

Culture & Communication

Alessandro Duranti

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Lecture 11: Empathy & Personal Reference

Today

The construction of the Self in language

What is empathy?

Is it natural and therefore universal?

Is it (also) cultural? How so?

Can empathy be evoked?

Can it be reduced, halted, controlled?

What is the role of language and other codes (e.g., gestures)?

The relevance of empathy for the Law.

General questions

Why is it difficult to look at certain photos or to certain scenes in a movie?

Or to listen to certain sounds, speech?

Or to read certain descriptions of events?

‘violent,’ ‘graphic,’ ‘visceral,’ etc. to describe the object of our reaction.

Definition by Edith Stein

Empathy is our (natural) way of experiencing others by identification with their experience. It is different from perception or memory.

- Stein, Edith [1917] 1989. *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications.

Empathy

From Greek ἐμπάθεια (*empathēia*) < *en* 'in, at' and *pathos* 'emotion, passion'

In Ancient Greek *pathos* literally meant 'what happens to a person' – a good or bad experience - and from that it came to mean also 'emotion, passion'

The English word *empathy* is the translation (by E. Titchner) of the German *Einfühlung* (lit. 'in-feeling') invented by the German philosopher Robert Vischer (1847-1933) and adopted by Theodor Lipps to describe our capacity to experience what someone else is experiencing (an inner participation), e.g., in looking at a work of art.

Ex. your emotional involvement with a character in a movie.

Empathy

Infants are distressed by the distress of others and may cry.

Some **animals** are also distressed by the suffering of other animals.

Hypothesis about empathy

Empathy is pre-reflexive, that is, immediate and non brought about by reasoning. It can be said to work from **analogy** – we (com)pair self and other.

Recently supported by research on **mirror neurons** (e.g., by Vittorio Gallese at Univ. of Parma, Marco Iacoboni here at UCLA) that demonstrated that when we observe someone's else actions the same neurons that are activated in the other person for that action are activated in our brain (premotor cortex).

Empathy as a “first person perspective”

A person resonates with the experience of another, a combination of imagination and emotion (Halpern).

A “first-person perspective” = our “I” (or our “Ego”) acquires something of another person’s I or Ego.

Seeing someone laugh might make us laugh. It’s contagious. Seeing someone else get hurt can might make us cringe.

We interpret someone’s emotions (inner state of mind) from their facial expressions, bodily postures, and actions (e.g., anger, happiness, fear, surprise, boredom, disgust, approval, disapproval, etc.). We interpret those external expressions as indexes of inner states.

Reading the emotions of the defendants

“During my fieldwork, defendants most frequently sat quietly, motionless, with no visible signs of emotion when their death sentences were pronounced to them by the judge. In fact this is how most defendants sat throughout their trials. They did little to draw attention to themselves, in part through efforts by the court system and their attorneys. They wore suits, just as their lawyers did; they were not visibly restrained in any way; and most kept a consistent, flat emotional countenance. In essence, they were nonpresent.” (Conley 2016: 101)

Importance of reading the emotions of the
defendants during a trial

A juror's interpretation of lack of empathy

R: so you said that there, even though you know, everyone sort of reigned themselves in, what kind of concerns were there outside of the evidence that people talked about with future danger?

J: oh, well outside of the evidence the concerns were, as I mentioned that he would have an opportunity to get let out again. Uh, the concerns were that uh, I I well I'll have to say that it was for me, and I think it may have been for some of the others, I don't know because I didn't question em. Uh, but **during that whole trial**, he, if you were there you too saw it, **he had no emotion whatsoever. He was cold as a snake.** Now if someone was sitting in a jury box telling the world what a horrible person I was I think I would have at least been a little bit interested in what they were saying. And at least looked at 'em. I'm not asking him to do any histrion- I wouldn't ask him to do any histrionics or any, you know. But **at least show an interest in what's going on. And he showed none whatsoever. At any point. He was just completely cold. Even when his kinfolks was sitting right behind him. Just like they were nothing.** So that played a part in it I'm sure. It did for me anyway. As a point what he, what, you know what's his, what would he do I mean you know, **did he show any human feeling** outside of.

