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MODELS: MIMESIS, NARRATIVE, AND PEER CO-OPERATION IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Abstract
Humans are not solipsistic beings and yet the role of mimesis has only recently been the object of increased scholarly discussion across disciplines. René Girard posited mimesis, human desire that is collective and not individualistic, as the foundation for expressions of human behavior and culture, especially the process of learning. Whereas Girard chose to predominantly concentrate on the negative consequences of imitation, positive mimesis can be particularly beneficial in promoting cohesion, creativity, and empathy in interpersonal relationships, such as in an educational setting or among teammates in sports. Personal narratives, experiences, and social context factor into the choice of exemplars for L2 learners as well as influence their system of motivations which promotes emulation. Moreover, collective imitation which favors non-exclusive ownership of ideas likewise contributes to a sense of community and non-competition as in the practice of co-operative peer learning or near peer role modeling (NPRM) in the language classroom. In contrast to a purely ipseistic approach, *individual commitment to a group effort* increases equitability and overall satisfaction within educational communities in the pursuit of collective goals.

Key words: mimesis, narrative, cooperation, classroom

Imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery -
it's the sincerest form of learning.
George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

Introduced by the late French-American anthropologist, René Girard, the theory of mimetism has reevaluated a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature and culture, with a host of transdisciplinary implications, spanning psychology to anthropology, through to literary criticism and linguistics. The scientific study of imitation has gained considerable scholarly ground since the discovery of mirror neurons by a team of Italian researchers in the 1990's, validating many of the girardian hypotheses with regards to imitatory behavioral patterns and interdividual psychology. Though Girard chose to primarily focus on the nefarious outcomes of concurrent desires, the creative potential here cannot be underestimated, insofar as cognitive development and learning depend, to an immense degree, on the duplication of an exemplar's behaviors.[1] Creativity as a consequence of imitation can be observed in the language classroom and elsewhere, where students mimic verbal and non-verbal communication, thereby facilitating the learning process in a natural way, in addition to fostering the building of collaborative relationships. Nidesh Lawtoo writes: "As any teacher or student knows from direct experience, education relies heavily not only on repetition and representations of objects but also on memorization, imitation, and last but not least, identification with influential models or subjects. It is in fact a good mimesis with selective models or subjects that often guarantees a successful education in selective disciplines or objects of inquiry" (2022, 17). Research in cognitive development, education theory, and social psychology readily supports these claims in both infants and adults. It would therefore be no exaggeration to claim that models serve as positive motivation for L2 learners who frequently measure success in comparing themselves with native speakers, celebrities, colleagues, and their peers, besides tracking progress according to the various language achievement scales or on popular learning applications which encourage healthy competition. It is to these selective mediator-models that one not only looks for inspiration, but also from whom one might elicit critical feedback, all in the hopes of becoming, in some small manner, more like them.

[1] Girard's comments regarding the positive applications of mimesis are scattered, often summary. Yet during the course of one interview, he mentions that all mimetic desire is intrinsically good, in that it assumes an extreme "opening out of oneself" (Adams & Girard 1993, p. 24). The possibility of delineating cultural from acquisitive mimesis is discussed in a later work, though Girard suggests instead that it has a double-bind structure. Mimesis "isn't necessarily acquisitive, in the sense of being conflictual, but also cultural," noting that rivalry may develop around cultural objects as well (Girard et al. 2017, 57).

1. Mimesis and Modeling

"In the science of man and culture today there is a unilateral swerve away from anything that could be called mimicry, imitation, or mimesis. And yet there is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behaviour that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation" (Girard, 1987, 7). According to mimetic theory, human beings are not solipsistic since all sociality and cultural intercourse are founded on this intersubjective principle. Girard's revolutionary thesis contends that expressions of human behavior are mimetic or imitated according to the desires of a model. Physical objects, social or financial status, a spouse, or even the superior abilities that the Other possesses grow in prestige from the perspective of the Self. Naturally, in cases of acquisitive mimesis, the reciprocally-desirous models may then transform into obstacles, owing to the fact that the object refuses to be or cannot be shared, leading in turn to mimetic rivalry. If left unchecked, the rivalry risks spiraling into a negative dynamic between "monstrous doubles," whose imitation brings each too dangerously close for comfort. This now-classic triangulation model of desire becomes Girard's starting point for subsequent claims relating to interpersonal conflict, collective violence, and scapegoating. What is imperative here, however, is the exact nature of the relationship between the subject and the model in either an internal or external mediation. Whereas the former can be characterized by a closer, more intimate proximity which increases the potential for conflict (such is the case with sibling discord), the latter involves a distance, whether geographical, spiritual, or social which precludes a convergence of the mediator and subject (Girard, 1965).

