

# The Covert “See” in Perception of Another Person’s Feeling

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***Abstract:** Translation and understanding are always interwoven with each other. No matter in daily life or academic research, understanding is usually founded on appropriate translations. However, due to the specific grammars or syntaxes of different languages, sometimes we are apt to be “lost in translation”. Particularly, in the field of philosophy, translations may either cover up or manifest the key points of philosophical problems. In this paper I argue that, in both English and Japanese, the verb “see” are covert or hidden by grammars in our formulations of perceptions of another person’s feeling; and actually we are able to “see” the feelings of another person in some sense. Furthermore, in my view, some special but illuminating Japanese expressions may help us to solve the issues involved. I will carry on research in the light of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, especially his “Psychological Philosophy”, which I believe will shed light on the philosophical problems concerned.*

## **1. Preliminary Discussion: Translation and Understanding in Perception**

Translation and understanding are so inseparable that they look like twin sisters or even two sides of a coin. Both of them somehow depend on synonymy. More specifically, the substitution of synonyms is one of the necessary conditions for proper translation between two languages, and to some extent understanding can be expressed by substitution between different ways of expressions. That is why W. V. Quine’s skepticism on radical translation and synonymy has such a great impact on analytical philosophy. And no wonder that translation may cause trouble in ordinary languages or philosophy.

As for me, a special kind of expression in Japanese is worth noting, which can help us as a *prima facie* example to figure out the covert philosophical problems in ordinary languages. It is also a typical instance about the roles of translation and understanding in both linguistic and philosophical fields.

Japanese are always said to be a very introverted and cautious people, and due to this disposition they seem not to be willing to talk about another person's feeling directly. For example, when faced with a lonely person, a Japanese observer is not inclined to say "He is lonely", which directly refers to the person's feeling. On the contrary, he tends to choose the following more reserved formulation:

彼は寂しそうです。(He seems to be lonely. /He looks lonely.)

Instead of using verbs such as "seem" or "look", he adopts such a special syntactic structure to express his *perception*<sup>1</sup> of another person's feeling. The same or homologous formulations are also used in different kinds of contexts. When what is in question is something in the outer world, as the objects could be observed or referred to directly,<sup>2</sup> it will be much easier for us to express and communicate. In Japanese there are several ways to express the subtleness of different attitudes or intentions. For example, when talking about the weather we can say:

雨が降るそうです。(It is said that/I heard that it is going to rain.)

雨が降るようです。(It seems to rain.)

雨が降りそうです。(It is going to rain.)

Please notice that only the last sentence is akin to our representative example "He looks lonely", whereas the two corresponding translated English sentences ("He looks lonely" and "It is going to rain") have distinct forms. Of course there are some culture differences here. British or Americans are said to be much more extrovert and do not shame to express their own ideas directly. In contrast it is hard to find an expression such as "He is lonely" (彼は寂しいです) in Japanese. However, culture difference is not the point for us. What we are going to deal with in this paper is something philosophical rather than linguistic or cultural. Actually what is involved here is the formulation of perception, which is a common topic in philosophy. Although we have different ways of speaking, none of us could transcend limitation of human being, which is reflected in all kinds of human languages. A legitimate formulation has to fit with human nature, logical possibilities and so on. That is why contradictions are excluded in all of the languages. So I advocate that the

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<sup>1</sup> Now I use "perception" in a relative loose sense. Someone may argue that it is a kind of thinking or inference instead of perception. I will clarify this later.

<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, another person's feelings are always hidden from us, which means that they could not be observed directly. See the next section.

significance of the Japanese expressions mentioned above lies in their fitness with the possibilities of our ways of perceptions.

