Empathy and Cognitive Linguistics:
How Empathy Factors Are Involved in Language

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1. Introduction

Although cognitive linguistics includes various strands such as cognitive grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991), construction grammar (Croft 2001; Fillmore 1988; Goldberg 1995), metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989), and the study of blends and mental spaces (Fauconnier 1985; Fauconnier and Turner 2002), any studies in this discipline are expected to fulfill the Cognitive Commitment (1).

(1) The commitment to make one's account of human language accord with what is generally known about the mind and brain from disciplines other than linguistics.

(Lakoff 1991: 54)

However, as Dąbrowska (2016) argued, cognitive linguists have not treated the Cognitive Commitment seriously. Consider, for example, *empathy*, "the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person" (Lamm et al. 2007: 42). Few studies in cognitive linguistics have paid attention to this capacity (e.g., Ikegami 2008; Langacker 1991), and even they do not discuss it based on psychological perspectives, which is an obvious violation of the Cognitive Commitment.

If empathy is actually involved in language, it is predicted that factors that increase empathy are observed not only in behavior but in language. The present study will propose that, out of the five empathy factors classified by Preston (2002), *familiarity*, *similarity*, and *past experience* can be seen in language, thereby demonstrating that empathy factors are useful to classify or explain empathy-related linguistic phenomena.

2. Empathy factors in psychology

As already noted, empathy is the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person. Several factors have been found that increase empathy (e.g., Cialdini et al. 1997; Krebs 1975; Zahn-Waxler et al. 1984). Preston (2002) classified such factors into five: *familiarity* (the subject's previous experience with the object), *similarity* (the perceived overlap between the subject and object such as species and age), *learning* (acquired by explicit or implicit teaching), *past experience* (with the situation of distress), and *salience* (the strength of a perceptual signal, e.g., louder, closer, more realistic, etc.).

Let me take familiarity as an example. Cialdini et al. (1997) conducted an experiment where participants were instructed to think about and describe one of four same-sex persons: a near stranger, an acquaintance, a good friend, or a family member. Then, they were asked to consider that the described person was just evicted from his/her apartment, and to indicate the level of help (if any) they would be willing to give the evicted

person by choosing one of seven increasingly costly helping options. The results revealed that a more familiar relationship leads to a greater willingness to help, demonstrating that familiarity facilitates empathy.

3. Empathy factors and language

Of the five empathy factors, learning is not expected to be seen explicitly in language because it concerns how frequently or strongly an individual feels empathy. However, since the other factors are involved in what kind of entity an individual more strongly empathizes with, they are likely to be observed in linguistic phenomena. In this section, it will be suggested that the *empathy hierarchy* in Langacker (1991) and empathy hierarchies tin Kuno (1987) respectively correspond with similarity and familiarity, and that past experience is the key to characterizing the function of expressing empathy that Japanese sentence-final particle *yone* has.

3.1. Similarity and Langacker's empathy hierarchy

Similarity is reflected in Langacker's (1991) empathy hierarchy, which ranks entities according to their potential to attract individuals' empathy on the basis of such matters as likeness and common concerns (2).

(2) speaker > hearer > human > animal > physical object > abstract entity

(Langacker 1991: 307)

Entities ranked higher in the empathy hierarchy are more salient than those ranked lower and therefore they are more eligible to be the subject of the sentence. (3) is thus unnatural because the subject (*the dog*) is an entity ranked lower than the other participant (*me*) in the empathy hierarchy.

(3) ??The dog was chased by me.

(Langacker 1991: 307)

3.2. Familiarity and Kuno's empathy hierarchies

Kuno (1987) proposed several empathy hierarchies that are different from Langacker's empathy hierarchy. Consider the *Descriptor Empathy Hierarchy* (4) as an example.

(4) Given descriptor *x* (e.g., *John*) and another descriptor f(*x*) that is dependent upon *x* (e.g., *John's brother*), the speaker's empathy with *x* is greater than with f(*x*).

(Kuno 1987: 207)

According to the Descriptor Empathy Hierarchy, in (5), the speaker empathizes more with John than with John's brother. This makes John more qualified than John's brother as the subject, resulting in the unnaturalness of (5). Note that referring to John as *John* and John's brother as *his brother* indicates that the speaker is more familiar with John than with John's brother. Therefore, the Descriptor Empathy Hierarchy concerns familiarity.

(5) ??Then his brother was hit by John.

(Kuno 1987: 203)

3.3. Past experience and the Japanese sentence-final particle *yone*

The present study suggests that past experience is also reflected in linguistic phenomena, given the Japanese sentence-final particle *yone*. This particle, along with another sentence-final particle *ne*, has the function of expressing empathy (Inoue 1999; Zhang 2009). However, these particles are not necessarily interchangeable. Consider the situation where a woman named Mary is talking about her pain from childbirth to her friend Anna. Then, Anna can show her empathy with Mary by saying (6).

(6) *Taihenda {a. ne/b. yone}*.
'That's tough, isn't it?'

Crucially, (6b) can only be uttered by women who have the past experience of childbirth. On the other hand, (6a) does not have such a constraint. The difference between (6a) and (6b) thus reflects our common sense that "it is considered inappropriate, and sometimes even offensive, for a man to say that he empathizes with a woman's pain from childbirth" (Preston 2007). Therefore, *yone* is used when the speaker understands the hearer's sensation or feeling through his/her own past experience.

Note that the experience required to use *yone* is not just experience but *past experience*. To consider this, imagine another situation where John and Michael are having lunch together. Michael is eating John's recommended pizza for the first time. In this case, Michael can utter (7a) but cannot (7b) because the use of *yone* implies that he has eaten the pizza before, which is incompatible with the context. Michael has the experience of eating the pizza in the sense that now he is eating it. Nonetheless, he cannot utter (7b), demonstrating that *ongoing experience* is inappropriate for empathy expressed by *yone*.

(7) *Kono piza oisii {a. ne/b. yone}*.
'This pizza is delicious, isn't it?'

4. Conclusion

In response to the present situation where cognitive linguistics does not deal with empathy seriously, the present study employed empathy factors (i.e., familiarity, similarity, learning, past experience, and salience) to classify and explain empathy-related linguistic phenomena. It was revealed that familiarity and similarity are reflected in Langacker's (1991) empathy hierarchy and Kuno's (1987) empathy hierarchies, respectively. It was further suggested that past experience can differentiate the functions of expressing empathy that the Japanese sentence-final particles *ne* and *yone* have. Additional studies are needed to ascertain whether salience (as a factor in facilitating empathy) is involved in language.

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