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Empathic Response of Slovene Readers to Poetry in Slovene and English

ABSTRACT

Drawing on literary theory, translation studies, and social identity theory, the research investigates whether reading Louise Glück's poem "Adult Grief" in English versus Slovenian elicits different affective reactions. Using a repeated-measures design and a specially developed empathy scale, the study differentiates between compassionate and distressed responses of narrative empathy and examines how they relate to the four dimensions of trait empathy as assessed by the *interpersonal reactivity index*. The findings indicate that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* are key predictors of empathic engagement, with *fantasy* enhancing *perspective taking* and *personal distress*. Notably, language significantly influences empathic responses, especially when interacting with *personal distress*, suggesting that reading in one's native language reduces the self-other differentiation and intensifies emotional experience. However, language exposure also moderates responses, indicating that habitual engagement in a language can enhance emotional resonance regardless of native status. These results underline the complex interplay between language, empathy, and literary affect.

Keywords: empathy, poetry, translation studies, mother tongue, foreign language, self-other differentiation

Slovenski bralci in njihovo empatično odzivanje na poezijo v slovenščini in angleščini

IZVLEČEK

Na podlagi literarne teorije, prevodoslovja in teorije socialne identitete preučujemo, ali branje pesmi Louise Glück »Adult Grief« v izvirniku v primerjavi s slovenskim prevodom sproža drugačne afektivne odzive. Z uporabo ponovljenega merjenja in lestvice za merjenje empatije razlikujemo med sočutnimi in s stisko zaznamovanimi oblikami narativne empatije ter preučujemo njihovo povezanost s štirimi dimenzijami osebnostne empatije, kot jih definira IRI (ang. *interpersonal reactivity index*). Rezultati kažejo, da sta empatična skrb in domišljijočo vživljanje ključna napovednika empatične vključenosti; pri tem domišljijočo vživljanje krepi zmožnost prevzemanja perspektive in osebne prizadetosti. Jezik statistično značilno vpliva na empatične odzive, zlasti v interakciji z osebno prizadetostjo, kar nakazuje, da branje v maternem jeziku pri bralcu zmanjšuje razlikovanje med lastnim odzivom in odzivom lirskega subjekta ter intenzivira čustveno izkušnjo. Na odzive vpliva tudi izpostavljenost jeziku, kar pomeni, da lahko ukvarjanje z jezikom okrepi čustveno resonanco. Izsledki poudarjajo zapleteno prepletenost jezika, empatije in literarnega afekta.

Ključne besede: empatija, poezija, prevodoslovje, materni jezik, tuji jezik, razlikovanje jaz-drugi



1 Introduction: Empathic Experience During Literary Reading

In the present study,¹ we investigated the effects of reading in the native language compared to a foreign language on the empathic experience. Suzanne Keen (2006, 208) defines empathy as a feeling that is triggered when we are personally confronted with the emotional state of another person, or when we listen to or read about such a state. Keen distinguishes between sympathy (compassion for another person's state) and empathy (internalization and adoption of another person's emotions), as well as between narrative emotions (emotions felt towards the characters, the narrated situation or the narrator) and aesthetic emotions (emotions directed exclusively towards the formal aspects of the text). *Narrative empathy* is understood to be based on the experience of narrative emotions. A key element of *narrative empathy* is that the reader identifies with a character while reading, even if the similarity between them is minimal. However, it remains unclear whether identification with the character precedes the experience of empathy or whether empathy arises first and leads to identification (Keen 2006, 214). For this reason, we believe it is important to examine how readers' dispositions, in conjunction with other variables, influence their empathic responses.

Mark Davis (1980) proposed a model of *trait empathy* (empathy as a personality dimension) comprising four interrelated constructs. To operationalize this model, he developed the interpersonal reactivity index (IRI), one of the most commonly used instruments for measuring empathy today. The four subscales of the IRI are *empathic concern* ("a tendency to feel warmth, compassion and concern for others"), *personal distress* ("a tendency to feel self-centred distress in response to the negative experiences of others"), *fantasy* ("a tendency to identify strongly with fictional characters and to put oneself in fictional situations") and *perspective taking* ("a tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others"). *Perspective taking* and *fantasy* are generally considered the cognitive dimensions of empathy, while *empathic concern* and *personal distress* are considered the affective dimensions of empathy.