## 2. Dilemma in Perception of Another Person’s Feeling: The Covert “See”

In daily life, when trying to comfort someone or express our concern, there is often a dilemma. For example, when your lover or boyfriend/girlfriend is lonely, you may want to say “I know/understand your feeling” or “I can feel your loneliness”. However, are the expressions really proper or not? Not quite easy to answer. On the one hand, from a philosophical point of view, “I can feel your loneliness” might be misleading, because definitely it is *impossible* for us to feel another person’s feelings *directly*. On the other hand, on your interlocutor’s behalf, “I know/understand your feeling” might not be acceptable either, because the verbs such as “know” or “understand” only convey something *intellectual*, which falls under a category different from *feeling* or *sensation*. Furthermore, only if I regard your feeling as plausible objects I can “know” or “understand” it. In this way, however, your feelings are just cognitive objects, just as physical things or facts existing in external world. Nevertheless, what she or he really needs is much more than your intellectual understanding or knowing, especially when she or he is quite sensitive.

It is reasonable to call this scenario a dilemma, for neither choice could meet our needs: they are either false (from a philosophical point of view) or useless (on the behalf of the interlocutor). So in the case of “I can...your feelings”, do we have some other choice to assign to “...”? In order to solve this problem, we have to look deeply into the heart of things.

Actually, from the perspective of philosophy, the candidate verbs mentioned above could be divided into two groups. The first group consists of verbs referring to sensations or feelings, such as “feel”, while the second one concerning intellectual activities, such as “know” or “understand”. More precisely, for both groups, the appropriate formulation should be paraphrased as “I can feel/know/understand that you are lonely”, whose grammatical object is a clause “you are lonely”, rather than “your loneliness”. Can your feelings (e.g. loneliness) become the object in this kind of formulation, and at the same time are not regarded only as physical objects or events? Considering the subject and object should be connected by a verb, the question turns to be: is there a *proper verb* in this kind of formulation? It is just the heart of the whole story.

What shall we learn from the aforesaid scenes? The answer should be: in the formulation “I can...your feelings”, we need an exactly appropriate verb to assign to “...”, and otherwise we can only say “I can feel/know that you are lonely”. A subject could not feel what another subject feels, but only sympathize with or be affected by him. Then can we find out an acceptable verb to bridge the gulf between two subjects? Or in other words, is it reasonable for us to talk about feelings intersubjectively in terms of a certain kind of verbs?

Luckily we do have another group for choice, which consists of verbs of perception. In effect, if observing our ordinary language carefully, a usual but significant verb will attract our attention, namely “see”.<sup>3</sup> Here I construe “see” as verbs of perception, as well as “hear” or “notice”. However, if we regard perception just as pure sensations or pure observations, it might be illegitimate to say “I see your feeling”. The differences and connections between pure observation and perception will be dealt with later.

Even though it is a legitimate formulation, does it stand for the subject’s activity<sup>4</sup> involved here? After all, in English the verb itself is always covert, whilst only its cognates arise, such as “seem” and “look” (“He looks lonely”). Whereas in Japanese, it even disappears. However, please bear in mind that the grammars of ordinary languages cover the real logical structures of propositions from time to time. Even a word is absent in literal sense, it may still play some significant role logically. For example, a lot of Japanese sentences do not have subjects, but it is not said that there is no subjects in reality. By the same token, even though the speaker has not asserted that he is seeing or perceiving, the concerning activities still exist in reality. In short, we should not ignore the covert word “see”.

However, the still unsolved problem is: can this verb really connect the subject and another person’s feeling? No doubt that we can see “that a person is lonely”, but can we see his or her “loneliness” directly? Or to put it another way: does “I see your loneliness” make any sense? If it does, “see” will become “the chosen one”.

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<sup>3</sup> In the original German text Wittgenstein uses the verb “sehen” and the gerund “Sehen” alternately. So in this paper the uses of verb “see” and gerund “seeing” are also context-dependent and sometimes interchangeable.

<sup>4</sup> I use “activity” in a quite loose sense here, applicable to both physical and mental terms which can be characterized by a verb. So both “seeing” and “thinking” can be called “activity”, regardless of the difference from behaviors such as “raising hands”.