To further qualify Girard's theoretical distinctions, Paisley Livingston offers a systematic presentation of mimetism, with an emphasis on the psychological aspects of imitation. He highlights one category of desires which are mimetic or *emulative*, but not necessarily competitive upheld by a tutelary belief: "the model is the person *I would like to be* implying that I am not now such a person, my proof being that I lack some or all of the attributes listed. The tutelary belief involves the agent's awareness that the model possesses - at least for the moment - a hierarchical difference in relation to the agent" (1992, 44). It is clear from the above definition that the choice of model depends on tutelary beliefs, demonstrated by a host of motivating factors which differ with each personal history. Learning an additional foreign language may result in an increase in salary at work, the opportunity for internal advancement, the ability to communicate with locals while abroad, increased respect from family or friends, etc., all of which M has either received or done or may be planning to do in the future. Nevertheless, this does not automatically entail a rivalry with M, rather, it may prompt S to adopt the same learning methods, apply to the same language course, or travel more readily in order to increase language competency. The mediator therefore becomes someone

whose desirable traits such as aptitude (x) or determination (y) are highly valued and later reproduced, because they will bring about a positive outcome, thus dispensing with the necessity of trial and error. Livingston rightly notes that this type of utilitarian modeling can also be found in Albert Bandura's seminal work on Social Learning Theory (SLT), where the conscious end goal remains in focus: "Equipped with a set of preferences and incentives, this agent observes the consequences of others' actions and then copies those actions that result in outcomes that he or she deems rewarding"[2] (1992, 41). L2 learners, especially autodidacts, frequently turn to online tutorials or web pages run by experts for advice regarding materials and strategies for gaining fluency in the target language. These can undoubtedly guide learners who are daunted by the overwhelmingly rich array of didactic resources available, while also inspiring and encouraging them to persevere in their endeavors without a rivalrous dynamic ever surfacing.

Only in the past few decades have psychological mimesis and observational or vicarious learning by imitation received increased scholarly attention, having been discounted for decades by linguists, philosophers, and language practitioners due in part to the emphasis on the autonomy of the social being. No one wishes to be "unoriginal," that is, someone else's imitator. Imitation in second language acquisition theory is frequently viewed as simply a primitive skill requiring little thought and understanding (Speidel & Nelson, 1989). Jean Piaget (1951), the influential developmental psychologist, considered imitation in children to be a laudable achievement, suggesting a cognitive sophistication that develops in gradual stages. Decades later, researchers such as Andrew Meltzoff have focused on early social cognition in infants. In proposing the "Like-Me" framework, he argues that infants can see themselves in the person of the caregiver; it is this recognition which marks the beginning of social cognition (2005). In a previous ground-breaking study, newborns (12-21 days-old) were observed to successfully imitate the facial acts and other gestures of adults (protrusions of the lips and tongue, opening of the mouth, the opening and closing of hands). He elucidates that imitation precedes the use of language by humans, teaches, while not having to be itself learned (Meltzoff, 2011).

Outside the field of child developmental psychology, mimicry plays a crucial role in interdividual relations. Meltzoff likewise sheds further light on the bridge between mimesis and the empirical results of clinical tests: "Being caught up in others'

[2] Cf. Bandura, Albert. 1977. *Social Learning Theory*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall. Nonetheless, it is worth noting, as Livingston does, that the two theories do in fact differ. Whereas Bandura posits a conscious and motivated subject imitating a model (who themselves develop *self-efficacy*) in order to achieve success, mimetic desire is less behaviorist theory-heavy and to an extent, less instrumental with regards to the subject's aims: "In Girard's view, the orientation toward the other is primary, and even the goal of self-efficacy is ultimately understood as a particular stance taken in relation others" (Livingston, 1992, 41). Furthermore, the subject may not have a clearly defined desire despite the certainty that the mediator does, in some way, occupy a position of superiority, thus warranting imitation.

