



Semantic interpretation and second-order empathy

Dirk Geeraerts



KU Leuven

RU Quantitative Lexicology and Variational Linguistics

1 Introducing 2nd order empathy

George Saunders, 'Tenth of December'



1 Introducing 2nd order empathy

George Saunders, 'Tenth of December'

'He had been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now saw that there could still be many - many drops of goodness, is how it came to him - many drops of happy - of good fellowship - ahead, and those drops of fellowship were not - had never been - his to withhold.

Withhold.'



1 Introducing 2nd order empathy

a narrative progression:

from zero empathy

(I don't want to go through a degrading terminal illness)

over first order empathy

(I don't want the boy to drown)

to second order empathy

(I don't want to thwart the love of my environment)



1 Introducing 2nd order empathy

first order empathy:

the ability of Self to take into account Other's
point of view

second order empathy:

the ability of Self to take into account Other's
point of view as including a view of Self
(and specifically, as including an empathic view of Self)



2 Demarcations

demarcating the focus of what follows

- against different dimensions of empathy
- against different modes of second order empathy

2.1 Dimensions of empathy

is 'empathy' always affective, as in the literary example?
an unresolved terminological issue

cognitive empathy	understanding Other's point of view
affective empathy	recognizing Other's animical state
sympathetic empathy	aligning with Other's animical state

in what follows, 'empathy' will be used indiscriminately for these three phenomena



2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

compare:



2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

and compare: the prisoner's dilemma

warden	prisoner will go for door	
prisoner		

2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

the prisoner's dilemma

warden	prisoner will go for door	
prisoner	warden thinks I will go for door, so I go for window	

2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

the prisoner's dilemma

warden	prisoner will go for door	if prisoner thinks I think he will go for door, he will go for window
prisoner	warden thinks I will go for door, so I go for window	

2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

the prisoner's dilemma

warden	prisoner will go for door	if prisoner thinks I think he will go for door, he will go for window
prisoner	warden thinks I will go for door, so I go for window	warden thinks I (think he thinks I will go for window, and thus) go for window, so I go for door

2.2 Modes of 2nd order empathy

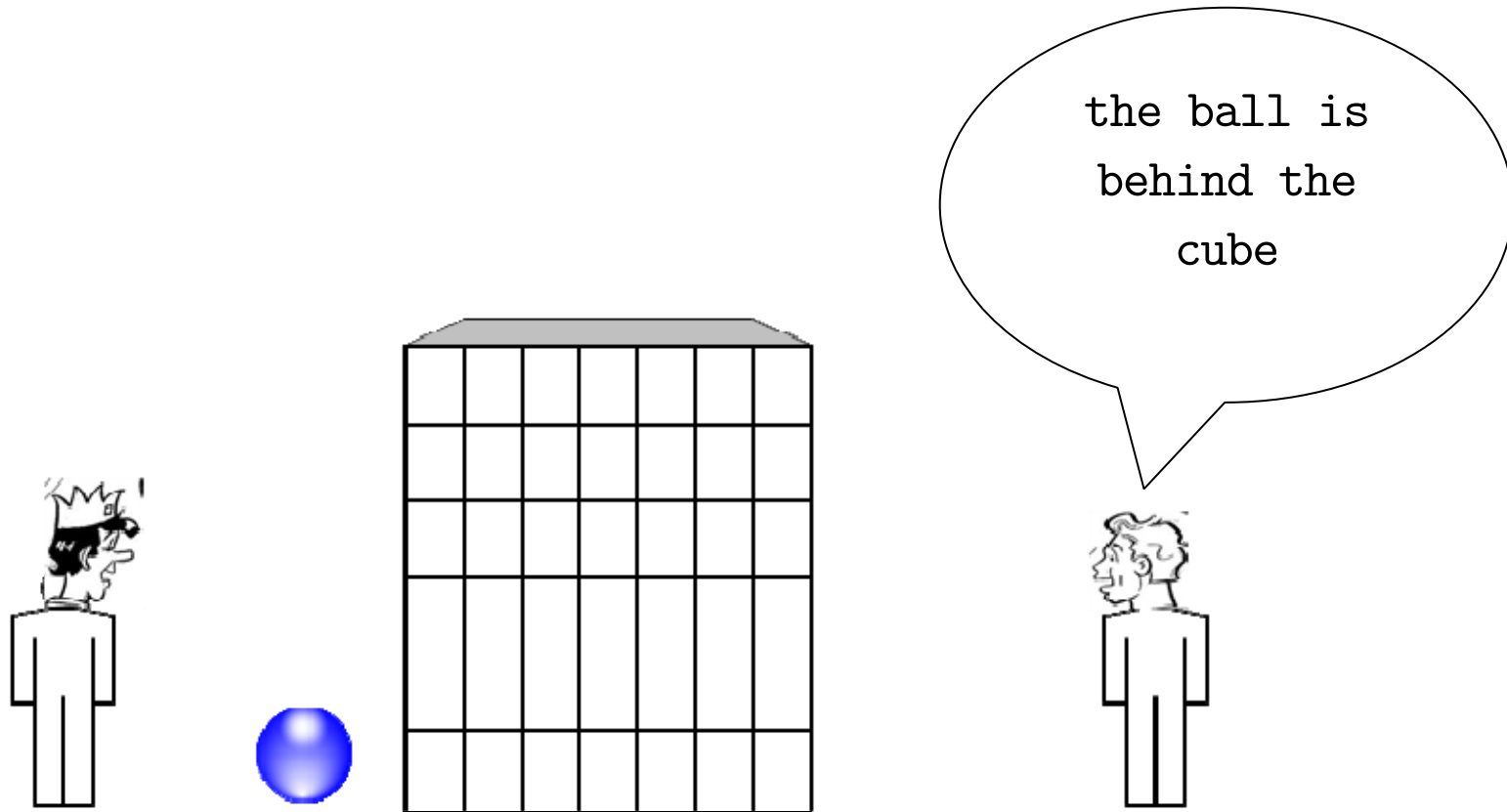
-> second order empathy exists in different mental modes (like visual and cognitive), but in what follows, we will concentrate on its importance for language in a discursive context: what does second order empathy mean for Self's interpretation of Other's utterances?

