The perception of empathy

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Abstract. In the present article, we aim to identify, analyse and correlate the variables underlying the perception of empathy based on the evaluations made by the role play participants of their own interactions. The subjects, whose L1 was either Catalan or English, held a conversation dealing with a trouble that aimed to elicit an empathic response. Each participant assessed the effects that those dyad dialogues had on them by completing a questionnaire in which different elements were included depending on whether they were the empathy receiver or the empath provider. Although partially grounded on conversational aspects, the analysis of the items favours a more psychology-oriented approach since they involve subjective cognitive and emotional factors. The results show the positive effects of empathy-related verbal strategies on the empathy receiver and the central importance of understanding and appraisal in the construction of empathy. The results also point to the mutual influence of interactional participants on each other. By identifying the significant correlations established between the variables considered, we hope to contribute to the understanding of the impact of empathic conversations on the participants.

Keywords: empathy; English; Catalan; intercultural pragmatics.

1. Introduction

In our everyday interactions a variety of communicative resources are put to work, enabling us not only to convey a given message but also to express our mood and emotions. Capturing the latter is important but even more so when it is necessary to respond in an empathic way, i.e. taking the other person's cognitive and emotional status into account. Closely linked with emotions, empathy is an important ability and part of our emotional and social intelligence (Neubauer & Freudenthaler, 2005; Bar-On, 2006; Mayer et al., 2008; Joseph & Newman, 2010; Mayer et al., 2016). By acting and responding empathically we convey the idea that we understand the other person's thoughts and feelings—helping us to improve our social performance in most of our everyday interactions (Redmond, 1985; Preckel et al., 2018)—and at the same time we establish or reinforce our social bonds (Gallese, 2003; Galinsky et al., 2005). However, what we consider to be empathic may not be considered as such by others, opening up a gap between what is displayed and what is perceived. The current article addresses this specific aspect of the speech act of empathy-giving: the participants' perceptions of their interactions with another person.

Based on the answers to a questionnaire given by the participants in a series of role-played conversations on the interaction they had just had, their immediate impressions were collected and the effects of the conversation on each of them were assessed. By analysing how these different effects interrelate with themselves and also with the number of empathy-related strategies per conversation, we can bridge the gap between the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of empathy and better figure out some of the elements empathy seems to rely on. Thus, the findings in this article mainly build on empathy-related psychological and interactional concepts, two of which are found to be key: understanding and appraisal.

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The current paper presents part of a wider comparative study on the verbal expression of empathy in Catalan and English, which mainly deals with interactional dimensions such as the verbal strategies that native speakers of these two languages use when responding to the telling of a trouble (Sanahuges & Curell, 2020) and the sequential organization of these interactions. What is considered in this paper is the effect of these interactions on the participants, so the focus shifts towards a more psychology-oriented perspective. We aim to connect the expression and perception of empathy by analysing the impact of a given conversation on the interactional participants. By rating different aspects such as changes in mood or appraisal, it is the participants themselves who determine the relevance of these empathy-related effects, deeming the conversation more or less satisfactory. The aim of the article, then, is to study what happens in each language separately and then draw a comparison between the two.