movements and imitating what they are doing is an essential part of human sociality. [...] The duplication of the action patterns and gestures is part of the fabric of human communication; the imitation of customs, habits, rituals, practices, preferences, social norms, and values is essential to maintaining human culture itself" (2011, 57). In social psychology, experts on the functioning of imitative behavior have also contributed greatly to an understanding of the interpersonal benefits in humans. Tanya L. Charthard and John A. Bargh (1999) introduced the term Chameleon Effect which designates the unintentional imitation of those with whom one comes into contact. The authors found that mimicking the interlocutor's facial expressions, postures, and mannerisms in social settings, also increased the potential for bonding, while mimicry (observation of the modeled behavior and its subsequent reproduction) is often used by those with higher levels of empathy. Indeed, Speidel and Nelson (1989) emphasize the centrality of observation and imitation in the process of communication, by definition, *making common*, through verbal interchanges and the sharing of knowledge. Moreover, beyond the language structures learned from repeated conversation, it is likewise apparent that children acquire sociocultural, emotive, and environmental awareness integral to a multidimensional approach to language acquisition.

2. Mimetic Models for the Language Classroom

The preponderance of research on modeling and language acquisition has unsurprisingly focused on the early stages of childhood language development. Models chosen by older students in a language learning environment can hardly be the same ones a child has near at hand, nor can the emulation be expected to achieve some ill-defined purpose. A diversified set of social factors comes into play commensurate with the L2 learners' growing inventory of *available designs* (to borrow a term from multiliteracies) - social, linguistic, and cultural resources which they bring to the educational process. A noteworthy study conducted by Christine Muir et al. (2019) investigates the identities and characteristics of specifically English language role models, the extent of their influence in the motivational process, in addition to the potential for a role model archetype. The following questions were posed by the research team: How common is having a language learning role model? Who exactly are the participants' role models? And what characteristics do participants value in their English language role models?

The survey engaged 8,472 English language learners and teachers from all over the globe (80% under the age of 40), with a majority of participants at a self-declared level of upper-intermediate proficiency. The questionnaire was divided into three sections, the first two of which are outlined below. Participants were initially asked if they had an English language role model, defined as "someone that you respect and that you want to become more like." If so, follow-up questions were solicited as to whether the models were real/fictional,

native English speakers, younger/older, and in the same/different profession. Participants likewise had an opportunity to identify, by name, the model(s). In the second section, those surveyed were asked to rate a set of characteristics related to English language learner priorities, such as fluency, accent, etc. Of the responses in the first section, 68.1% declared having a language role model, whereas most of the models (59.6%) were male and native English speakers (64.2%) with a preference for the British variety of English. Additionally, slightly over half of the models (55%) were famous, that is, not personally known to the participants, with identified models ranging from Barack Obama, Emma Watson, Adele, to Queen Elizabeth II. These responses reflect the most common role model archetype for students and teachers alike - male and female native speaker celebrities (Table 1). Conversely, among the personally known models, teachers/professors (58.6%) and friends/classmates (18.6%) achieved the highest score (Table 2). Lastly, the study concluded that participants evaluated their models within four broad dimensions: overall command of English, paralinguistic features, personal attributes, and accent/variety of English.

Table 1: Top five ategories of famous role models (Muir et al., 2019).

Famous role model categories	*N*	Percentage of famous role models	Percentage of all role models
All famous role models	4,590	100.0	55.0
Film/TV industry	1,170	25.3	13.9
Politics	728	15.9	8.7
Author/poet	493	10.7	5.9
Singer/musician	448	9.8	5.4
YouTuber/vlogger (ELT related)	263	5.7	3.2

Table 2: Top five categories of personally known models (Muir et al., 2019).

Personally known role model categories	*N*	Percentage of personally known role models	Percentage of all role models
All known role models	3,156	100.0	37.8
Teacher/professor	1,848	58.6	22.1
Friend/classmate	588	18.6	7.0
Family member	275	8.7	3.3
Boss/colleague	252	8.0	3.0
Partner/spouse (current or ex)	99	3.1	1.2

Regarding the pedagogical implications of the study, the authors note the importance for teachers to build or nurture the links between learners and their models, otherwise, “if learners have a L2 role model but rarely meet/imagine them, their

existence is likely to have little relevance" (2019, 18). Thus, both internal and external mediator-models have the potential of positively impacting the learning process in more ways than one, such as by creating or refining the ideal L2 self - the person one aspires to become when speaking the L2 (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