A concept closely related to the *fantasy* dimension is narrative transportation, which refers to the reader's immersive experience of being *transported* into the world of the narrative in an imaginative way (Green and Brock 2000). This process involves a temporary detachment from the real world and a heightened sense of identification with the persona and the situation in which they find themselves. People with high *fantasy* scores were more likely to feel immersed in the story and consequently showed stronger emotional responses to the literary text.

The connection between empathy and literary reading was first outlined theoretically by Keen (2006), while empirical research, in particular the distinction between various aspects of empathy (affective and cognitive), was initiated by Koopman (2015). She found that readers react more empathically when engaging with texts that exhibit a high degree of literariness than with texts that lack such stylistic features. Her findings can be attributed to the influence of *narrative transportation* on empathic responses.

Future research on empathic responses to literature should definitely continue to distinguish between cognitive and affective components of empathy. Although, as Keen (2006) postulates,

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these are highly overlapping experiential phenomena that flow in the reader's consciousness in such a way that they are not necessarily able to meaningfully distinguish them in their subjective experience.

Another important distinction in the psychological literature is that *empathic concern* is a measure of other-oriented feelings of empathy, whereas *personal distress* measures self-oriented feelings of empathy (Batson, Fultz, and Schoenrade 1987). It is now widely recognized that the self-other differentiation is a critical component of empathy that distinguishes maladaptive from adaptive responses (Decety and Jackson 2004).

With this in mind, we propose that the most important distinction between empathic responses to literature, particularly when other variables such as the language of the text are taken into account, may not be between cognitive and affective empathic responses. Rather, it lies in the way cognitive processes and affective regulation interact to facilitate differentiation between self and other and allow readers to experience empathy differently while reading. This interplay of affect, cognition and regulation, also known as "*empathy regulation*" (Tully et al. 2016), is considered central to the distinction between distress and concern in response to the suffering of others.

Recent interdisciplinary studies from the fields of empathy theory, social neuroscience and multilingualism suggest that the experience of *personal distress* may be particularly sensitive to contextual variables, such as language. Decety and Lamm (2006) show that affective empathy is enhanced when the distinction between the self and the other is weakened. While they do not explicitly address language, their neurocognitive framework supports the idea that social closeness, which can be reinforced by shared identifiers such as language and other contextual factors, can enhance emotional resonance. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), a shared linguistic identity may trigger a preference for one's group and, more importantly, a stronger emotional resonance.

Pavlenko (2006) argues that emotional responses are more deeply encoded in a person's native language due to early socialization and embodied language use. This could explain why reading in the native language elicits a stronger emotional response. Foroni (2015) and Iacozza et al. (2021), by observing the physical responses of readers using electromyography and pupillometry, demonstrated that the use of a foreign language is associated with limited emotional processing and partial embodiment of the language. They attributed this to the greater emotional attachment to the native language. Further evidence comes from developmental studies. Heffelfinger Peacocke (2018), for example, observed that children showed more prosocial and empathic responses when interacting in their native language, suggesting that emotional resonance is more accessible through early acquired language systems.

In the field of literary reading, Chesnokova et al. (2017) found that the aesthetic and emotional impact of poetry decreased when the texts were read in translation, indicating that language choice significantly influences readers' emotional engagement, even in controlled literary contexts.

Batson et al. (1997) also provide additional support for the more general notion that empathy towards members of one's own group – such as those associated with a common language – tends to be stronger, especially in emotionally engaging conditions.

Although most of these studies are not concerned with literature *per se*, their common denominator – higher affective reactivity when reading in one's native language – is the central focus of our study. Specifically, we want to investigate whether reading a poem in one's native language triggers a deeper engagement of the *personal distress* component of empathy. We hypothesize that the reader's native language acts as a shared social identifier that reinforces a sense of belonging and reduces the psychological distance between the reader and persona.

2 Research Aim and Hypotheses

The aim of our study is to investigate how the language in which a poem is read impacts the reader's empathic response to the poem. Specifically, we examine this effect by comparing responses to poems read in Slovene (the participants' mother tongue) and in English.