Empathy, affect encoded in languages

Empathy can be expressed and evoked by different kinds of signals, including posture, gesture, and speech.

In all languages, there are **ways of speaking** that can be used to evoke empathy or its opposite (distance, disapproval, disgust). ("ways of speaking" include words as well as voice quality, intonation, volume).

Empathy, affect encoded in languages

In some languages, there are specific **words** or **grammatical forms** (i.e., words with grammatical function) that encode or trigger empathy. This is a conventional and hence “cultural” way of triggering or responding to something also “natural”.

Samoan positive affective pronoun 'ta'

`ou 'I' (clitic pronoun, attached to verb stem)

`ou *te iloa*

1st TA know

'I know' (non-contrastive)

a`u 'I, me' (independent pronoun, contrastive or emphatic)

E le iloa e a`u

TA not know Erg me

'I don't know' or '(it) is not known by me,' contrastive)

ta 'I' or 'my' (affective clitic) or **ta ita** (independent affective pronoun)

Margaret Mead

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was in Samoa in the 1920s, doing the fieldwork on adolescents that resulted in her dissertation (under Boas' supervision) and her 1928 book *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

When interviewing Samoan youth (in Samoan), she forbid them from using the expression *ta'ilo*, literally '(poor) I/me know/have a sense (of it)'

ta ilo! 'How would I know'

ta ilo! 'How would I know' or 'poor me, (how I would) I know!'

Affective (AFF) article 'the' (**si**) + Pronoun **ta**

le tama	vs.	si tama
the boy		the-AFF boy ('poor/dear boy')
le toea`ina	'vs.	si toea`ina
the old-man'		the-AFF old-man' ('poor/dear old man')

Article **si** can be combined with personal pronoun **ta** for begging:

si + ta [sta] **si ta** sikaleti (pronounced [sta sikaleti])
AFF I-AFF cigarette (or [ska sikaleki])
'poor my cigarette'
(understood as 'give poor me a cigarette')

person reference in Italian

In Italian, like in Spanish and differently from French (or English), in main clauses the Subject Pronoun is not obligatory.

Che fa? 'what does (he/she) do?' (no subject pronoun)

Che fa **lui**? 'what does **he** do?' (personal pronoun)

Che fa **lei**? 'what does **she** do?' (personal pronoun)

Che fa **questo**? 'what does he/this one ' (demonstrative)

Che fa **questa**? 'what does she/this one do?' (demonstrative)

Che fa **questa donna**? 'what does this woman do?' (demonstrative + Noun)

Italian 3rd person pronouns vs. demonstratives

Main Character & Positive Affect:

lui 'he/him'

lei 'she/her'

Secondary Character & Negative Affect:

questo 'this (one)' (masc.)

questa 'this (one)' (fem.)

quello 'that (one)' (masc.)

quella 'that (one)' (fem.)

[Duranti, Alessandro 1984. "The Social Meaning of Subject Pronouns in Italian Conversation." *Text* 4.4: 277-311.]

What is done with grammatical parts like special pronouns or special articles (in Samoan and some other languages) can also be done in other ways, for example:

lexically (choice of words)

prosodically (with varying pitch or intonation)

Paralinguistically (with volume, speed, rhythm, lengthening of sounds,
voice quality)

Listen next to an audio recording of two women interacting with a young boy who is at the two-word stage of language acquisition (he is capable of utterances like “ride it,” “big one”).

Try to identify features of the talk that convey **affect**, e.g., positive emotions toward the other person (e.g., a child) or the events recounted.

push: tit. push tit

mo a:ykəl

mo: mo. a:ykəl

mo

-a:ykəl

RIDE IT

one, one,

big. –hh O::NE

wow!

push it?

What Michael?

What?

motorcycle?

did you see a motorcycle?

oh you wanna ride the motorcycle=

=oh we rode the motorcycle at Chuck E Chee::ze?

one

You rode a big motorcycle?

whow!



Deixis (in English) (indexes)

demonstrative: *this, that, these, those, ...*

adverbs: *here, there, now, yesterday, ...*

personal pronouns: *I, you, ...*

Deictic + Noun: *this table, that man* (presupposition: there is a table, there is a man)

I am talking to you. (speaker and addressee are constituted, entailed by the use of the pronouns “I” and “you”).