2. Literature review

Although ordinarily empathy is understood as imagining oneself in somebody else's shoes, one of the main drawbacks when studying it is that there is no general consensus on what it actually is (Hall & Schwatz, 2019). Often used as an umbrella term under which diverse definitions coexist, empathy can be examined from multiple perspectives. For instance, Batson (2009) provides eight different definitions of the concept—(a) cognitive empathy or empathic accuracy, i.e. grasping the other person's internal state, (b) mimicry or imitation, i.e. adopting the other person's movements, posture or neural responses, (c) affective empathy or emotional contagion, i.e. feeling what the other person feels, (d) aesthetic empathy, i.e. projecting into the other person's situation, (e) perspective taking, i.e. imagining how the other person is feeling and thinking, (f) imagine-self or projective empathy, i.e. imagining how one would feel and think in the other person's place, (g) empathic or personal distress, i.e. feeling distressed when seeing the other person's distress, and (h) empathic concern or sympathy, i.e. feeling for the other person who is in need. In a review article, Cuff et al. (2016) found over forty definitions of empathy in the literature. In spite of this diversity, which illustrates the complexity of the concept, there are two traits of empathy that achieve a strong consensus: its cognitive and emotional aspects. The cognitive aspect refers to the ability to understand another person's feelings and thoughts whereas the emotional aspect—also known as affective empathy—refers to sharing another person's feelings. Eklund & Meranius (2021), by reviewing the different conceptualizations of the construct in 52 articles, identified the various themes and sub-themes that emerged in those conceptualizations and found those on which there seemed to exist a high degree of agreement: understanding, sharing, feeling and self-other differentiation. In other words, for empathy to occur, the empathiser must understand, feel and share the feelings of the other person while maintaining their individuality, their differentiation from the other person.

The notion of understanding is key in the empathic process and closely related to perspective-taking. Only by taking the other person's perspective are we able to understand them and express empathy by responding effectively (Israelashvili et al., 2019). The sharing and feeling components are particularly disputed and sometimes left out of the conceptualisation of empathy. For example, Wondra (2017) reduces empathy to its manifestation: only when care is expressed and the other person's feelings are understood and validated can we talk about empathy, regardless of any underlying cognitive and emotional processes. For him, empathy is just one possible outcome of an appraisal process and it occurs when both parts—the empathy receiver (ER) and the empathy provider (EP)— assess the same stimulus in the same way. His is one more contribution in the long line of psychological appraisal theories of emotion (e.g. Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1991, 2001; Smith & Kirby, 2001; Ellsworth, 2013), based on the idea that our emotions arise from our interpretations and evaluations of a given stimulus (e.g. a given event or object).

Appraisal is a process that aims to prevent or diminish any potential harmful effects or to maintain any beneficial effect associated with the stimulus. Our emotional state is shaped by the activation of appraisal detectors that determine our stance and emotional response. Thus, reappraising the stimulus is one of the mechanisms of social support and an emotion-regulation strategy. By helping the other person to reconsider the effects of that stimulus, its relevance can be challenged as well as the potential initial distress it may have created (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Webb et al. 2012; Troy et al., 2018; Megías-Robles et al., 2019; Salimzadeh et al., 2020).

The fourth theme—self-other differentiation—is also a basic element of empathy that works at different levels: sensory, cognitive and affective (Simantov et al., 2021). Without this differentiation, we would experience the other person's emotions, which is more likely to result in emotional contagion and lead to personal distress than to empathic concern (Decety, 2005; Atkins, 2013; Batson, 2018). Recognising the emotional state of the other person does not inevitably involve the recreation of the original feeling in the empathiser but it can facilitate its comprehension based on the latter's experiences (Breyer, 2020).

Traditionally, the study of empathy was mainly undertaken within fields like psychology or, later on, neuroscience, since empathy was seen as an innate capacity and the focus was on the internal mechanisms that operate when feeling what others feel. From an interactional perspective, the study of empathy—understood as the display of support and understanding for the other person's internal state—was born later, at the end of the 20th century

and the beginning of this century, principally through and thanks to conversation analysis (CA). The focus then shifted from an internal component to external, observable practices emerging in interaction. How empathy and empathy-related features (e.g. prosody, gestures) are interactionally expressed has been systematically analysed by authors such as Freese & Maynard (1998), Ruusuvuori (2005, 2007), Hepburn & Potter (2007), Heritage (2011), Kupetz (2014), Sanahuges & Curell (2020). Gradually, research on empathy has included more and different perspectives and is now embedded in the broad area of affectivism (Dukes, 2021), a multidisciplinary approach to the study of affective phenomena and related behaviour. By joining behavioural and cognitive areas that have usually been kept dissociated, affectivism offers a broader and deeper understanding of affective processes and brings their study to the fore.

3. Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the study this paper is based on aims to better understand the speech act of empathy-giving in two different languages: Catalan and British English. Through different data-gathering instruments, each collecting and measuring a given aspect of empathy, we aimed to construct a comprehensive picture of the speech act of empathy-giving.

The participants were 52 first-year students of physiotherapy at a Catalan and a British university whose L1 was Catalan and English respectively. There were 26 Catalan subjects (13 males and 13 females), with a mean age of 19.38 years (SD 2.15) and 26 British subjects (10 males and 16 females), with an average age of 22.30 years (SD 4.64). Blinded to the study objectives, the subjects took part in four tasks: they filled the Interpersonal Reactivity Index questionnaire (Davis 1980, 1983), participated in open role plays, filled in a post-role play questionnaire and participated in focus group interviews. In this article, the focus is on the questionnaires.

The role plays involved situations in which the teller explained troubles that affected them, with no responsibility for the listener, related to personal, academic or professional issues, and all could be expected to elicit empathy in the listener. There were 13 pairs in each language group, and all of them participated in 4 situations—except a Catalan pair that role-played only in 2 due to time constraints— which yielded a total of 102 conversations (50 in Catalan and 52 in English).

In order to assess how the conversations in the role plays were considered by the participants and whether they had had any kind of impact on them, two short questionnaires were specifically designed for the study, taking the main factors that empathy seems to be related to (e.g. the feeling that one is understood and not judged) into account. Thus, the questionnaires aimed to gather information on how empathy was perceived by the subjects and were filled in right after the role plays in order to get their first and fresh impression of the conversation. There were two questionnaires, one for the ER and another one for the EP (see the Appendix), each containing 5 items that had to be rated with a 7-point Likert scale. The questions for ERs were related to their level of satisfaction with the conversation, changes in their mood or perspective on the situation and whether they felt understood or judged by the other person. The one for EPs collected information also about their level of satisfaction with the conversation, the level of responsibility they considered that their partner had for the situation, whether they thought they had helped the other person, and their level of identification with and concern for the other person. Each conversation required two questionnaires—one for the ER and one for the EP—giving a total of 100 questionnaires in Catalan and 104 in English.

4. Results

Pearson's correlation was run to determine whether the different variables are intercorrelated. The results are displayed in Table 1 (Catalan) and Table 2 (English) where the first column shows the relation of the total number of strategies per conversation with all the parameters analysed in the post-role play questionnaires and the other columns include the intercorrelation of variables. Significant correlations are highlighted in green ($p<0.01$) and yellow ($p<0.05$).

Table 1. Pearson's correlations among post-role play variables in the Catalan group.

CATALAN	Number strategies	Level satisfaction ER	Mood ER	Perspective of situation ER	Understood by partner ER	Judged by partner ER	Level satisfaction EP	Responsi-bility EP	Help cope better EP	Identifica with par EP
Level satisfaction ER	0.374**									
Mood ER	0.052	0.451**								
Perspective of situation ER	-0.055	0.301*	0.674**							
Understood by partner ER	0.048	0.422**	0.413**	0.531**						
Judged by partner ER	0.045	0.036	0.054	0.072	-0.169					
Level satisfaction EP	0.098	0.449**	0.178	0.278	0.389**	-0.108				
Responsi-bility EP	-0.143	0.026	-0.083	0.134	0.227	-0.237	0.268			
Help cope better EP	0.265	0.347*	0.173	0.353*	0.338*	-0.071	0.482**	0.213		
Identification with partner EP	0.099	0.175	-0.104	0.063	0.295*	-0.135	0.168	0.234	0.132	
Level of concern EP	0.425**	0.382**	0.042	0.153	0.206	-0.129	0.254	0.129	0.403**	0.287

** =$p<0.01$ * =$p<0.05$

In Catalan, the number of strategies used in each situation has a significant positive correlation with two of the variables—ER's level of satisfaction and EP's level of concern. In other words, the more strategies were used, the higher the ER's satisfaction and the EP's concern for their interlocutor. The rest of variables, when intercorrelated yielded 35.5% of statistically significant results, i.e. 16 correlations—10 $p<0.01$ and 6 $p<0.05$—out of 45, all positive. There are also 8 negative correlations, none statistically significant.