In order to engage these and other theories of modeling, Brian Warnick (2008) proposes an intriguing study on the intersection of imitation and education, moving beyond the traditional dyad of imitator-model. He instead examines the social nature of exemplarity by connecting perceptions and the impulse of imitation within a novel framework known as the Narrative Sense of Self, which serves as a sort of "road map" based on the subject's previous experience, social structures, and conventions. Imitative action requires both the existence of a deserving model as well as the idea of the observed action relative to the Narrative Sense of Self (Warnick, 2008). This of course would presuppose existing narratives already rich in positive modeling and content in addition to an open playing field for creativity, notwithstanding the fact that certain learners may lack such varied experiences. The better formed these narratives are, the more focused and fruitful the imitation will be. On the other hand, exposure to productive or heroic forms of violence or a glorification of criminality may lead to an equally tantalizing, but negative sort of modeling, assuming the narrative has been so conditioned. Our sense of self dictates what influences we choose to block and those whose content we might seek to emulate, all the while adding to our auto-narrative (Warnick, 2008).

Warnick likens education to a typical rite of passage, moving from one stage to the next, where initiates imitate seasoned members. The actions serve to reinforce community bonds, not unlike players on a sports team who follow the lead of a coach or a fellow athlete. The teacher's prerogative, akin to that of the coach, should be to promote collective imitation, inclusion, and creativity (Warnick, 2008). This leads to one vital component of the imitative cycle, that is, the idea of ownership over the act itself, which must become communal as opposed to something exclusive, fiercely guarded by its originator. Teachers and coaches fulfill that role, whether in the classroom or on the court, by fostering collective ownership of ideas thereby building, what anthropologist Victor Turner would call *communitas* of shared experience, fostering cooperative, non-conflictual imitation. Teachers are likewise encouraged to imitate learners by adopting an egalitarian approach founded on mutual respect and validation. Furthermore, such a strategy would solve the girardian predicament of object scarcity in episodes of appropriative mimesis: "There must be enough of what is imitated to go around. The focus on imitation must allow for multiple students to participate in the activity without taking away the possibility for others to participate on an equal basis. Otherwise, imitation will eventually tear down the community instead of building it up" (Warnick, 2008, 106).

One author has offered an alternative take on mimetism by suggesting that the narratives, e.g., legends, new stories, hearsay, surrounding models and the inspirational quality of the values therein are initially what draws the subject's attention. In this hermeneutical view of mimesis, the story that the model has to "tell" replaces the object, instead becoming the one in which the subject wants to participate (Duyndam, 2014). Exemplars may, but do not have to be, eminent figures from the annals of history or show business. From a subjective standpoint, they can be anyone whose narrative value structure inspires us and through which we become connected to him or her. Speaking the Queen's English serves as a paradigm for some, whereas our next door neighbor or favorite aunt might also be an accomplished polyglot. Stories about the Queen and her family circulate in classrooms around the world, mass media have made listening to speeches straightforward, and works such as *Pygmalion* recount stories of language refinement. Closer to home, a simple chat with the exemplar about participation in a successful study abroad program can stimulate the subject's desire to have a comparably rewarding experience. Corresponding in many ways to Warnick's theoretical discussion, hermeneutical mimesis involves the subject first deliberating over the soundness of the values within the narrative and then applying those in a creative manner. In doing so, the subject becomes an "accomplice," locked in an inclusive relationship with the exemplar, whose authoritative example is then translated either in part or in full depending on the circumstances (Duyndam, 2014). When taken together, both positions avoid the contagious trap of conflictogenic mimesis of the girardian formula, considering that the application and manner of translation remain the prerogative of the subject as a matter of mediated choice.

3. Peer Learning and Modeling

On a pedagogical level, a third way combining the Narrative Sense of Self and hermeneutical mimesis may be found in the words of legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, when he defines the essence of teamwork as *individual commitment to a group effort*. A middle ground emerges between the needs of the individual learner, their respective goals, and relevant social factors in colloquy with those of the model, group, or learning community. Future alumni of tertiary institutions feel the impending necessity to find financially satisfying work which invariably demands at least a communicative cognizance of English. For others, emigration in hopes of better prospects seems a more viable option. Still other L2 learners travel extensively, have friends and family abroad, or simply wish to delight in reading English-language literature as opposed to works in translation. These factors contribute to a personalized and finely-tuned auto-narrative not unlike a football team member who balances an individual agenda (e.g. salary) with the necessity of effective collaboration in the hopes of winning a game.