### 3. Different Meanings of “See”: From a Wittgensteinian Point of View

At this point it is time for us to introduce some new philosophy resource to deal with the problems mentioned above. In my view, some of Wittgenstein’s remarks on “Psychological Philosophy” are very powerful reinforcements. “Psychological Philosophy” is not formulated in a single book, but scatters in his manuscripts such as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* and *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. It is a significant branch of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, which is quite different from other two relevant terms: philosophy of mind and psychology. Philosophy of mind is a branch of philosophy, the themes of which include nature of mind, the relationship between mind and body or that between mind and world. Psychology is normally regarded as a branch of science, dealing with scientific problems of our mental occurrences or nervous system by means of experiments and observations. “Psychological Philosophy”, however, specifically refers to a special way of investigating the foundational problems of psychology, by means of, in the light of Wittgenstein’s characteristic method, clarifying the intricate relationships between various psychological concepts. Considering Wittgenstein’s celebrated slogan “meaning is use”,<sup>5</sup> one of the primary missions of “Psychological Philosophy” is to clarify the actual or practical uses of psychological concepts. In this section I am not going to analyze Wittgenstein’s texts in detail, but to follow his methods and solve our problems in a *Wittgensteinian* way.

Go back to the previous question. Does “I see your loneliness” make any sense? It is not easy to answer it without making every key component clear. With our purpose in mind, the use of “see” should be the foremost one, because its meanings and uses determine whether the feeling of another person could become the legitimate object of it.

Then what does “see” mean? Or in other words, what can we see? The second question sounds a little odd, for of course we are able to see countless kinds of things. In everyday life, we can “see” shapes, colors, facial expressions, similarity and so on. Some of them are visual properties of objects, some are not. However, is there any essential difference between the objects that can be seen? Are all the objects of “see” on a par, or fall under the same category? Wittgenstein also tries to answer the bundle of questions in his own way. He says:

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<sup>5</sup> I have not taken it for granted that the slogan is completely right or characterizes Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. In fact some remarks in his drafts directly go against it. But as far as our investigations in this paper, this slogan is acceptable in a certain way.

“I see that the child wants to touch the dog, but doesn’t dare.” How can I see that? — Is this description of what is seen on the same level as a description of moving shapes and colours? Is an interpretation in question? Well, remember that you may also *mimic* a human being who would like to touch something, but doesn’t dare. And what you mimic is after all a piece of behavior. But you will perhaps be able to give a characteristic imitation of this behavior only in a wider context. (RPP I 1066)

But now am I to say that I really “see” the fearfulness in this behavior — or that I really “see” the facial expression? Why not? But that is not to deny the difference between two concepts of what is perceived. A picture of the face might reproduce its features very accurately, but not get the expression right; it might, however, be right as far as the expression goes and not hit the features off well. “Similar expression” takes faces together in a quite different way from “similar anatomy”. (RPP I 1068)

There are both kinships and significant differences between seeing fearfulness and seeing a facial expression. The relations here seem to be perplexing. But at any rate “see fearfulness” does make sense here, and the possibility that “fearfulness” or “loneliness” can be seen lies in the irreducibility of descriptions of the object of see. In other words, fearfulness could not be completely reduced to the features of face, just as expressions could not be reduced to facial features. Furthermore, both expressions and features can be seen, but there must be some indispensable differences between them. In the following remarks Wittgenstein tries to make much more explicit assertions about this:

On the other hand one would like to say: We surely can’t “see” the expression, the shy behavior, *in the same sense* as we see movement, shapes and colours. What is there in this? (Naturally, the question is not to be answered physiologically.) Well, one does say, that one sees both the dog’s movement and its joy. If one shuts one’s eyes one can see neither the one nor the other. But if one says of someone who could accurately reproduce the movement of the dog in some fashion in pictures, that he saw all there was to see, he would not have to recognize the dog’s joy...