As regards the ER, the two variables that show the most correlations are, both with 6, their level of satisfaction with the conversation—ER's mood, perspective of the situation and feeling understood by partner; EP's level of satisfaction, help partner cope better and level of concern—and feeling understood by partner—ER's level of satisfaction, mood and perspective of the situation; EP's level of satisfaction, help partner cope better and identification with partner. In both cases, 3 variables are related to the ER and 3 to the EP. These results would suggest that the ER's level of satisfaction and feeling understood by their partner are not only related to how the ER feels about the whole interaction (changes in mood and perspective) but also to aspects related to the EP (their level of satisfaction, concern and identification with their partner, and how much they feel they have helped their interlocutor). The two variables that follow are changes in their perspective on the situation—with a total of 4: ER's feeling understood by partner, level of satisfaction and mood; EP's help cope better—and changes in their mood—with 3: ER's perspective of situation, level of satisfaction and understood by partner. With these two, the correlations are mostly related to the ER. Feeling judged by the partner does not show any statistically significant correlation.

Regarding the EP, on the whole there are fewer statistically significant correlations. Whether they thought they had helped the other person shows 4—EP's level of satisfaction; ER's level of satisfaction, perspective of situation and understood by partner—three of which related to the ER, indicating a relatively high degree of agreement between ER and EP on their perception of the conversation. Next come two variables with 3 each: level of satisfaction—EP's help cope better; ER's level of satisfaction and understood by partner—and their level of concern for the ER—EP's help cope better and identification with partner; ER's level of satisfaction—distributed evenly between ER and EP. Finally, their level of identification with the ER has 2 correlations —EP's level of concern and understood by partner—and no significant correlation with the level of responsibility they considered that the ER had for the situation.

Table 2. Peon's correlations among post-role play variables in the English group.

ENGLISH	Number strategies	Level satisfaction ER	Mood ER	Perspective of situation ER	Understood by partner ER	Judged by partner ER	Level satisfaction EP	Responsibility EP	Help cope better EP	Identification with partner EP
Level satisfaction ER	0.107									
Mood ER	0.328*	0.539**								
Perspective of situation ER	0.284*	0.676**	0.492**							
Understood by partner ER	0.153	0.732**	0.335*	0.622**						
Judged by partner ER	-0.268	0.584**	-0.511**	-0.506**	-0.689**					
Level satisfaction EP	0.189	0.401**	0.396**	0.471**	0.312*	-0.258				
Responsibility EP	-0.107	0.240	0.166	0.176	0.171	-0.033	0.257			
Help cope better EP	-0.001	0.270	0.213	0.404**	0.414**	-0.264	0.462**	0.288*		
Identification with partner EP	-0.194	0.257	0.079	0.294*	0.173	-0.147	0.250	0.120	0.111	
Level of concern EP	0.121	0.384**	0.120	0.341*	0.435**	-0.369**	0.217	0.074	0.059	0.284*

** $=p<0.01$ * $=p<0.05$

In English, the number of strategies used in each situation shows a statistically significant positive correlation with the ER's change in mood and in their perspective on the situation, but not with their level of satisfaction with the conversation. That is, the more strategies were used, the more the ER's mood and perspective on the situation were changed, but it did not affect their overall satisfaction with the conversation. When the other variables were inter-related, 53.3% turned out to be statistically significant, that is, 24 out of the 45, 20 positive and 4 negative.

