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**The Rhetorical Mimic: Using Empathy to Persuade**

We believe that we are in control of our own identities, our own reactions, and our own beliefs. We explicitly make choices based on personal preference (even if influenced by the outside powers of advertising) that shape who we are. However, recent research in the neurosciences has shown that we are less able to control our feelings because a natural force of mirroring others binds us to one another. In neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni’s book *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*, he calls the tendency of humans to mimic what others are doing “reciprocal imitation” (49). For Iacoboni, “reciprocal imitation” is the basis for understanding human empathy. For rhetoricians, this idea of “imitation” sounds a bit familiar—flattery-as-imitation has been discussed and used by the likes of Plutarch (“How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend”) and the Sophists, for good and for ill. Mimicry, too, is familiar territory. The challenge, however, is the fine line between imitation and empathy, and this is the relationship that I want to discuss here. Although imitation has been a verbal rhetorical “technique” (in both spoken and written dialogue) studied for some time now, as a discipline we are prime for a turn to understanding the role of involuntary bodily reactions. For the purposes of this paper, I will explain the concept of “mirror neurons” and their link to human empathy. To take it one step further, I want to question the role of these mirror neurons and their impact on rhetorical empathy. This new understanding of our bodily impulses perhaps challenges the historical notion of rhetorical flattery.  Ancient rhetoricians, like Plutarch, cautioned individuals to be on the look out for too much flattery, as it might indicate weak persuasion. In this presentation, I will suggest that recent psychological and neurological research on empathy has opened new spaces for individuals to involuntarily identify with the similarities in others. Additionally, I will suggest that rhetoricians must ensure that they are responsibly persuading their audiences, especially if, as mirror neurons suggests, we are prone to passing on our persuasive techniques even subconsciously.

Before you continue reading, I want you to try an experiment. Turn to a person near you and give ‘em a great big grin. Watch what your neighbor does when you flash your pearly whites. He probably smiled back, didn't he? So why does your neighbor smile back? Is he happy? Well, maybe. It is more likely that he is acting as a ‘mirror’ for you—he is simply mimicking the action on someone else's (your) face.  Researchers have discovered that the cause of this reaction is due to specific brain cells called ‘mirror neurons’. I’ll emphasize what I find rather interesting about these cells, especially from a rhetorical perspective in just a bit, but first I want to explain the back story of these mirror neurons. A research team from the University of Parma in Italy discovered these mirror neurons in the late 80s, and since their discovery mirror neurons have been linked to everything from our responses to violent video games all the way to explanations for autism (Iacobani 8). Vittorio Gallese, the main researcher on that Italian research team, described the function of mirror neurons in the following way, “What mirror neurons tell us is that these mentalizing processes are not the only juicy bit. The very motor processes through which we react to other people’s actions are where the most exciting process of all appears to occur: your actions become my actions. I feel what you do. Somehow understanding the actions of others does not always require mentalizing. Mirror neurons in your premotor cortex, in this very pragmatic area, appear to give us an intuitive understanding of the actions of other people” (*Emphatic Brain*, Loc. 206).

For rhetoric, I want to suggest that these mirror neurons might hold the key to our inability to resist some types of persuasion while at the same time involuntarily causing the likelihood that we will relate to someone trying to persuade us. So unlike imitation and flattery, we are unable to “resist” the others’ actions because our brain automatically wants to perform the same task. But what do these mirror neurons actually do? Science writer Jonah Lehrer explains that these cells are responsible for the synaptic responses in our brains when we see somebody doing something (*Brain Games*). We literally “mirror” the other person’s action. For example, as I grasp this bottle of water, the part of your brain that is responsible for motor actions actually lights up as if you, too, are grasping this bottle of water. It is through repeated visual stimulus that our brains pick up and improve upon certain tasks. Similar to dreaming about an action when you’re sleeping, the brain simulates the activity and helps you learn new skills by forging those new pathways in the brain. As a side note, Lehrer noted in the National Geographic television special that by simply watching Tiger Woods play golf, you can actually improve your golf game because your brain’s motor sensors are reflecting and simulating the same action they are seeing (*Brain Games*).

But here's where I want to draw that fine line here between straight up imitation and the involuntary reactions of mirror neurons. The difference lies in the way our brains interpret and react to the mirror neurons. With the former, imitation is a conscious effort. We see someone doing something and we try to mimic those actions, that kind of fashion, and often that writing style. This is why we see small children copying each other when given two sets of the same toys—if one child opens an umbrella, the other will likely follow along and open the second umbrella. With imitation, we are actually performing an activity with the purpose of trying to do that action in the same likeness of the original. With the latter, our mirror neurons light up in response to an action (like, grasping the water bottle) but we don’t actually need to perform it. Remember that smile experiment we did a few minutes ago? Try that again when you leave here—the responses that you get are not only imitation, but they are also the result of those mirror neurons giving us the capacity to empathize. We smile because we understand what happiness feels like, not necessarily because we are or want to be happy. This experiment works even if we don’t smile back—we are literally smiling on the inside because our brain is “pretending to do the action it was observing” (Emphatic Brain, Loc. 176). As another way of saying it (and perfect for any fans of the movie *Clueless*), neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has called mirror neurons “the ultimate as-if devices” (Loc 1654)