3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

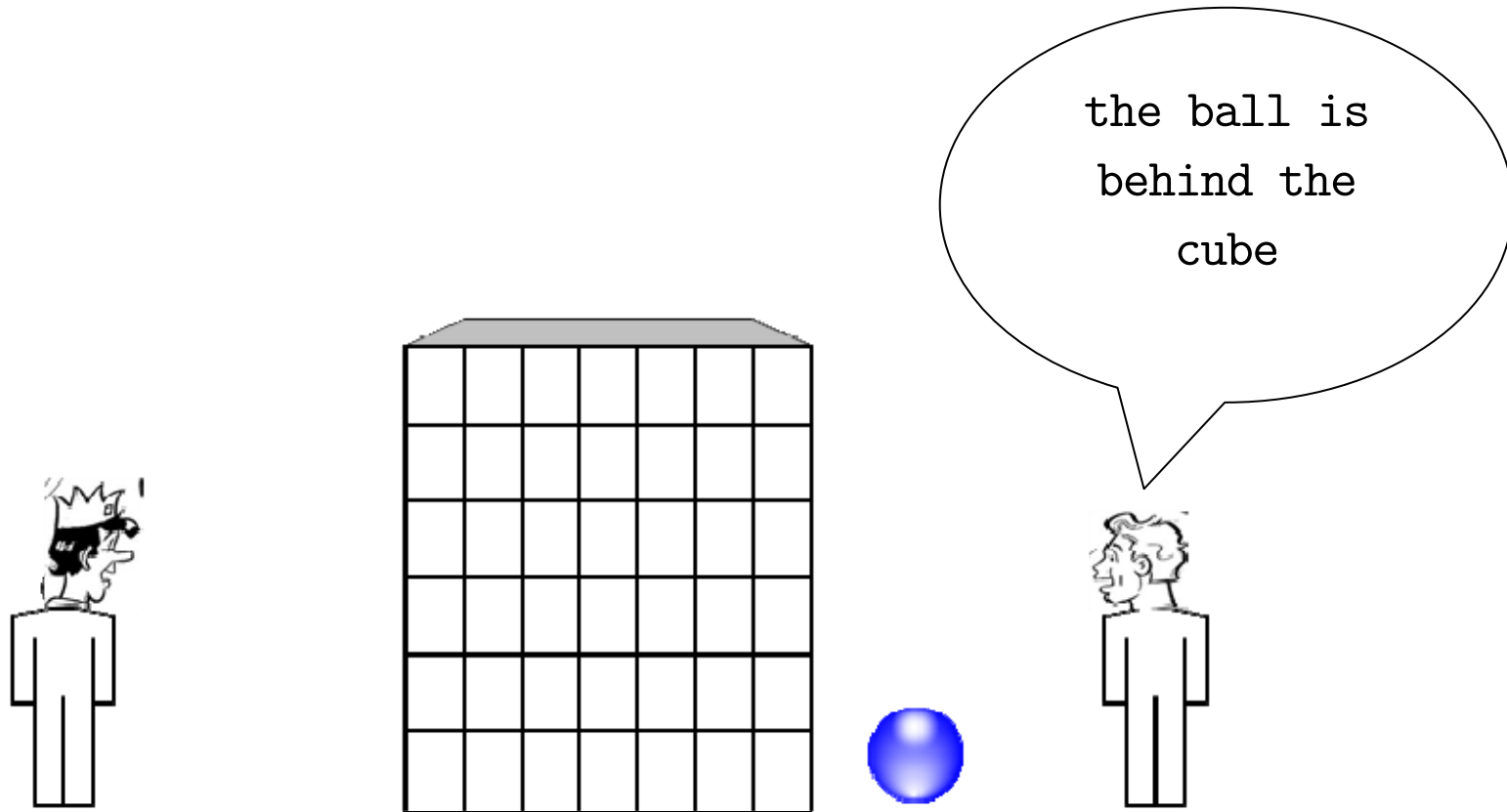
second order empathy leads to systematic ambiguities of interpretation, at diverse levels of linguistic meaning