Mom, mommy, dad, daddy, man, young man, boy

Third Person Reference, Common Nouns

Man, woman, gentleman, lady

Mom, mommy, dad, daddy,

young man, boy, young woman, girl.

“the man” (Interview by Conley of juror)

J: no. what the discussion was about, we're talking about punishment phase?

R: yes, punishment. Yeah.

J: what the discussion was about, there were two options. We'd already found **the man** guilty. of capital murder. the two options, life without parole, death penalty. If you gave **him** life without parole, what would happen? that was the discussion. would **he** ever, under any conceivable circumstances, be a danger to the public or the guard staff. that was what the discussion was about. That was what the argument, if you want to call it an argument, that's what it was about.

Injecting Affect in a Narrative

R: what was what swung the case?

J: uh what the jury, what our jury charge, what our charge was.

R: so can you explain=

J: =you want me to elaborate?

R: yes please.

J: okay. As you can imagine, any case like this deals a lot with emotion. In other words, I am fairly unemotional but, it is very difficult to sit there and listen to **someone's grey-haired old daddy beg you not to kill their boy**. And try to take blame for the way he turned out and you know he may be right. However, the charge specif- that we as jurors, every one of us, swore to, on the oa- on the day of our oath, the charge said that we would only let evidence guide us. We would not let supposition, emotion, prejudice, I forget the other term but something like that, okay. So, you you must try to put your emotion aside as much as you can and only go on what is presented as evidence. Either from the stand or physical evidence.

1st and 2nd vs. 3rd person

1. For Émile Benveniste (1956), the third person (English *he, she, they, them*) is a “non-person,” someone excluded from the speaker-hearer special I-thou (French *je-tu*) relationship [fn].
2. “They” are the ones who are not spoken to, but spoken about (this is particularly true if “they” are physically present, that’s why saying “she” or “he” can be considered **disrespectful** if the person, e.g., one of your parents or grandparents, is right there with you)

[fn. In a 1946 article Benveniste cites as evidence the Arabic name for the 3rd person, *al-yā’ibu* « celui qui est absent »]

Negative Affect, Distancing via Pronouns & Deictics

White residents talking about Asian American “newcomers”:

“I welcome them to our community, but it is them coming to our community. I don’t want it to change into their community.”

“What do we know about these people?”

Adrienne Lo (2016: 102)

From 2nd to 3rd person (+ deictic)

CM; We are supposed take what **you say Mr. Cohen**, at this time. about President Trump, as the truth (1.0) but **you're** about to go to prison for lying. How can we believe anything **you** say? the answer is:: we can't. this begs the question. why are **those in the majority** holding this hearing? I am appalled. We could be focused on actual issues that are facing America. like the border security. neonatal abstinence syndrome. or improving our nation's crumbling infrastructure. Instead the Democrats are trying to grasp at straws. Let's talk about **this witness**.

(CM = Rep. Carol Miller, Republican-West Virginia)

Michael Cohen's Hearings, Feb. 27, 2019

From M. Cohen's Testimony



Rep. Carol Miller (W. Virginia)

Let's talk about **this witness.**



Video Clip “This Witness”

Michael Cohen’s Hearings, Feb. 27, 2019

MM; but it was an intentional effort by this witness and his advisors, ...



Questioning of Michael Cohen by Rep. Mark Meadows (R-North Carolina), February 27, 2019):

3rd person reference (no Name)

MM; You *((points))* know that. Mr- Mr. Chairman. And to- ..
indicate that I asked someone who is a personal friend of the-
the Trump family who has worked for him who knows
((points towards camera)) **this particular individual**,
that she's coming in to be a prop. it's racist to suggest that
I ask her to come in here for that reason. [...]

Video clip “Meadows This Particular Individual”

Michael Cohen’s Hearings, Feb. 27, 2019

Review

Empathy is a pan-human, natural response to events that evoke immediate and unconscious emotional reactions.

Empathy is also modulated, mitigated or evoked by cultural practices, some of them involving language or a combination of language, gestures, postures, dressing code.

Empathy plays a considerable role in jurors' emotional reactions and their moral evaluation of the defendants.

