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Emanuel E. Garcia, MD

Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia

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Brief Remarks on Some Linguistic Features of “Empathy” and “Sympathy”

Emanuel E. Garcia, M.D.

The use of words by an individual or culture is subject to the very same psychological forces that drive man's other activities. Hence, the history of a word's usage becomes a telling record of the mental processes of its creators and users, both conscious and unconscious. Etymology, as Freud has observed in his dreambook (1900), contributes significantly to our understanding of the deeper layers of the psyche. Let us take the word “rival,” for example, and see how we may make use of etymological data. It is derived from the Latin “rivalis,”¹ which originally meant “one sharing a stream” or “neighbor, companion, aid” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971; Shipley, 1984, p. 333). When Shakespeare has Bernardo say:

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste
(*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. i, 11. 13–14)

“rival” is used in just this sense: companion, helpmeet, colleague. Yet this meaning is now obsolete. Today to declare someone a rival is to brand him or her a competitor, someone with whom one struggles, a foe, an enemy. The inevitable dark side of human relations is thus revealed: proximity implies danger, friends may betray, neighbors attack.

In psychotherapy, words are powerful vehicles of emotion. Despite the inevitable imprecision of any language (see Groddeck, 1977), the articulation of one's thoughts and feelings remains the primary tool for insight-oriented psychotherapy. As Freud has declared, “Words are the most important media by which one man seeks to bring his influence to bear on another” (1890, p. 292).

And “mere” words in turn can exert their own effect on their users. The formal structure of a word, the associations it brings to one's mind, the overt meaning which a given culture has assigned to it, and, significantly, its covert links by dint of sound, form and etymology to a host of other words and cultural artifacts which may appear superficially unrelated—all of these contribute to molding one's own thought or perspective, albeit in ways not readily evident. Groddeck (1977) unhesitatingly speaks of “the invincible claims by which language enslaves our thought and action” (p. 249).

Suffice it to say that the choice of a word to describe a particular

¹Itself derived from the Latin “rivus,” meaning “stream” (Lewis, 1964).

phenomenon, especially in the realm of psychotherapy, is meaningful. Bettelheim (1983) has drawn our attention to this very issue in his consideration of the authorized English translation of Freud's opus, and he convincingly shows how the misrendering of Freud's words has itself created and fostered erroneous thinking in English readers, spawning further misapplications to the detriment of psychoanalysis.

I offer the above as a preface to a cursory investigation of some linguistic curiosities presented by a word which enjoys considerable vogue among psychotherapists nowadays: empathy.

When Greenson (1960) lamented the dearth of psychoanalytic contributions on empathy over a quarter of a century ago, it was doubtful that he would have foreseen the burgeoning of interest in the subject that has since occurred. Today one can scarcely read a case history or technical paper that fails to highlight the topic. Phrases such as "empathic failure" or "empathic attunement" liberally season the literature.

The psychiatric community has generally agreed upon a definition of empathy as connoting a shared experience, i.e., the therapist's partaking of the patient's emotional and psychological state.² Webster's (1986) definition of empathy as "the capacity for participating in or a vicarious experiencing of another's feelings, volitions, or ideas and sometimes another's movements" conveys the essence of its current usage, although one must acknowledge, as in all psychiatric matters, a certain variability and complexity which cannot be rendered by statements that are reductionistic by nature. Nevertheless, one obtains the distinct impression that to have "empathy" is regarded as a far more noble achievement for a therapist than mere "sympathy," since the former has come to imply a much deeper sort of "emotional knowing," to use Greenson's (1960) apt phrase.

Interestingly enough, however, "empathy" is a relative newcomer to the English language. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* [1971], it emerged as late as 1912; but even more intriguing is the fact that its original meaning was noticeably and importantly different from the one to which we are now accustomed. Its first recorded English usage warrants quotation in full:

[Lipps] propounded the theory that the appreciation of a work of art depended upon the capacity of the spectator to project his own personality into the object of contemplation. One had to 'feel oneself into it' . . . This mental process he called by the name of *Einfühlung*, or, as it has been translated, *Empathy* (*OED*, 1971, Supplement)

"Empathy," as here described, is clearly revealed to be an essentially *narcissistic* phenomenon: the subject has *projected his own personality* into the object to be

²For an introduction to the now-formidable literature on empathy, see Greenson's excellent article (1960), as well as that of Post (1980), which provides an interesting review.

understood, which consequently acts as a sort of mirror, reflecting back aspects originating from the subject. Webster (1986, p. 2317) additionally notes that the term is "frequently employed with reference to a *nonhuman* object" (my italics), and that it possesses the *least* emotional content of any of the synonyms of "sympathy," in keeping with its fundamentally narcissistic legacy. This should come as a surprise, given its current employment to represent a sort of apex of non-narcissistic understanding, wherein the therapist ostensibly transcends the limitations of self-interest to immerse himself in the patient's emotional world.

