disruption”. The main source domains in “Social harmony” are KINDNESS, GRATITUDE, LOYALTY, and KINSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP (p. 255). The emotions that can give rise to “Social disruption” include INTEREST (86.7%), SENSORY PLEASURE (6.49%), AMUSEMENT (3.39%), and CONTENTMENT (2.46%) (p. 264). Díaz-Vera concludes Chapter Five by suggesting that speakers of Old English mainly understood positive emotions as experiences that were rewarding “either for the individual” or “for the entire social group” (p. 267).

In Chapter Six, he proceeds to further conclusions. An interesting conclusion is that JOY is the “most prototypical member of the Old English category of positive emotions” (p. 271). Díaz-Vera indeed goes as far as to suggest that LOVE should be understood as a member of this more general category. As regards figurative language, Díaz-Vera suggests that speakers of Old English used more literal than figurative expressions for positive emotions. However, he also dedicates some space to discussing the role of metonymy in the creation of lexical items for new categories such as contentment, relief, and compassion. He then returns to the role of intrapersonal versus interpersonal aspects of emotions, making important generalisations. For example, he claims that “shared entertainment [was] considered more hedonically pleasing than – individual activities guided by one’s curiosity” (p. 280) and that Old English speakers valued virtue and “foster[ed] an optimistic outlook towards the future” (p. 281). Lastly in Chapter Six, Díaz-Vera considers “Conceptual variation across textual genres, individual authors, and communities”, underlining, for example, Ælfric’s role in introducing new ideas about emotions.

The book closes with “Concluding remarks” where Díaz-Vera emphasizes the “tension between the Germanic and the Christian systems of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours” (p. 289) and returns to JOY as a central category of positive emotions. Moreover, he presents ideas for further research, such as the idea that one could apply the same methodology to studying Middle English. The book also includes a lengthy list of references (pp. 293–307) and an index (pp. 309–314).

EVALUATION

I am not entirely certain whether positive emotions are in more need of study than negative emotions. Above all, there is plenty of research in positive psychology. Eleven years ago, Tugade, Shiota, and Kirby noted that “psychological research on positive emotions has burgeoned within the past 20 years” (2014: 1). While I was writing this review, I noticed the publication of a new book titled “Positive emotions” (Fredrickson 2025). However, I agree that positive emotions are an important topic for study, because, for example, they “promote resilience” (Fredrickson 2025: 1), and it is excellent that linguists are contributing to this topic.

While Díaz-Vera’s book makes very interesting reading, I had some difficulties following the argument. For example, it took me some time to realize that Díaz-Vera based the clusters of meaning on Uchida and Kitayama’s work (2009). While Uchida and Kitayama (2009) are credited for their work in the beginning of the book (pp. 15, 17–18), several other authors are also discussed, so that I was at first not able to see what was most central to the development of Díaz-Vera’s own method. I would have liked to read more about why he arrived at this choice.

To give another example, on page 19 Díaz-Vera introduces what he calls “three structural levels” of analysis: “(i) lexemes > expressions; (ii) expressions > source domains; and (iii) source domains > meaning clusters.” This division is central to his analysis, but it was difficult for me to relate it to the research questions since these were only introduced later. Also, a separate chapter was dedicated to annotating the corpus, but there was no explicit mention of “three structural levels” there. Instead, the chapter delves, among other things, into detail concerning the tagging of the data that is not explicitly revisited anywhere in the book.

In brief, I would say that Díaz-Vera could have been even clearer about the main choices he made and perhaps downplayed some other detail. However, my general impression of the book is that it is balanced and well-written.

There is no doubt that Díaz-Vera’s book is the result of much hard work. Díaz-Vera himself talks about a “decade of research” (p. VII). Based solely on the amount of data Díaz-Vera has covered, it can be said that the book has plenty of value. It also has value because it is a systematic overview of positive emotions in Old English. It is a repository of knowledge; anyone interested in any positive emotion in Old English should use it as a reference work. I am now especially referring to Chapter Four, which I have covered rather superficially, and the fact that it discusses ten emotion families in detail. As someone interested in the language of emotions, I especially appreciate the inclusion of not only JOY, LOVE and PRIDE in the book, but also such lesser studied historical emotions as INTEREST, SENSORY PLEASURE, and RELIEF. As Díaz-Vera suggests, the book sets an example of what could be done with another historical variety of English.

It can also be said that Díaz-Vera achieves a synthesis in the book, in Chapters Five and Six. He is able to successfully combine his linguistic analysis with psychological models. He can explain not only what kind of expressions Old English speakers used about positive emotions but also how they thought about and evaluated positive emotions. This achievement is relevant not only to medieval scholars but also to scholars of emotion more generally, and especially to the comparison of languages and cultures.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr. Heli Tissari teaches English linguistics at Umeå University in Sweden. She is interested in the language of emotion and, in particular, words and metaphors for emotions, as well as other expressions with words for emotions (such as “I fear that”). At the time she was writing this review, she was also teaching a course on words and metaphors for emotions in English. Her latest publication was a joint article on affect expressions occurring in people’s written stories about the music of video games.

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