Language, Empathy and (Inter)Subjectivity

Samir Khalaily
Al-Qasemi College of Education and Zefat Academic College
Samir@qsm.ac.il; samirkh@zefat.ac.il

18th conference of the Israeli Association for the Study of Language and Society
Tel-Aviv University, 24.06.2019
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

Talk Objective

This talk argues that the concept of MOTHER constitutes a fundamental component in the human conceptualization of love, empathy, and the divine. Some linguistic evidence from Palestinian Arabic and Hebrew are presented to substantiate the claim that the predicate mother (or feminine) is a necessary element in individuating the mental space of these concepts. Further evidence will be adduced for the lexicalization of the interdependence of the SELF-(significant) OTHER relation. The talk concludes by drawing some theoretical implications related to the proper treatment of proper names, the first-person perspective, and Buber’s ethical philosophy and its relevance to education.
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

• Palestinian Arabic (PA) and Hebrew manifesting empathy expressions

(1) Love/Empathy expressed in PA vocative constructions

a. yamma taʕal-i kul-i
   VOC-mother IMPER-come-2FS IMPER-eat-2FS
   ‘Mother, come (to) eat!’

b. yamma taʕal kul
   VOC-mother IMPER-come-3FS IMPER-eat-2FS
   ‘Mother, come (to) eat!’
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

(2) Love/Empathy expressed in Hebrew vocative construction

a.  

\[ \text{maami} \quad \text{bo} \quad \text{le}^-\text{xol} \]

mother-VOC IMPER-come-2MS to-eat

‘Mother, come (to) eat!’

b.  

\[ \text{maami} \quad \text{bo} \quad \text{le}^-\text{xol} \]

mother-VOC IMPER-come-2MS to-eat

‘Mother, come (to) eat!’
(3) **Null hypothesis**

The human mind uses the concept MOTHER as a true/authentic expression of empathy, love, and intimacy.

(3) seems to make it possible that natural languages such as PA and Hebrew encode total identification with the male addressee in expressing a positive affective attitude towards him as a significant other.
(4) Feminine dimunitivization of masculine proper names in PA

(a) kamaal 'akal t-tuffaaḥa

Kamal eat-PST-3MS the-apple

‘Kamal ate the apple.’

(b) kammul-a 'akl-at t-tuffaaḥa

Kamal-Dim-F eat-PST-3FS the-apple

‘Kamal ate the apple.’

Grammatical feminization of masculine proper names through dimunitivization in PA shows that the attribute feminine is a basic ingredient in conceptualizing the positive affective/loving attitude towards the (masculine) other.
(5) **Love/Empathy expression via first proper name**

An individual $x$ enters a love relation or has a love attitude towards an individual $y$ if and only if the former is (emotionally)able to address or call the latter with his or her first proper name.

The idea in (5) embodies the insight that in a romantic love relation, a person feels he or she is born anew, i.e. the new affective state of mind and heart discloses a new world of meaning and new perception of the SELF. We maintain that humans have a unique relation to their first name. This is due to the fact that the very act of name-giving to the born child by the parents symbolizes a valuable gift/meaning to him or her. It is given as an act of parents' love.
We in fact possess our names (just as we as children possess our mothers!) and it is not unreasonable to give one's precious thing (i.e. one's name) to the one he or she loves. Thus, when a mature person is ready to give his/her first name to another (mature) person by addressing or calling another person by that name, he or she conceives the world and his or her identity from that affective attitude. The rebirth of each individual in the love relation makes each receive the other’ name.
(6) Relation of negative affective attitudes and proper names

a. *issa ba-mḥa Ḍism-ak*
   
   Now PRES-erase-1S name-CL-2MS
   
   ‘I now erase your name.’

b. *issa ba-nass-ik Ḍism-ak*
   
   Now PRES-make-forget-you-CL-2MS name-your-CL-2MS
   
   ‘I now make you forget your name.’

The intimate relation of people to their name is so fundamental to the extent that the ontological distinction between the name and its reference is obliterated, as exemplified in (6).
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

(7) Lexicalization of the interdependence of the Self-Other relation:
grammaticalized use of the PA nominal *maḥsuubak* ‘your considered’

a. *ʔana* zur-*it* landan
   I-NOM visit-PST-1S London
   ‘I visited London.’

b. *maḥsuub-ak* zaar landan
   considered-2MS-you-gen visit-PST-3MS London
   ‘I visited London.’

c. *maḥsuub-t-ak* zaar-*at* landan
   considered-2FS-you-gen visit-PST-3FS London
   ‘I visited London.’
Salient characteristics of *maḥsuubak*:

a. The semantic import in using the *lexical* version of the first person pronoun for self-reference expression is the empowerment of the value of the speaker’s ego. The ego of the addressee is *reinforced* by implication. The felicity condition of its use necessitates the *equal* ranking-status between the speaker and the addressee; therefore, its salient use is often between friends or close colleagues.