To address this question, we need an instrument for measuring narrative empathy states. Since to the best of our knowledge no such measure exists, we will design our own. It will draw primarily on Keen's (2006) work on narrative empathy and be informed by relevant psychological conceptualizations of the facets of empathy originally proposed by Davis (1980) and further elaborated by Batson (2009). We anticipate identifying a two-factor structure of empathic responses, mostly distinguished by the level of self-other differentiation.

First, we will investigate whether a difference in empathic responses between the language conditions exists, and whether any observed difference is attributable to Slovene being participants' first language. We will also explore whether this difference is not better explained by linguistic preference, self-assessed proficiency, or greater exposure to a particular language in terms of reading, viewing and listening to content.

Based on previous studies (Koopman, 2015; Pavlenko 2006, 227–46; Foroni 2015, 10), we hypothesize that the intensity of empathic responses will increase when the poem is read in the mother tongue. Although preference, knowledge and exposure to the language are expected to influence the intensity of empathic responses, we anticipate that these factors will not fully account for the effect of the language in which the poem is read.

Secondly, we will examine how trait-level empathy, measured by Davis's (1980) IRI, interacts with language variables in predicting empathic responses to the text. We hypothesize that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* will be the primary predictors of empathic responses. *Fantasy* will also meaningfully interact with *personal distress* and *perspective taking*, intensifying their effects because of the central role of imaginative transposition in the context of reading narrative.

Personal distress will differentiate between the two factors of empathic responses, positively predicting one and negatively the other, showing the difference in self-other differentiation between the two types of responses (Decety and Jackson 2004; Decety and Lamm 2006).

Building on findings by Koopman (2015), we anticipate a ceiling effect in the interaction between the language conditions and *empathic concern*, and thus that the language effect at high levels of trait *empathic concern* may diminish significantly.

We also expect an important interaction between language conditions and *personal distress*, indicating that language can act as a signifier of in-group belonging, thus lowering the level of self-other differentiation (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Before proceeding with the empirical part of the study, we analyse the Slovene translation of the poem, compare it with the English original, and provide a close literary interpretation. It is essential to determine how the poem has been translated, which strategies were employed in the process, and what differences exist between the two texts that might potentially evoke distinct emotional responses. On the other hand, an analysis of the poem's formal and stylistic features ensures the semantic equivalence of the translation and the adherence to key principles of translation theory, which is a necessary condition for assuming the possibility of comparable reading effects across languages. As we elaborate further in the following sections, poetic effect is closely tied not only to lexical semantics but also to the phonetic and rhythmic structure of the text, as well as to its embeddedness within a specific linguistic and cultural context.

3 Poem Selection and Methodology

The selection of the poem was based on an analysis of its potential to evoke empathic experiences in the reader. This potential is primarily related to the theme or central motif of the text. We wanted to select a poem that expresses a negative emotion, as reference studies (e.g. Koopman) have shown that negative emotions are more productive for studies on the reception of literature. A second important criterion was the literary quality of the text, which should avoid banality, stereotypes, redundancy, simplification and other features characteristic of trivial literature. The third criterion was linguistic clarity, whereby the stylistic devices used should not hinder the understanding of the content. The fourth criterion was the expectation that readers would be relatively unfamiliar with the specific text. This was determined by ensuring that the poem is not part of the standard school or university curriculum in Slovenia. Based on these criteria, we selected the poem "Adult Grief" by the American poet and Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück. Grief over the loss of a loved one is a universal theme and, through the literary motifs in the poem, is closely linked to negative emotions – particularly sadness, but also anger and fear – so we assumed that the poem would evoke strong emotions in the participants.

In addition, the selected poem has an internal structure that follows a clear narrative arc of events in linear time, characterizing the speaker's emotional state and thought process at the moment of lyrical utterance. This provides the reader with the opportunity to clearly recognize the central motif, events and emotions that can either be identified with or linked to similar personal experiences.

In addition to the necessary theoretical framework regarding the empathic potential of poetry and the importance of the language in which the poetry is read, an essential component of the study is the analysis of the poem itself. The choice of the language in which the original poem used in the study was written proved to be methodologically significant. We chose

English because of its hypercentrality (Casanova 2004): it is the language from which most literary texts are translated, and the language in which the majority of readers engage with foreign-language literature – an observation confirmed by this study. This touches on the broader question of literary translation and the global circulation of literature. On the other hand, for the purposes of our study, language competence – apart from the mother tongue – could reasonably be expected only in relation to English as a foreign language.