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

if there is no contextual disambiguation, hearers face the possibility of a systematic interpretative ambiguity:

does the speaker construe the objective situation in a non-empathic or in an empathic way, i.e.

if the speaker's construal is non-empathic, the hearer's interpretation will be 'first order empathic'

if the speaker's construal is empathic, the hearer's interpretation will be 'second order empathic'

-> in which areas of language does this play a role?



3.1 Deixis

spatial

The ball is behind the cube etc. etc.

temporal

transatlantic Other: *I will call you tomorrow morning*

puzzled Self: *My morning or your morning?*

3.1 Deixis

personal

(difficult to find cases where ambiguity is not resolved):

nurses'/parents' plural:

we = you

and now we are going to finish our plate, right?

3.2 Vocabulary

Self: *'How do you like my new { haircut, car, paper... }?'*

Other: *'Awesome!'*

Self: *'Are you serious or are you just trying to please me?'*

first order empathic interpretation:

Other is expressing his genuine opinion

second order empathic interpretation:

Other is catering to my insecure, attention-craving,

unworthy Self



3.3 Speech acts

Other: *'Isn't there a bit of a draft in here?'*

Self: *'Let me close the window for you'*

versus *'I am fine, thank you'*

first order empathic interpretation:

Other is expressing his discomfort

second order empathic interpretation:

Other is inquiring about my discomfort (and suggesting to act on it)



3.3 Speech acts

(cp. Saunders)

Significant Other: *'I don't want you to see me degrade'*

Self: *'But I will be there to support you'*

versus *'But we'll always have Paris' (i.e. my love is stronger than the hurt)*

first order empathic interpretation:

Other is afraid of the process of decay, wants to maintain a positive image of himself

second order empathic interpretation:

Other does not want me to go through the pain of seeing him decay



3.4 Style/Register

using difficult words

first order interpretation:

'this is how this person is; it's so natural to him that he doesn't consider whether the audience understands'

second order interpretation:

'this person, assuming that I do not know the word, is trying to impress me'

second order interpretation, alternative:

'this person assumes that I know the word and by using it expresses that he includes me in the circle of cognoscenti'

3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

intermediate conclusion:

second order empathy induced ambiguity is pervasive, in the sense that the mechanisms illustrated so far systematically involve different types of meaning

- | | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| deixis | -> reference |
| vocabulary | -> categorization |
| speech acts | -> interaction |
| style/register | -> social identity |



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

intermediate conclusion:

second order empathy induced ambiguity is irreducible, in the sense that none of the standard interpretative factors guarantees automatic or complete disambiguation

- context
the 'difficult words' example shows that context does not only disambiguate: context (in this case, Self's assumptions about Other) may also multiply the potential interpretations



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

- pragmatic maxims
in general, Gricean maxims seem to favor a second order empathic reading: taking into account the interlocutor's point of view increases the relevance of an utterance however, Self would have to be certain whether Other was applying the Gricean maxims to begin with



3 Second order empathy as a source of ambiguity

- normativity
in general, assuming an adherence to established usage of words and expressions ties in with a second order empathic reading: Self can reasonably expect Other to use the language in the established way
but again, this can only be a default assumption for Self



4 Linguistic perspectives

how does second order empathy relate to existing empathy research in linguistics, and how can it be studied?