As for the ER, changes in their perspective of the situation shows 8 correlations, 7 positive—ER's mood, level of satisfaction, feeling understood by partner; EP's level of satisfaction, help cope better, identification with partner and level of concern and 1 negative—ER's feeling judged by partner. Next come two variables with 7 correlations each, their level of satisfaction with the conversation (all positive)—ER's mood, perspective of the situation, feeling understood by partner and feeling judged by partner; EP's level of satisfaction, level of responsibility and level of concern—and feeling understood by partner, with 6 positive correlations—ER's level of satisfaction, mood and perspective of the situation; EP's level of satisfaction, help cope better and level of concern—and 1 negative—ER's feeling judged by partner. The statistically significant correlations of these three variables are split almost equally between variables related to the ER (level of satisfaction, mood, perspective, feeling understood, and feeling judged) and to the EP (level of satisfaction, help cope better, responsibility, concern, and identification). Next we find two variables, with 5 correlations each. Feeling judged by partner shows 5 correlations, 4 negative—ER's mood, perspective of the situation and understood by partner; EP's level of concern—and, surprisingly, 1 positive— ER's level of satisfaction. Changes in mood also shows 5 correlations, 4 positive—ER's level of satisfaction, perspective of the situation and understood by partner; EP's level of satisfaction—and 1 negative—ER's feeling judged by partner.

In general, there are fewer statistically significant correlations with EP variables, and, interestingly, they tend to be with ER variables. Level of satisfaction and level of concern each show 5 correlations, all positive in the former and 4 positive and 1 negative in the latter: level of satisfaction— EP's help cope better; ER's level of satisfaction, mood, perspective of situation and feeling understood by partner—and level of concern—positive: EP's identification with partner; ER's level of satisfaction, perspective of situation and feeling understood by partner; negative: ER's feeling judged by partner. Next come help cope better, with 4, all positive—EP's responsibility; ER's level of satisfaction, perspective of situation and feeling understood by partner—responsibility, 2 positive—EP's help cope better; ER's level of satisfaction—and identification with partner, also 2 positive—EP's level of concern; ER's perspective of situation.

For the sake of comparison, Table 3 displays the 10 highest and most significant correlations in English and Catalan, only 4 of which are found in the two groups, albeit in different positions: perspective of situation ER + mood

ER, perspective of situation ER + feeling understood by partner ER, level of satisfaction ER + mood ER and level of satisfaction ER and feeling understood by partner ER. As can be seen, all of them involve 2 ER variables, and are a combination of level of satisfaction, changes in the perspective of the situation, changes in mood and feeling understood by the partner.

Table 3. Most significant correlations of post-role play variables and number of strategies per language groups.

	CATALAN	ENGLISH
1	Perspective of situation ER + Mood ER (0.674**)	Level satisfaction ER + Feeling understood by partner ER (0.732**)
2	Perspective of situation ER + Feeling understood by partner ER (0.531**)	Feeling understood by partner ER + Feeling judged by partner ER (-0.689**)
3	Help partner cope better EP + Level of satisfaction EP (0.482**)	Level satisfaction ER + Perspective of situation ER (0.676**)
4	Level satisfaction ER + Mood ER (0.451**)	Perspective of situation ER + Feeling understood by partner ER (0.622**)
5	Level satisfaction ER + Level satisfaction EP (0.449**)	Level satisfaction ER + Feeling judged by partner ER (0.584**)
6	Level of concern EP + Number of strategies (0.425**)	Level satisfaction ER + Mood ER (0.539**)
7	Level satisfaction ER + Feeling understood by partner ER (0.422**)	Feeling judged by partner ER + Mood ER (-0.511**)
8	Feeling understood by partner ER + Mood ER (0.413**)	Feeling judged by partner ER + Perspective of situation ER (-0.506**)
9	Help partner cope better EP + Level of concern EP (0.403**)	Perspective of situation ER + Mood ER (0.492**)
10	Level satisfaction EP + Feeling understood by partner ER (0.389**)	Level satisfaction EP + Perspective of situation ER (0.471**)

There are 55 correlations per language in total. Analysing each of them in detail would require more than an article so the discussion section coming next deals only with those variables that are directly connected with purely interactional aspects—i.e. number of strategies— and those that are relevant for the sake of comparison between languages or relevant per se because they are connected with how the conversations had an impact on the ER, who is the recipient of the empathic messages in the interactions.