To achieve the aim of our study, we used a randomized repeated measures design in which all participants were exposed to two reading conditions (Slovenian and English) at two consecutive time points. To control for the order effect, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Half of the participants read the poem first in their native language (Slovenian) and then in a foreign language (English), while the other half did so in the reverse order.

We selected a single poem and its translation for the study in order to maintain the same content of the text in both language conditions and to minimize the risk of content bias. The names of the author and translator were also omitted.

We conducted an online survey via the 1KA platform. Before reading the poem, the participants completed a measure of trait empathy (Davis 1980). After each reading of the poem (once in Slovenian and once in English), the participants immediately completed a study-specific questionnaire designed to measure empathic responses. The questionnaire comprised a total of 26 items, which were intentionally constructed to include a substantial number of distractors (17 items²) to reduce response bias. The remaining nine³ items were developed to capture empathic responses to the poem and were selected in part based on a consensus reached by the research team after reading the poems to identify the emotions the poem was trying to convey to its readers. Two of the nine items were constructed to specifically reflect narrative transportation and identification (Green and Brock 2000). For each emotion, participants had to respond on a five-point scale (1 = very little or not at all; 5 = completely). There were no breaks between the first and second readings as we wanted to encourage completion of the entire questionnaire.

This was followed by yes/no questions to verify that the participant had read the poem and understood its content: (1. *“Did the protagonist lose her parents?”* 2. *“Does a child die in the poem?”*). Finally, we asked the participants to indicate how many words in each text (Slovenian and English) they did not understand. Those who did not answer “yes” to the first content question and “no” to the second content question, or indicated that they did not understand four or more words, were excluded from further analysis.

In addition to demographic data (gender and age), we also asked the participants to self-assess their level of English, their language preference (Slovenian vs English) and their exposure to content in both languages.

² The distractors were: fear, happiness, enthusiasm, courage, nervousness, cheerfulness, joy, tenderness, kindness, boredom, exhaustion, discomfort, ridicule, disgust, love, anger, warmth, shame, pleasure.

³ The nine selected emotions were compassion, being moved, mercy, sadness, helplessness, dejection, guilt. The nine selected emotion items are identified in the model diagrams with their Slovenian translations: sočutje, ganjenost, usmiljenje, žalost, nemoč, potrtost, krivda.

The data was collected from a total of 329 participants between 7 May 2025 and 11 June 2025. Only 205 (62.3%) answered the entire questionnaire, while 59 (28.8%) were excluded due to the exclusion criteria described above. Three of the remaining 146 participants were excluded from subsequent analyses due to a disproportionately high Mahalanobis distance computed on the nine items. The participants' demographic data are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Participants' characteristics and demographic information.⁴

	Condition sequence group		
	English to Slovene	Slovene to English	Full sample
Total final sample	69	74	143
Gender			
Female	57	54	111
Male	10	15	25
Other	2	5	7
Age group			
18–25	56	49	105
26–35	10	15	25
36–45	0	2	2
46–55	2	5	7
56+	1	3	4
English proficiency			
B1	3	5	8
B2	12	14	26
C1	36	32	68
C2	18	23	41
Language preference			
Slovene	19	26	45
English	17	20	37
Depends	33	28	61
Exposure to content			
Slovene	3.28 (1.07)	3.32 (0.98)	3.30 (1.02)
English	4.29 (0.73)	4.31 (0.74)	4.30 (0.73)
Interpersonal Reactivity Index			
Fantasy	3.73 (0.67)	3.65 (0.63)	3.69 (0.65)
Perspective Taking	3.60 (0.60)	3.45 (0.56)	3.52 (0.58)
Empathic Concern	3.88 (0.53)	3.81 (0.55)	3.85 (0.54)
Personal Distress	3.04 (0.63)	2.95 (0.64)	2.99 (0.63)

⁴ For exposure to content and IRI, both the means and standard deviations are reported.