But remember the meaning in which we learn to use the word “see”. We certainly say we see this human being, this flower, while our optical picture

— the colours and shapes — is continually altering, and within the widest limits at that. Now that just is how we do use the word “see”... (RPP I 1070)

Just as Wittgenstein’s words, our optical pictures “is continually altering”, without preventing us to see the objects at all. This is such an essential characteristic of usages of “see” that there is no way to find or create a “better” (more appropriate) word to take the place of it. As we have argued, a person who has copied a face exactly may still fail to recognize the facial expression or its similarity with another face, so facial expression, similarity or fearfulness (loneliness) could not be just reduced to properties such as shapes or colors. More specifically, the grammar of “see” determines that these entities could be the objects of it, and accordingly the entities fall under distinct categories. At this point the differences and connections between pure observations and perceptions are involved. If we take it for granted that perception (e.g. see) is no more than sensory or cognitive activity which corresponds to pure visual properties, the distinction between features of a face and expressions of it will disappear. As a result we have to admit that see is not a simple cognitive activity, and could be related to different kinds of objects.

Admittedly a lot of things could be the objects of a perception (see). In Wittgenstein’s words, of course we can see the fearfulness of another person, but not “in the same sense as we see movement, shapes and colours”. In a word, “see” has complicated different meanings; or better to say, it is a “family resemble” concept which has different but akin uses.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein distinguishes two uses of see:

Two uses of the word “see”.

The one: “What do you see there?” — “I see this” (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: “I see a likeness in these two faces” — let the man to whom I tell this be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

What is important is the categorical difference between the two ‘objects’ of sight. (PI II xi 111)

The first meaning of “see” corresponds to description, drawing and copy, and in these cases you can describe the corresponding visual properties. Its second meaning nonetheless does not definitely have a simple visual object, although there

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<sup>6</sup> It is the same for the term “perception” itself, which is akin to both sensation and thinking, but equals to neither of them. This issue will be handled in the next section.

is always a grammatical object such as “likeness” (or better to say “similarity”, the German word is “Ähnlichkeit”). From this it can be learned that, once accepting that “see” has two kinds of uses and two kinds of “objects”, it will also be acceptable to say “I see your loneliness” in the second meaning of this verb. In this way, the covert component in the perception of another person’s feeling has been dug out. Although there is no verb involved in corresponding Japanese expressions, we can still assert that the “loneliness” is “seen” by the Japanese observer. After all, linguistic or translating factors only cover or hide the mental activities of observer, but cannot eliminate them: no matter which type of formulations is chosen, the corresponding mental activities always exist. Our purpose is just to identify what the activities are and how they are covert, rather than why they are covert or why this type is chosen; the latter should be linguists’ job.

#### **4. Why is it “Seeing” rather than “Thinking”?**

However, even though “I see his loneliness” makes sense, it is still not clear that why the covert mental activity involved is not “thinking”. No doubt that the English sentence “I think he is lonely” is valid, and when uttering these words we seem to have made some inferences, which apparently belong to the field of thinking. As for Japanese we can also use patterns such as “...と 思います” to make an assertion. In this case why is the activity in question not a kind of thinking? As has been said before, “I know/understand your feeling” is not good enough to comfort another one. But that is not the point here, for what has to be examined is the relation between seeing and thinking.

According to Wittgenstein’s remarks in the previous section, there seems to be a vague boundary between activities of seeing and thinking, or rather we have to regard seeing as a mixture or fusion with thinking. However, it does not follow that there is no relatively clear boundary. As a matter of fact, seeing and thinking can be distinguished with respect to certain contexts, or in a Wittgensteinian phrase: language games.

In practice, the proposition “I see a red circle” could be proved to be false when the object turns out to be yellow or a square. In this circumstance, it is not that the observer has made a false assertion or judgement. In contrast, it is better to say he has come up with an illusion or misconception. Illusion is not a mistake in the



following sense: I calculate  $2+2$  as 5, in which something wrong arises in the progress of calculation. What is the subtle difference here?