4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

main traditions in linguistic and linguistoid fields:

- literary linguistics
studying the linguistic mechanisms of empathic narrative style (like free indirect speech)

4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

- language acquisition and communicative competence
studying the effect of empathy and theory of mind on the acquisition of linguistic and communicative skills
e.g. prelinguistic pointing as an attention-directing device (Tomassello)
e.g. empathic deficiency and autism (Baron-Cohen)
e.g. intercultural communication, arguing that empathy is a crucial skill for the acquisition of cross-cultural competence



4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

- empathy hierarchies
entities can be ordered according to their salience
SAPs > 3rd pronouns > human > animate > natural forces >
inanimate (DeLancey 1981)

- typological research:
distribution of constructions according to levels in the
prominence hierarchy
e.g. languages with nominative/accusative versus
ergative/absolutive case marking place the split along
the hierarchy (with nominative construal to the left)



4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

- viewpoint selection and interpretation:

(Kuno & Kaburaki 1977, Kuno 1987)

John wrote to Bill about himself

Someone wrote to Bill about himself

coreferentiality correlates with construal according to subject's (John/someone) or object's (Bill) point of view,

but the subject-based interpretation is more difficult for *someone* than for *John* (which is higher in terms of empathy)



4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

- intersubjectivity
(Traugott, Langacker, Verhagen, Nuyts)
coding of speaker/hearer relations, like
honorifics expressing social relations
discourse particles managing mutual alignment
demonstratives creating joint attention

4.1 Empathy research in linguistics

the notion of second order empathy provides a corrective footnote to the latter two traditions:

- by focusing on dialogic situations in which the observer is also a participant
- by focusing on speaker/hearer interactions *without* explicit coding of intersubjectivity



4.2 Prospects

from a hearer perspective

what are the factors (speaker characteristics, context features, situational dimensions...) contributing to ambiguity recognition?

(cp. psychological research on empathy ability and empathy accuracy)

linking up with existing ambiguity resolution research

e.g. Picture Noun Phrases (Kaiser et al. 2009): can we reinterpret the phenomena in terms of 2nd order empathy?

Mary remembered Lisa's story about herself



4.2 Prospects

- *Mary remembered Lisa's story about herself*
(imputed) first order empathy on Mary's side
(Mary gets into Lisa's world, but doesn't see herself as featuring prominently in that world)
- *Mary remembered Lisa's story about herself*
(imputed) second order empathy on Mary's side
(Mary gets into Lisa's world and recognizes herself as part of that world)

4.2 Prospects

if this reinterpretation is correct, what induces a 3rd party observer to impute either 1st or 2nd order empathy to Mary?

e.g.

coreferential preferences are influenced by verb semantics

Mary divulged Lisa's story about herself

Mary denied Lisa's story about herself

(i.e. who's the interested party?)

4.2 Prospects

from a speaker perspective

what are the devices speakers can use to reduce the ambiguity, and what is their position in the language?

cp. intersubjectivity research

- which intersubjective devices are specifically geared towards 2nd order empathy disambiguation?
relative to the specific meaning types
e.g. deixis: *to your left*
e.g. categorization: *we will now perform an 'exercise'*
e.g. speech act: *we're beyond flattery, right?*



4.2 Prospects

- what is the diachronic evolution of such devices?
intersubjectivity research suggests a universal (semasiological) evolution from subjectivity to intersubjectivity
but is it also the case that the expression of intersubjectivity and the capacity for empathy increases?
and if so, is this a universal phenomenon or is it part of a specific cultural history?
(cp. research into emotion terms)

5 Conclusions

- empathic, subjective construal is well known in linguistics, but its consequences for the interpretative processing of utterances have not received a lot of attention yet
- the possibility for the hearer to choose between a first order empathic and a second order empathic interpretation of speaker utterances introduces a principled indeterminacy in the speaker-hearer interaction

5 Conclusions

- this potential for ambiguity involves different types of semantic phenomena: reference, categorization, interaction, social identity
- the empathy-based interpretative ambiguities define an intriguing research agenda for linguistics, cultural history, and philosophy



Takk!

dirk.geeraerts@arts.kuleuven.be

<http://wwling.arts.kuleuven.be/qlvl>