The statistical analysis was performed with the programme R, version 4.5.0 (R Core Team, 2025). To account for repeated measures with the same items across two time points, we fitted a correlated-trait correlated-uniqueness confirmatory factor analysis (CTCU-CFA) model with two pairs of correlated latent factors to assess our conceptual factor structure of empathic responses. The CFA was conducted with the lavaan package (Rosseel 2012) utilizing a robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLM) to account for non-normality of item distributions.

For model refinement, we used two exploratory factor analysis (EFA) models with the psych package (Revelle 2025) – one for each time point. The models were estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) and an oblique rotation was performed (Promax). Communalities testing was used to assess which items should be discarded. All items that had communalities below .40 in at least one of the EFAs were discarded. The new refined model (Figure 1) with fewer items was readjusted and compared with the conceptual model using the chi-square test (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

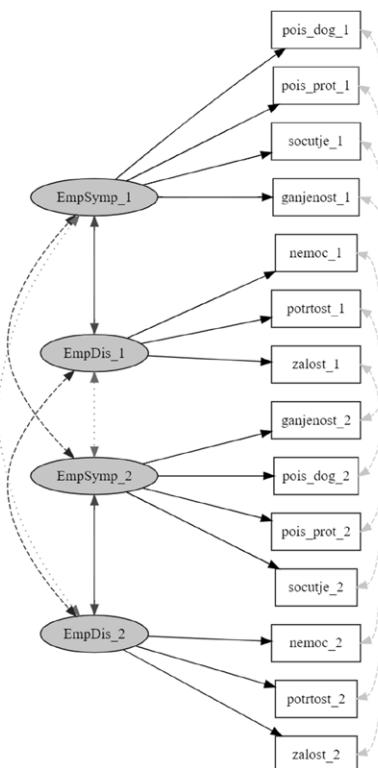


FIGURE 1. The Correlated-Traits Correlated-Uniqueness (CTCU-CFA) refined measurement model.

Measurement invariance was tested using the semTools package (Jorgensen et al. 2025) and following the guidelines suggested by Chen (2007) by dividing participants into two groups according to the language in which they had first read the poem. The longitudinal stability of the model was assessed by examining the correlations between conceptually identical factors across time points. The internal consistency of the factors was assessed by calculating the McDonalds Omega coefficient with the semTools package (Jorgensen et al. 2025). Participants' factor scores were extracted with the regression method for use in subsequent analyses. To assess convergent and divergent validity, the correlations between the factor scores and the values of IRI (Davis 1980) were analysed.

Two within-subjects analyses of variance were conducted with the ez package (Lawrence 2016) to examine the effects of language conditions on both types of empathic responses. To assess the role of other language variables, we ran two mixed multiple linear regression models with random intercepts for participants using the lmerTest package (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, and Christensen, 2017). In the analysis of the first pair of mixed models with multiple linear regression, only significant predictors and the first measured language variable (control variable) were retained. To assess the interactions between empathy traits and language variables, we conducted two further mixed models with multiple linear regression and random intercepts and calculated bootstrapped confidence intervals for fixed effects using the lme4 package (Bates et al. 2015).

4 Adult Grief Analysis

The analysis of the poem focuses on the elements that underpin its emotional dimension and its impact on the reader's empathic experience, i.e. on its phonological structure and thematic organization, rather than on the broader context of the poet's work, in which the leitmotif is often existential loneliness (Markova 2021, 470). What is decisive for us is, on the one hand, the thematic justification of the anticipated effect of the text and, on the other, the particular translation decisions that help to shape the specific effect of the poem at the level of empathic reception. In particular, we emphasize the changes in the intensity and valence of the poetically encoded emotions that are crucial for empathic engagement, rather than the success or failure of the translation *per se* or even the translator's overarching translation strategy. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the poet and translator Veronika Dintinjana did not translate this poem in isolation, but as part of a selection of Louise Glück's works for the Slovenian collection *Onkraj noči* (*Beyond Night*, 2011), published by Mladinska knjiga.