Marco Iacobani has argued that mirror neurons are responsible for ability to empathize with others. The ability to empathize harkens back to the response of the mirror neurons—we don’t actually have to perform the same emotional response, but our brains ‘light up’ as though we are experiencing it. I want you to keep in mind how often -- and involuntarily -- this process occurs. Mirror neurons jump into action any time you empathize with anyone:  we have compassion because we understand other humans through our emotions. For instance, think back to a time when you became stressed out from working too much. Sure, it is great to have someone pat you on the back and counsel you that you'll get through a rough patch, but sometimes it is more helpful for a friend to simply say "Oh, that's terrible!"

So what is it that makes the “oh, that sucks” response so much more appealing? The answer seems to lie in ‘mirror neurons.’ It’s this human ability to understand others – to empathize – that allows us to see someone else’s perspective by sharing feelings. Advertisers bank on empathy all the time.  Think of the last time you started to feel a bit weepy when you saw a commercial showing an emotional connection between a parent and a child.  I’ll be the first to say that when there’s an advertisement that draws on the relationship between a father and daughter, a tear comes to my eye because I remember the sentimental moments of childhood. That's empathy--having an understanding from a similar experience. Such reflexes – when it feels like someone ‘gets’ *exactly* how you felt – are when the mirror neurons are working their magic. Mirror neurons help us connect to one another because they let us ‘see ourselves’ in those moments.

Now, for some of the more challenging stuff: How can those involuntary reactions from the mirror neurons be applied to rhetoric? Do they make us more prone to persuasion because we respond to the idea of something without actually thinking it through? That smiling at a baby experiment works the same way with speech, except that speakers must try to step back and consider how the audience will be thinking. In the recent text *Rhetorical Style,* Jeanne Fahnestock has rightly pointed out that even “Aristotle’s high estimation of language suggests motion receives an odd endorsement from the discovery of ‘mirror neurons,’ [because] presumably the same stimulation effect is produced by words referencing motion” for instance Aristotle’s notion of *energeia* (340). I do, however, want to take this idea one step further and suggest that not only do mirror neurons respond to ideas about motion, but as Iacobani has pointed out mirror neurons hold the key for the human capacity to empathize, and empathy helps us persuade and be swayed.

Therefore, we must be cautious of our mirror cells kicking in whenever we are prone to persuasion (which is, of course, all the time). We might respond in a very specific way because our mirror neurons are working in the background “pretending to do the action it was observing” (Keysers). In the book *The Emphatic Brain*, Christian Keysers suggests that “our conscious thoughts interact with our emphatic intuitions to help us make decisions, and to help us learn from the experiences of others instead of being dependent on our own trials and errors” (Loc 3198). In other words, we learn how to respond to situations by what Keysers calls “sharing circuits”—we become “’infected’ by the emotions of other individuals” (Loc 3280). The idea that we are in control of our own thoughts and ability to be persuaded (or not) is actually somewhat complicated because our brains are already subconsciously “pretending to do the action it was observing” even before we consciously recognize that we are in a persuasive situation. Keysers calls this moment of conscious recognition “a two-stage process: First we mirror their states, then we introspect. We no longer think directly about other people but about their reflection on the mirror of our own states” (Keysers, Loc 3241).

So what does this do for rhetoric? Iacoboni suggests that mirror cells break down the action between perception and action—our reactions are automatic instead of carefully reasoned responses. This slightly dismantles the idea that persuasion could result in an uncertain response. When the one doing the persuasion is projecting a certain appeal, then the audience has less ability to control their reaction. The perception of the persuasive situation is also the action—they are invariably tied together if we link it back to mirror neurons. In much the same way, Iacoboni suggests that when comparing monologue and conversation, conversation should be more difficult than monologue because we’re calling on several cognitive operations at once, such as speaking and listening. However, the fact that conversations are easier than monologues is likely because mirror neurons are at play—our audience is acting and perceiving simultaneously. With monologues, we are not entangled in a constant feedback loop of those mirrored perceptions. Further, Iacoboni argues that, “mirror neurons in our brains produce automatic imitative influences of which we are often unaware and that limit our autonomy by means of powerful social influences” (209). The notion that we think that we are responding independently of the persuasive situation is slightly negated because of these highly ‘infectious’ mirroring situations.

There is much to be said still about mirror neurons, empathy, and rhetoric, but I know that we (as a field) will continue to pursue really interesting work that crosses these disciplinary boundaries not just philosophically, but also by blending scientific research with our own interests in how language functions.

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