When thinking about another person’s feelings, we come up with a thought or an idea simultaneously, which could be either true or false according to the actual situations. Correspondingly the thought could be restated as: he looks *so and so*, so I guess/ think that he is *such and such*. The point is that “so and so” and “such and such” could not be identical or mere paraphrase, otherwise the pattern will turn to be a tautology or trivial truth. Consequently, one essential characteristics of thinking is that the observer (or better to say “thinker”) makes an inference based on something different (from “so and so” to “such and such”).

However, in “seeing” we could not make such a distinction between two parts of a mental process (say making an inference). More precisely “seeing” does not have two parts at all. It is not that we “see” the shapes or features of a face and then “see” or “grasp” the facial expression or feeling; rather we see the expression immediately. If the observer is asked to describe what has been seen, the proper description is no doubt the one directly referring to the facial expression or feeling. Because as remarked above, description about expression or feeling could not be reduced to the one about shapes, colors and so on. In summary, the structure of “seeing” never consists of two parts. “Seeing” is a unified activity, by no means a step from “so and so” to “such and such”. In this way we can draw the boundary between “seen” and “thinking”.

Now let us reconsider the special Japanese expression at the very beginning. Just as this article’s title, in this formulation the verb “see” is covert, along with the observer’s mental activities. No doubt that an observer could not “see” (in the first sense of it) another person’s feeling directly, but what is in question is not a pure inference either. Strictly speaking, it is inappropriate to say there is only one single type of mental activity involved. When we “see” the feeling of another person, this kind of “seeing” is neither a pure sensation nor inference, but akin to both of them. In most cases we do not need to “infer” the inner state of the observed, as we can see the feeling of him in the second sense of “see”. Although due to some special linguistic factors the verbs are always absent in corresponding Japanese sentences, if we are asked to identify what the involved mental activity is, it is definitely to be “seeing”, just mixed with some “thinking” anyway. At this moment the misleading linguistic or translating factors have been cleaned up.

I am not asserting that the activities in question will never be a kind of thinking. It is better to say the possibilities of talking about another person’s feeling

make up a spectrum. “He is such and such” stands on one end of this spectrum, whereas a deliberate inference such as “he looks so and so, so I guess/ think that he is such and such” stands on the other end. The formulations in all kinds of languages correspond to various positions on the spectrum, which present various dispositions of the language users. The complexity here again reminds us to be cautious about talking about another person’s feeling.

## 5. Further Investigation: The Role of Psychological Adjectives

It has been seen that we can “see” another person’s feeling in a specific sense of this verb. However, there is still something worth noticing. In addition to the verb which characterizes the mental activity involved, the psychological adjective which characterizes the feeling of another person also plays significant role.

Let us reconsider the expression “He looks lonely”. No doubt that sometimes we may make mistakes, or the observed may be simulating or pretending. Simulation is a very special situation, in which the internal relation between feeling (the inner part) and performance (the outer part) seems to be broken up and turns to be an external or contingent one.<sup>7</sup> However, even in this case, the inclination to use the same psychological adjective word reminds unchanged. That is to say, we are still inclined to use “lonely” or “loneliness” to describe what has been seen, and our public criterion on the proper description is constant. The possibility of simulation or making mistake exists in the gulf between what has been seen and what has happened in reality. In this case, it is better to say we come across a quite different kind of language game, which but still depends on the more fundamental games about observing or seeing.

In the typical formulation “I see your loneliness”, besides the verb “see”, “loneliness” or “lonely” also play fundamental roles: they are always the proper concepts to describe what has been seen. If you want to express what you feel (your own experience), you should use this word; by the same token, if you want to describe what you have seen, you should use exactly the same word. In this way the psychological concept (adjective) bridges the gulf between two subjects.

