

## DIMENSIONS OF EMPATHY IN RELATION TO LANGUAGE

Ilona Herlin & Laura Visapää  
*University of Helsinki*

Empathy is generally used to refer to the cognitively complex process in which we are able to stand in the shoes of another person, to understand their perspective, emotions and the situation they are in and then, to feel the feelings that are derived from the situation of the other. The ability to empathize requires the ability to distinguish between the self and the other. It thus requires a Theory of Mind: understanding that other individuals have consciousness, thoughts and feelings different from our own (Hoffmann 2000; Preston & de Waal 2002, Tomasello 2003). In our everyday lives, we often associate empathy with emotional sensitivity and the ability and willingness to listen to other people's problems. Empathy is indeed involved in these activities but it is a great deal more: it is the key to the fact that we can understand other people and cooperate in an intelligible manner; it is thus a core mechanism of intersubjectivity (see also Herlin & Visapää 2011).

The starting point of our study is both the current interest in empathy in such fields as biology and anthropology as well as the need to develop cognitive linguistics in its current theoretical stage: the growing need to integrate an interactional approach to cognitive research. We will aim to develop a cognitive linguistic description of the ways in which empathy – a fundamentally intersubjective phenomenon – is intertwined with language. We analyze the ways in which empathy is present in language, first of all suggesting that empathy cuts through all language use by co-ordinating different perspectives and emotions, and then by analyzing the constructions and patterns that could perhaps be considered markedly empathetic. These will be analyzed with respect to three dimensions of empathy recognized by psychologists: i) recognition of the other's feelings, ii) feeling what the other person is feeling, and iii) feeling sympathy for the other person (pot. leading to proactive behaviour. (See Preston & de Waal 2002.)

We will discuss the dimensions of empathy in video-taped Finnish conversational data, focusing on one conversation. Our main focus is on grammatical constructions (esp. the Finnish “zero person construction”, Laitinen 2006), but we will also take into account other phenomena through which people can show their orientation towards other participants: e.g. gaze, body torque, discourse particles, and second stories.

**Key words:** empathy, grammar, intersubjectivity, cognitive grammar, interactional linguistics

### References

- HERLIN, ILONA & LAURA VISAPÄÄ 2011: *Kieli ja empatia* ('Language and empathy'). Helsingin yliopisto.
- HOFFMAN, M. L. 2000: *Empathy and Moral Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LAITINEN, LEA: Zero person in Finnish: a grammatical resource for construing human reference. – Lyle Campbell & Marja-Liisa Helasvuo (eds.), *Grammar from the human perspective: Case, space, and person* s. 209–231. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- PRESTON, STEPHANIE & DEWAAL FRANS 2002: Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate basis. – *Behavioral Brain Science* 25 (1): 1–20.
- TOMASELLO, MICHAEL 2003: *Constructing a language: a usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.