As in the case of "rival," whose linguistic history revealed to us the unconscious identification of friend with foe, so with "empathy": the opposites of narcissism and, for want of a better term, non-narcissism are embraced by one and the same word. Such paradoxes are a hallmark of primary process thinking (see Freud, 1900, p. 318; 1910). Yet this curious historical transformation of the meaning of "empathy" also emphasizes a general and fundamental paradox posed by the human quest for knowledge: that man's understanding of his surroundings (which include his fellow men) is both predicated upon and limited by the narcissistic projection of personal characteristics, mental and emotional. Freud succinctly illustrated the dilemma when he discussed the birth of the idea of consciousness. He observed that

Without any special reflection we attribute to everyone else our own constitution and therefore our own consciousness as well, and that this identification is a *sine qua non* of our understanding. This inference (or this identification) was formerly extended by the ego to other human beings, to animals, plants, inanimate objects and to the world at large, and proved serviceable so long as their similarity to the individual ego was overwhelmingly great; but it becomes more untrustworthy in proportion as the difference between the ego and these "others" widened (1915, p. 169).

For example, by endowing animals with human features and motives, primitive man's understanding and ultimately his survival among them was aided. Yet, as we well know today, a scientific study of animal behavior necessarily eschews such anthropomorphism, recognizing therein a most definite barrier to further knowledge. I believe that this very issue, namely, the role of narcissism in man's search for the truths of Nature, is one of the most crucial for the history of science.

In the therapeutic setting the therapist must guard against tendencies to project his own ideas or emotional states onto the patient, lest he falsify the latter's experiences and communications. Simply speaking, the more the patient functions as the therapist's mirror, the less actual truth about the patient will be perceived by the therapist. Thus the most understanding therapist is one whose projective distortions are kept to an absolute minimum.

As psychotherapists who are accustomed to attaching weight to the alterations and nuances of our patients' language over the course of treatment,

we must not shy away from inquiring into the significance of our having adopted a word whose original meaning so clearly differed in essentials from the one eventually assigned to it, the more so since a perfectly acceptable term was already at hand—one moreover whose heritage was a relatively long and noble one. I refer to “sympathy,” which appeared in English as early as 1596 to indicate conformity or community of feeling *between persons* (OED, 1971). In contrast to “empathy,” it is not a translation from the terminology of German aesthetics, but a direct derivative from the Greek. In its literal sense it means a “feeling *with*”; “empathy” connotes “feeling *in*” (“sym” is Greek for “with,” “em” for “in”).

Are there psychological implications of the difference between these two prefixes? Allow me to offer the following speculations.

“With” implies awareness and acknowledgment of another person, as well as a certain separateness: in short, *co*-existence. “In,” however, would seem to imply something different—the destruction of the object through a process of merger or replacement. To be *in* someone’s shoes, for example, means that the shoes’ owner has been effectively replaced, or in the language of the unconscious, destroyed. The five-year-old girl who wears her mother’s high heels fulfills thereby the oedipal fantasy of matricide as she takes mother’s place in relation to father. L. Frank Baum’s masterpiece, *The Wizard of Oz*, supports this interpretation: Dorothy inherits the magical shoes of the witch after she has unwittingly killed her. Thus, in a certain sense, to *em*-pathize means to usurp or destroy.

To be “in” someone’s psychological world also seems to connote a rather grandiose ideal which satisfies the therapist’s desires for complete, omniscient understanding—an obvious fallacy. Like it or not, there are limits to what any one person can know about another, and we must be careful to acknowledge this fact, strikingly proved by the unpredictability of behavior manifested so frequently by those whom we profess to know well—patients, friends, spouses.

It is a matter of practical consequence, therefore, whether as therapists we strive to “be” our patients, as some advocates of empathy appear to suggest. To sympathize with them in a way that allows for the resonance of unconscious processes (Freud, 1912, pp. 115–116) is indeed difficult enough.

An example of the emotional knowing towards which we can aim, and which I urge we call “sympathetic understanding” rather than “empathy,” is provided by Freud himself. Theodor Reik went to Freud for analysis while in the midst of difficulties during his middle forties, and he wrote of “the penetrating sagacity, the human understanding, the wisdom, and the kindness of the great man” (1954, p. 261). More specifically, Reik depicted an elegant illustration of Freud’s profound appreciation of his patient’s hidden emotional processes:

In the last session I clinked the coins in my pocket while giving myself up to free associations. I casually remarked that playing with money showed my anal-erotic tendencies. Freud answered seriously: “That is, of course, nonsense. You think of your brothers and you are glad

that you are now able to send them money." (Reik, 1954, pp. 261–262).

Reik traced his chain of associations and admitted that he had had a fleeting thought of his brothers, but one *which he had not bothered to express*, and he marveled at Freud's "fine unconscious understanding." Of course, such a feat is possible only if one is exquisitely attuned to the patient's emotional state. In this instance, such sympathetic resonance permitted Freud to dismiss a trite theoretical comment, and to penetrate to the core of Reik's thoughts and feelings to facilitate insight.

In this brief paper, frankly fragmentary and speculative, I hope to have directed the reader's attention to the hidden meanings and uses of words and their potential relevance to our psychotherapeutic attitude, using the curious linguistic features of "empathy" as an example. If nothing else, I trust that my plea for "sympathy" will have piqued interest in the role played by terminology in shaping our thought.

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