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<sup>7</sup> For Wittgenstein’s distinction between internal/external relations (especially in his later philosophy), see M. ter Hark’s book *Beyond the Inner and the Outer*, p.31, pp. 182–184; and Jakub Mácha’s book *Wittgenstein on Internal and External Relations: Tracing All the Connections*. The latter one is a systematic study on this subject. But it is such a tough work that I would not like to mention it too much in this paper.

What is the role of a concept? This is not a simple question, but in most cases an adult does know how to use concepts, including psychological adjectives or nouns. The role of psychological adjectives or nouns looks like a Janus<sup>8</sup> who has two faces: one looks towards a human being’s inner world (feelings), the other looks towards the outer world (performances or behaviors). However, neither side could itself characterize the entire meanings or usages of such a concept. In the Japanese expression “彼は寂しそうです”, adjective “寂しい” or the corresponding noun “寂しさ” is always the *felicitous* word here, which seems to express something both universal and individual. In any case, criterion is always something public, whereas feelings are private or personal.

However, the two-facedness of psychological words (adjectives) should not be misconstrued as “containing two successive or independent parts”. At times we are tempted to divide its two faces into two separate subsidiaries, one of which belongs to the inner side, the other one belongs to the outer. But can we really separate them? We cannot “separate” different ingredients or components of a kind of alloy unless we have decomposed it. An ingredient is a “part” of this alloy, but we cannot separate it from other ones directly, just as dismantling Lego Bricks. It is the same for Janus: once one of the faces is separated, it will not be Janus any longer. Similarly, if a psychological adjective has only one side, it will cease to make sense. Any attempt to construe this kind of words from only one side is doomed to fail.

Regardless of the culture and linguistic distinctions, the roles of verbs and psychological adjectives are always essential. The investigations above can be summarized as a complicated answer to the following question: “How can we see another person’s feeling?” The answer partially lies in the complicated meaning of “see” (mixed with pure sensation and thinking), partially in the two-facedness of psychological words which are vital in our perception of other ones’ feelings.

## 6. Conclusion and Further Comments

No matter whether in English, Japanese or Chinese, in spite of the countless ways of expressions, we all face such a dilemma: it is impossible for us to feel another person’s feeling directly, but we have to talk about it intersubjectively. Nevertheless, to regard another person’s feeling as an object is not always proper for our aims. Different languages have different ways of utterance, which corresponds to different

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<sup>8</sup> Janus is a two-face god in Roman myth, cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus>.

ways of thinking, or different ways of life. However, such diversity roots deeply in the *possibilities* of perceiving, feeling and thinking. Just as mentioned above, these possibilities form a spectrum, which reflects the various human dispositions. Here we seem to touch the boundary or limitation of human beings. It is possible for us to imagine that there is a much more advanced being who is able to directly “xx” other ones’ feelings, and in their “language” there is an appropriate verb for “xx”, but we will never know what it is like to be such a kind of being.<sup>9</sup>

What we have discussed above should just be regarded as a preliminary works for further investigations. And finally, I would like to make some further comments with regard to the whole paper. Philosophy always deals with the universal items, regardless of the manifold diversity of differentiations. However, when doing philosophy, we have to use different languages, which can limit our ways of talking or thinking.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the linguistic differences seem to be essential to our discussion, and we may be “lost in translations”, or better to say, lost in the linguistic world. However, in my view, they just reveal a variety of aspects of philosophy, instead of different kinds of philosophy. Languages somehow present the limitation of human beings, but adequate communications and careful technical discussions can help us to “see” the answers to philosophical problems clearly through the dense fog of forms of languages.

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<sup>9</sup> I use this expression in a similar way with Thomas Nagel’s paper “What is it like to be a bat?”, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435–450.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in Chinese there is also a very special expression “我覺得”, which is always translated as “I think...” or “...と思います”. However, technically it equals to neither of them. Actually this expression presents an inclination to fuse feeling and thinking together, and hide the attitude of speaker at the same time. It is a pity that we do not have time to investigate it here.

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