Given that groups which have like-minded goals should be encouraged to actively engage in co-operative learning, the most favorable approach appears to be a peer learning system in and outside of the classroom. For student mediator-models engaged in learning by teaching, even when supplemental to regular courses facilitated by teachers, a host of mutual advantages come into view, not the least of which is them becoming better students: "Explaining to others is a way to test the review and reformulation of the information that our mind has gathered to transform it into knowledge. Just as children explain the lesson to their parents (in the process of learning and before facing the teacher), we explain our ideas to our partners, friends or colleagues, and often experience the feeling of finishing off, ordering and securing our thinking by this means" (Duran & Topping, 2017, 29). Peer teaching likewise offers a sense of equality in contrast to the traditional hierarchy of teacher-student, while additionally developing, in both tutors and tutees, critical thinking skills and self-knowledge in the process of mentoring. Peers tend to use age-appropriate language when explaining concepts, know the potential frustrations of their fellow classmates, are more direct when responding to doubts, and have themselves only recently mastered the material (Duran & Topping, 2017).

Specifically, near peer role modeling as discussed by Murphey and Arao (2001) incentivizes the process of co-operative learning on the basis of similarity and "nearness," proximally and in terms of frequency of contact. NPRMs often share a social, professional, ethnic, age, and linguistic background. For that reason, they are more psychologically attractive *because* their real-life excellence is more easily attainable: "The strong interpretation says that NPRMing allows students to identify with the models, become inspired, and themselves become more effective learners…NPRMing is not a panacea, but presents students with powerful 'identificatory moments' of possibility" (Murphey & Arao, 2001). In a previous study, Murphey and Murakami (1998) highlight the following practical steps for language teachers to explicitly encourage modeling: 1) Compile a list of the characteristics of good learners you wish other students to emulate; 2) Find (or produce) examples of these characteristics among your students; 3) Give these examples more exposure so that students can see, hear, and read about them (naturally model them).

As in hermeneutical mimesis, strategies or beliefs might serve as inspirational narrative values which can then be translated and applied by learners into their own lives dependent on their own needs. In contrast to a negative mimetic relationship as a consequence of being too much alike, similarity and proximity count as salient factors when and where narrative interest overlaps. Positive narratives replete with practicable solutions taken from the model in turn help construct their own Narrative Sense of Self. By openly acknowledging that the inspiration emerges from elsewhere (the model's narrative), peers enter into non-rivalrous relationships which consequ-

ently allow the modeler to make the narrative their own. Such an approach not only corresponds with the L2 Motivational Self System (the desires and hopes of the learner would like to become), but it also rejects the notion that native speakers are the ideal role models and teachers for L2 learners (Dörnyei, 2005). By spreading the word of the successful narrative values of peer mediator-models, teachers encourage the translation and application stages for others. Lastly, near peer learning strategies contribute to an equitable, less stressful educational environment when considering that learners may be hindered by situational anxiety or feelings of inadequacy if confronted with native speakers of the target language. Muir (2018) reiterates that NPRMs have the possibility to inspire, reassure and encourage, provide essential feedback, while acting as both a model for positive learning habits and L2 competencies, together with the confidence that we might also be able to achieve similar results.

Conclusion

The sharing of inspirational narratives from mediator-models fosters collaboration among groups with similar goals. These narratives should be openly discussed and given adequate exposure in order to avoid the pitfalls of breeding senseless competition. Topping explains: "In a co-operative structure, as one pupil achieves, others automatically achieve also. In a competitive structure, when one achieves, the others automatically *do not* achieve. In an individualistic structure, pupils' goals are unrelated and independent, and when one pupil achieves his or her goal, other students are unaffected, and probably largely indifferent" (1988, 2). To reiterate, this does not exclude the beneficial existence of external mediators (role models personally unknown to learners) whose narrative influence becomes part and parcel of the system of motivations. L2 learners often mention figures from the world of show business or famous YouTubers or colleagues whose command of English evokes admiration and incentivizes imitation. How often has the language teacher heard said in the classroom: *I wish I spoke English like x*? In a classroom environment, more experienced student mediators, tutors, and near peer role models, all fulfill an equally invaluable role in aiding others to attain shared goals, perhaps even following shared narratives, while simultaneously supporting and strengthening their own knowledge base or Narrative Sense of Self. Progress in learning depends on the willingness of the learner to reject the one-sided primacy of the self in favor of the more constructive openness towards co-operation with others, nurturing positive mimetic relationships with exemplars, both near and far, whose narratives continue to inspire and motivate.

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