5. Discussion

According to the results of the post-role play questionnaires, in both languages the number of verbal strategies used in the conversations has a positive effect on the ER. Although the items that are significant in the two languages are different—ER's level of satisfaction in Catalan and ER's mood and perspective of the situation in English—they are all related to a sense of positivity. Therefore, it seems that the more strategies are used, the more satisfied the ER is. In both languages, the ER's level of satisfaction is also connected with the items that are clearly linked with understanding (feeling understood by the partner) and appraisal (changes in one's perspective of the situation), the latter closely connected with mood, confirming the importance of these elements in the perception of empathy. Reappraisal is key when judging whether an interaction is supportive or not. Burleson (2008) studied what makes certain messages supportive in terms of reappraisal and classified them based on what he termed person centeredness, which he defined as "the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualise the distressed other's feelings and perspective (Burleson, 1994)" (Burleson, 2008, p. 208). It is those messages that have an impact on the ER's cognitive state, i.e. those leading to reappraisal, that are the most effective. According to the author's dual-process theory (Burleson, 2009, 2010) there are three elements that influence the ER's judgment of these messages: the content, the context and the amount of scrutiny the message is subjected to. In short, reappraisal is essential in order to consider a message or, for that matter a conversation, supportive. Consequently, reappraisal seems to be a clear indicator of effective interactions.

The EP-related variables that are significantly correlated with the ER's level of satisfaction and shared by the two language groups are the EP's level of concern and satisfaction. The former stresses the importance of imagining oneself in the other person's situation and suggests that the more one can identify oneself with their partner (which involves seeing things from the perspective of the other person), the better one can understand their emotional state

and share it. The latter emphasises the interrelation between the ER and the EP when jointly constructing empathic interactions (Heritage, 2011; Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Kupetz, 2014). This is clearly manifest in the Catalan group. Figure 1 below shows a possible pattern emerging when connecting three significant correlations, which may explain, at least in part, how the ER's level of satisfaction is achieved. Considering that all the situations are troubles, the logical and expected emotional state associated with them is negative. The ER's negative stance is transferred to the EP—here understanding and identification with the ER is crucial—and converted into worry or concern, which triggers the use of interactional, communicative resources and eventually impacts on the ER's level of satisfaction.

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┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│  EP's level of concern│ ⇒    │  Number of strategies │ ⇒    │ER's level of satisfaction│
└──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
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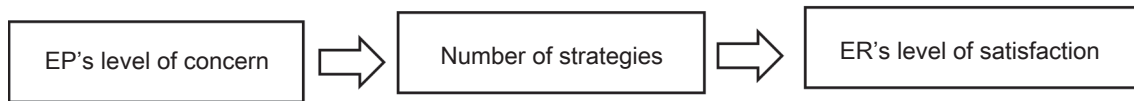
Figure 1. Possible causal pattern operating in the Catalan group.

As Wondra (2017) claims, empathising means showing care and support. If this empathy is purely cognitive or emotional and is not communicated, then it cannot be considered empathy. Vreeke & Van der Mark (2003) state that for somebody to be considered empathic, there must be a reactive emotion that leads to pro-social action. Therefore, empathy is not only restricted to what we feel, it must be made visible with some kind of reaction. The pattern proposed here would agree with this theory, providing the reactive emotion (concern) and the pro-social action (communicative strategies to convey support and empathy). The third step (satisfaction) would confirm that the action is regarded as effective by the other person.

The English group shows a different pattern. No significant correlation is found that can account for the first part of this process, i.e. why a certain amount of strategies is employed, but a significant correlation is found that can explain its effects, as Figure 2 below illustrates.

