Empathy displays as interactional achievements— Multimodal and sequential aspects

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Abstract

In this conversation analytic/interactional linguistic study, I aim to show which kinds of resources can be used by participants to display empathy in response to affect-laden tellings of personal experiences in German everyday interaction. 'Empathy' refers to the display of understanding of the other person's emotional situation. It will be shown that a whole range of resources such as facial expressions, response cries + assessments, expressions with mental verbs, formulations, and second stories can be used, and that these resources are deployed at specific sequential positions, and in a specific order from kinetic and 'fleeting' to verbal and 'substantial', in the course of the telling of a personal experience.
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1. Introduction

In Conversation Analysis (CA), the study of affectivity and emotion in social interaction has developed from a sideshow to a main field of interest in recent years (see e.g. Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Peräkylä and Sorjonen, 2012). Taking up the latest research on affect and emotion in interaction, I will investigate displays of empathy in German everyday interaction. My aim is to show how empathy displays evolve in interaction over time. Empathy here refers to displays of understanding of the other person's emotional situation. The main questions of the paper are: Which multimodal resources do participants deploy to display empathy in response to affect-laden tellings of personal experiences? How are these resources sequentially organized? First, I will outline how to approach the phenomenon *affectivity* from a conversation analytic perspective (section 2). Second, I will provide an account of how *understanding*, *affiliation*, and *empathy* are conceptualized in the CA literature, and I will argue that (a) displays of empathy inherently involve the participants' orientation to an asymmetry in their experiential rights and/or emotive involvement, something which is not constitutive of (the much broader field of) affiliative actions; and that (b) empathy is not merely an analytic category but something which participants make relevant themselves and display in responses to affect-laden tellings of personal experiences, and which they may even be able to address meta-communicatively in the sense of an ethno-category (section 3). I will then move to the main part of the paper, which is a detailed analysis of a lengthy telling about the loss of beloved family members (section 4). Such a chronological analysis allows us to account for the sequential orderliness of different types of empathic responses in the course of a telling of personal experiences, ranging from kinetic resources such as raised eyebrows to substantial verbal resources such as second stories. In the first discussion (section 5), I will argue for a preference structure of empathic responses from 'immediate and fleeting' kinetic practices to 'late and substantial' verbal

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practices. I will then show further examples from other recordings in order to provide evidence for this overall sequential orderliness of responses (section 6). This is to demonstrate that the phenomenon does not always occur as systematic as in the lengthy piece shown in detail, but that it is a recurrent phenomenon which can be observed on a smaller scale in many instances of tellings of personal experiences in everyday interaction (cf. Jefferson, 1988). Furthermore, in a second discussion part, I will argue why it may be beneficial to make use of the notions *apprehension* and *comprehension* to account for the different types of resources involved, ranging from affect-laden to cognition-oriented (section 7). The paper finishes with a summary of the phenomena observed and an outlook on possible future research (section 8).

2. Methodological approach and data

In line with the methodology of Conversation Analysis (cf. e.g. Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2010) and Interactional Linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2001; Barth-Weingarten, 2008), a number of studies on affectivity in social interaction have evolved, on the one hand in everyday conversation (cf. e.g. Selting, 1994, 2010, 2012; Christmann and Günthner, 1996; Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000; Günthner, 2000; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006; Local and Walker, 2008; Couper-Kuhlen, 2009, 2012a,b; Sugita, 2012), and on the other hand in institutionalized talk-in-interaction (cf. e.g. Heath, 1988; Sandlund, 2004; Ruusuvuori, 2005, 2007; Gülich and Couper-Kuhlen, 2007; Peräkylä, 2008; Reber, 2009; Voutilainen et al., 2010). For an insightful compilation of recent studies on emotion in interaction, see Peräkylä and Sorjonen (2012), for a summary, see Ruusuvuori (2013). These studies have in common a social constructionist approach to affect, which will be adopted in this paper as well:

> CA *can* make a specific contribution to the study of affect and emotion if we adopt the following as axiomatic:
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> - Affect and emotion are performed as displays [. . .] in interaction.
> - These displays are realized as embodied practices.
> - The practices are situated at specific sequential positions within interaction.
> - The practices are interpreted in a context-sensitive fashion.

<div align="right">(Couper-Kuhlen, 2009:96)</div>

In this paper, I investigate stretches of talk in which one participant reports personal experiences and displays affectivity related to these experiences, and in which the other participant's display of understanding this affect display is made relevant and locally constructed. When affectivity is made publicly available – either by contextualizing talk as affect-laden or by talking about an emotional situation or feeling (cf. e.g. Fiehler, 1990:96ff; Reber, 2009:194) – it becomes interpretable for the co-participants and thus analyzable for the researcher. This study goes in line with Peräkylä (2012), who provides a detailed account of the relevance of interactional studies for the field of emotion research, assuming that emotions are "socially constructed phenomena occurring in the sequential time of human social interaction, involving expressions that are responsive to the expressions of cointeractants and designed for these cointeractants to perceive and to respond to" (Peräkylä, 2012:288).

The main data used for the present paper consist of 9 h of video-recorded mundane talk-in-interaction among friends, mainly German university students. The recordings were made with three cameras and a high quality audio recorder in the homes of the interlocutors. For these recordings, labelled LoE_VG_X, the participants did not receive any instructions as to which topics should be discussed.[1] Furthermore, three recordings were made in which the participants were asked to talk about 'happy moments' and 'moments of loss' in their lives.[2] These recordings are labelled AGmT_X. As this paper is part of a larger project on the display of empathy in social interaction, 10 h of audio-recordings of phone-in radio shows are also part of the corpus. However, apart from the discussion on empathy as a participant's category in section 2, where I

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[2] The idea to make recordings with such instructions is borrowed from Voutilainen et al. (submitted). Still, it requires some reflection. These data, in which the participants are supposed to talk about specific topics, need to be treated with caution. By talking about the topics imposed, the participants show their orientation to the recording situation and thus they are 'doing everyday interaction for the camera'. However, by comparing these data to the data from the recordings without instructions, and also to recordings from other interaction contexts such as phone-in radio shows, it becomes obvious that the resources used by participants in response to affect displays (facial expression, sound objects, follow-up questions, utterances with mental verbs, formulations, second stories/analogies) do occur in various settings. Thus, it can be inferred that they are not specifically produced for the camera in these instructed settings. What might be specific for these settings, however, is the frequency of the use of these resources, as more stories involving affect displays are produced than in non-instructed settings. I would like to thank Christian Meyer for pointing this methodological issue out to me. For a reflection on utterances with mental verbs in everyday interaction and radio phone-ins, and the context-specificity of second stories for everyday interaction, see Kupetz, 2013.