

Second order empathy and pragmatic ambiguity

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If empathy is the ability to see Other's point of view, then the ability to see Other's conceptualization as incorporating a model of Self's point of view may be called 'second order empathy'. (In terms of Theory of Mind, this is a special case of second order belief, in which the object of the second order belief is Self.) First and second order empathy have an impact on the notion of 'ground' as used in Cognitive Linguistics: the notion of empathic construal points to the necessity of incorporating the interlocutor as an independent conceptualizer into an intersubjective model of grounding, and hence, the possibility of choosing between first order empathic and second order empathic readings of an interlocutor's utterances may introduce an irreducible interpretative ambiguity in the ground. If there is no contextual disambiguation, hearers face a systematic interpretative ambiguity: does the speaker construe the objective situation in a non-empathic or in an empathic way? This ambiguity is easy to detect in deictic expressions, but it can be shown to be pervasive in all expressions involving viewpoint. Next, if the potential for ambiguity introduced by second order empathy is combined with polarity alignment between Self's beliefs and Self's beliefs about Other's beliefs, the interplay of hearer's first order and second order beliefs yields six basic interpretative possibilities: statement, deception, disagreement, confirmation, accommodation, irony. The paper will explore the consequences of this pragmatic ambiguity from different theoretical perspectives: intersubjectivity and grounding, speech act theory, literal meaning, and specifically also the concept of irony.