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                                              ┌──────────────────────┐
                                         ⇒    │      ER's mood       │
┌──────────────────────┐                      └──────────────────────┘
│  Number of strategies │
└──────────────────────┘                      ┌──────────────────────┐
                                         ⇒    │  ER's perspective    │
                                              │    of situation      │
                                              └──────────────────────┘
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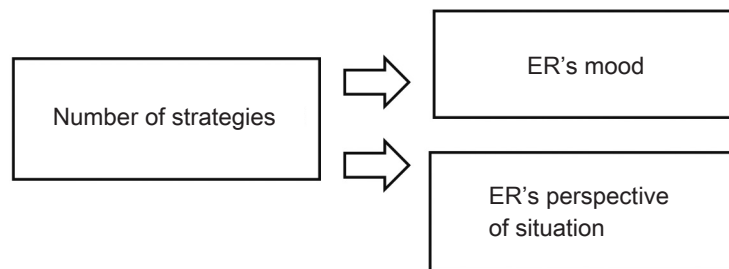
Figure 2. Possible causal pattern operating in the English group.

In spite of the fact that the effects on the ER are different from that obtained in the Catalan group, they still point to a favorable outcome. The higher the number of strategies employed is, the more the ER's mood and perspective of the situation (reappraisal) improve. For this "ideal" number of strategies to occur, the interaction must be sufficiently long for enough strategies to be included and for the topic to be developed. In both languages, then, it seems that when more strategies are incorporated, thus making the interactions more elaborated, the ERs end up feeling pleased with the effects those interactions have had on them. In her study on the organization of troubles-talk, Jefferson (1988) confirms that some elaboration typically occurs when a problem is presented. This entails different empathic strategies to be used, which contributes to make this positive impact on the ER, supporting the idea that empathy is co-constructed throughout the whole interaction, rather than simply expressed using a specific strategy.

In both languages, the EP's level of satisfaction is not only connected with the level of satisfaction of the ER but it is also clearly linked with their perception of having helped the other to cope better with the situation—pointing to the attainment of the EP's goal: the provision of support and empathy—and with the ER's feeling of being understood—again highlighting the conversational participants' mutual influence.

There is a correlation that behaves quite differently in the two languages: feeling judged by partner. Whereas in Catalan this does not correlate significantly with any other variable, in English it does correlate negatively with four—ER's mood, perspective of situation and understood by partner; EP's level of concern—but positively with one—ER's level of satisfaction—which is hard to justify. From a theoretical point of view, judging others should be, at least temporarily, suspended in order to be able to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Feeling judged is something that, rather than helping to develop empathy, tends to prevent or hinder it (Epley et al., 2002; Hoffman, 2014). Therefore, the resulting negative correlations were expected: if you feel judged, you are likely to feel less understood, your perspective of the situation will not improve, and neither will your mood. In addition, if judging the other person is often related to their level of responsibility for the trouble, there is evidence suggesting that there

are higher levels of sympathy and empathy when the level of responsibility is low (Hoffman, 2008; Chambers & Davis, 2012; Atkins, 2013). Although all the situations described in the role plays were quite general and did not place any responsibility on anyone, on a few occasions the ER took full or partial responsibility for it. Generally speaking, though, in the vast majority of situations, the ER did not claim any responsibility for the trouble at hand, which would make this correlation even more incongruent. Further research would be necessary that could account for this significant correlation in English.

Many other questions remain open, such as why the EP's level of satisfaction does not correlate significantly with the ER's change(s) in mood or perspective of the situation in Catalan, whether the EP is satisfied because they perceive the ER's feeling of being understood or the other way around or how this is perceived, leading to further questions about their interrelation, regulation and significance in the construction of empathy. These and other questions arise when analyzing the data, which, in the context of this study, remain unanswered. What these correlations definitely indicate is the complex and interrelated relationship of multiple parameters that participate in the construction of empathic interactions.