b. When it occupies a nominative position, the finite verb has the third person singular form.
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

c. It inflects for gender, in contrast to the functional status of the first person pronoun ’ana ‘I’.

d. It is impossible to attach the genitive third person singular clitic –u ‘his’ or –(h)a ‘her’ to the lexical noun maḥsuub to refer to the speaker of the utterance (8a,b): maḥsuub-u and maḥsuub-ha are ill-formed expressions in PA. Nor is it possible to have maḥsuub-i ‘my considered’ as a lexical version of the second person singular pronoun ’inti ‘you’.
(9) Affective interpersonal attitude by the second person clitic on propositional attitude verbs in PA

a. ṭana bafakkir-lak innu rašiiid mriiḏ
   I think-to you that Rashid sick

b. ṭana baʕrif-lak innu rašiiid mriiḏ
   I know-to you that Rashid sick

c.* ṭana baʕrif-lu innu rašiiid mriiḏ
   I know-to him that Rashid sick
We consider the presence of the second person singular clitic –*lak* in (9a, b) to encode the recognition of the addressee and the intimacy relation between the speaker and the addressee. Moreover, the speaker intends to convey the thought that the addressee may benefit from the acquaintance with the object of the attitude entertained by the speaker. The ungrammaticality of (9c) is due to the fact that the attached clitic –*lu* on the finite verb is a genitive third person singular.
Language, Empathy, and (Inter)Subjectivity

(10) Use of reflexives expressing an empathizing attitude in PA

a. ḥuṭṭ ʕal-ik kabbuut
   IMPER-put-2MS on-2MS jacket
   ‘Put a jacket on you!’

b. ḥuṭṭ ʕa(la) ḥaal-ak kabbuut
   IMPER-put-2MS on self-2MS jacket
   ‘Put a jacket on yourself!’

Had a Palestinian mother uttered (10b) instead of (10a) in addressing her son, she would have expressed an affectionate or empathizing attitude towards her son, the addressee.
(11) **Divinity related to the concept MOTHER in Arabic and Hebrew**

The nominal attribute ʾar-rahma:n and ʾar-rahim are derived from the ethical concept raḥmi ‘mercy or compassion’ and the latter is derived from the nominal root raḥim ‘womb’, which is inherently feminine. We hypothesize that the proper name ʾalla ‘الله’ is in fact a feminine noun that underwent conversion into a masculine by the advent of the Islamic religion. There is a set of data in PA that suggest that the concept of MOTHER carries a divinity meaning. First, native speakers of PA may utter the complex noun yammaa ʿOh mother!’ or yaa alla ʿOh God!’ in extreme situations of fear with non-distinct meaning.
Second, they may also utter the complex noun *yammaa yaa allaa* in exclamative sentences with non-distinct meaning:

a.  
* yaa 
* alla 
* ma 
* aḥlaa-ha

VOC  
God,  
what-EXCL  
pretty-COMP-prett-CL-her-3FS

‘Oh God, How pretty she is!’

b.  
* yammaa 
* ma 
* aḥlaa-ha

VOC-mother  
what-EXCL  
pretty-COMP-prett-CL-her-3FS

‘Oh Mother, How pretty she is!’

Third, native speakers of PA may utter the complex nominal *yammaa* ‘Oh, mother!’ or *yaa alla* ‘Oh, God!’ in ecstatic mode of experience with non-distinct meaning. Finally, native speakers of PA may use expressions of mother’s genital and the name of the divine being in curses/swears in extreme situations of anger and frustration with non-distinct meaning.
Concluding remarks related to education

• Rogers’ (1983) humanistic approach to education includes empathic understanding as the element that establishes a climate for self-initiated experiential learning. When the teacher has the ability to understand the student’s reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then the likelihood of significant learning is increased. Students feel deeply appreciative when they are understood— not evaluated, nor judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher’s.
The very act or attitude of the teacher towards his or her students expressed by the PA expression mʕalmi/mʕalimti ‘my teacher’ manifests the authentic mode of caring, trust, and prizing of the student by his or her teacher. It seems to us that conceiving of humans as autonomous whole persons that deserve a positive affective/empathizing attitude is a very fundamental condition to regulate human relations on respect and trust. The PA (and Hebrew) facts invite the perspective in which human relations can best be regulated on the basis of OTHER-mothering, rather than that of OTHER-brothering, as conceived in the mental lexicon of the French revolution or religious ethics such as in Islam in the (ideal) theory of humanistic ethics.
References


References