6. Conclusion

The starting point of this article is the conception of empathy as the demonstration of support and understanding for the interlocutor's internal state. More specifically, it has examined the participants'—both ER and EP—perceptions of their interactions with another person. The data used were gathered by means of a 7-point Likert scale questionnaire, right after the subjects took part in a role play where an emphatic response to a trouble telling could be expected, and was actually delivered. The aspects studied were the ER's level of satisfaction with the conversation, changes in their mood or perspective of the situation and whether or not they felt understood by the other person; and the EP's level of satisfaction with the conversation, how responsible they thought their partner was for the situation, whether or not they thought they had helped the other person, together with their level of identification with and concern for their interlocutor.

The interrelations of each variable (all involving clearly empathy-related psychological aspects, especially understanding and appraisal) with the number of strategies used in each situation (interactional feature) and of the variables among themselves were drawn. In Catalan, the number of strategies shows a statistically significant correlation with the ER's level of satisfaction with the conversation and the EP's level of concern: the more concerned the EPs are, the more strategies they use; and the more strategies are used, the more satisfied the ER is. In English, there is a statistically significant correlation between the number of strategies used by the EP and the ER's improvement on their mood and perspective of the situation (appraisal). In both languages, when the EPs' contributions to the conversations are elaborated, and hence more strategies are used, the ERs feel content with the interactions.

As for the interrelations among variables, they clearly show that empathy is constructed together by the two participants in the conversation and that they are mutually influenced. The ER's level of satisfaction with the conversation is connected to that of the EP, which is an indication that the interlocutors share their assessment of the "success" of the conversation. It is also related to the EP's perception of having helped the other cope with the situation and with their own feeling of being understood, again evidencing a convergence between the two participants.

In English there is a rather surprising finding: feeling judged by partner (ER) correlates positively with the ER's level of satisfaction, although it shows a negative correlation with four variables, as is to be expected. We find it hard to explain how feeling judged, a rather negative attitude, can make the ER satisfied with the conversation. In fact, many other questions are left unaddressed in the two languages, for example, why the EP's level of satisfaction does not correlate significantly with the ER's change in mood or perspective of the situation in Catalan but does in English. These questions probably need a purely psychological approach that could account for their (lack of) interrelation.

The results presented in this article are drawn from a rather small set of subjects, all students of a certain age, which clearly does not allow for the generalisation to British English or Catalan speakers in general. Using the same instruments, which allow the gathering of very interesting data, with other speakers (same languages, different age groups or same age groups different languages) would provide valuable and more general information on how empathy is produced verbally and perceived.

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Appendix. Questionnaires

Questions for participant A (empathy receiver)

Please, choose the option that best describes your answer to the questions below connected with the conversation you have just had.

After talking to your friend,

how satisfactory has the conversation been?

very satisfactory	quite satisfactory	satisfactory	can't say	unsatisfactory	quite unsatisfactory	very unsatisfactory
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

has your mood?:

improved a lot	improved	improved a little	stayed the same	got a bit worse	got worse	got a lot worse
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

has your perspective towards the troubling situation?:

improved a lot	improved	improved a little	stayed the same	got a bit worse	got worse	got a lot worse
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

have you felt understood by your friend?:

yes, very much	yes, quite	yes, a little	can't say	not always	not much	not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

do you feel your friend was judgmental about you?:

yes, very much	yes, quite	yes, a little	can't say	not always	not much	not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Questions for participant B (empathy provider)

Please, choose the option that best describes your answer to the questions below connected with the conversation you have just had.

After talking to your friend,

how satisfactory has the conversation been?

very satisfactory	quite satisfactory	satisfactory	can't say	unsatisfactory	quite unsatisfactory	very unsatisfactory
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

what is the level of responsibility of your friend for the situation?

not at all responsible	cant' say	responsible	quite responsible	very responsible
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

do you think you have helped your friend cope better with the situation?

yes, very much	yes, quite	yes, a little	can't say	no	not much	not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

did you identify yourself with your friend in that situation?

yes, very much	yes, quite	yes, a little	can't say	no	not much	not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

were you concerned about your friend?

yes, very much	yes, quite	yes, a little	can't say	no	not much	not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