The translator is familiar with Glück's poetic style, the meanings of her images and the use of poetic devices. The original title "Adult Grief" is rendered in Slovenian as "Žalost odraslih" ("The Sadness of Adults"). By using the word *žalost* (sadness) instead of *žalovanje* (grief), the meaning of the poem is slightly altered, as the original does not refer to sadness in general, but specifically to the sadness associated with loss, i.e. grief. In this case, the translator has opted for a broader interpretation of grief as a form of sadness, which leads to certain shifts in meaning and affective nuances in the translated text. This decision may have a modest effect on the intensity of the articulated emotions as well as on the intensity of the impact of the reading on the reader's empathic experience, insofar as the grief is more concretely linked to the textual

content (themes and motifs). Concepts that are more directly linked to specific experiences of the persona exert a stronger influence on empathic reception, as it is easier for readers to identify with a specific situation or event than with a general state or abstract emotion.

In cases where the poet uses the neutral pronouns “you” or “your” in English, Slovenian grammar requires the use of gender-specific forms. Interestingly, the translator consistently chose the feminine grammatical gender rather than the grammatically masculine form, which is usually used as the standard unmarked form in Slovenian. This choice was probably influenced by the female gender of the persona, which is evident in other translated poems, as well as by the gender of the author herself. In the selected poem, however, the gender of the speaker has no effect on the emotional structure of the text, as gender is not an emphasized theme or motif. We therefore assume that this decision has no significant influence on the reader’s empathic reaction.

Attention is also drawn to a line from the third stanza, “for you, home is a cemetery”, which has a clear poetic resonance due to its unusual word order. In Slovenian, the line is rendered as “zate je dom pokopališče”, a literal translation that retains the original word order but lacks the poetic inversion that could enhance the lyrical quality of the line in Slovenian. A more poetic conversion in Slovenian would be “pokopališče je zate dom” (“the cemetery is your home”). By choosing the first variant, the translator has favoured fidelity to the poet’s unadorned, non-decorative style over a heightened poetic effect. In this way, the translator preserves the affective imagery of the text, which in Slovenian would otherwise border on lyricism or even pathos.

This decision coincides with a statement from Glück’s essay “Education of the Poet”, also translated by Dintinjana and included in the collection, in which the author explicitly expresses her aversion to aestheticization: “[r]omance is what I most struggle to be free of” (Glück 2011, 156). With this in mind, we conclude that the translation successfully reflects the author’s stylistic ethos. Through such carefully considered changes and adaptations, the translation offers the reader an experience that remains true to the original message – especially on an emotional level.

4.1 Analysis of Phonic Devices

The poem consists of three stanzas. The last two stanzas correspond to the original poem in terms of the number of lines, while the first stanza differs slightly, as the translator has split the line. The enjambment in Slovenian seems entirely justified, as it balances the brevity and conciseness of the original while emphasizing the central line, which stands out strongly in the poem.

The poem is written in free verse. Since the rhythm in free verse is based on the lively pulse of the word sequence and syntactic parallelism, as well as on discrete acoustic devices such as alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme and other recurring sound patterns (Novak 2011b, 165), the use of free verse in “Adult Grief” contributes to a sense of immediacy and spontaneity while enhancing the emotional rawness of the poem. The language is simple, direct and free of excessive stylistic embellishment or symbolism. The poem is free of embellishments and digressions that

might otherwise distract from the central line of thought: grief. The tone, which is characterized by the persona's judgements, is harsh, accusatory, sharp and severe. At the same time, the poem conveys deep sadness and despair, but also a deep love between child and parents.

The poem's language is neither softened nor sentimentalized in order to evoke compassion. It captures the truth in a simple, honest, direct and therefore cruel way that strikes the reader with its severity and finality, as if hearing the following accusation for the first time: "There has never been a parent kept alive by a child's love" (Glück 1985, 51).

The poem uses few auditory and rhythmic devices, and those that do appear are subtle. The alliteration of initial consonants is not particularly pronounced, as in the line "press your face against the granite markers", where the /g/ sound reinforces the weight and physicality of the image. Assonance is not predominant either, but soft vowels in certain lines create a melancholy tone, as in "Now you have nothing: / for you, home is a cemetery", where the repeated "o" and "u" sounds are striking. The vowels "you did not prepare yourself sufficiently", the vowels "i" and "e" recur. Other tonal devices are largely absent.

The poem begins with a metaphor:

Because you were foolish enough to love one place,
now you are homeless. (Glück 1985, 51)

The persona accuses a person – or rather humanity – of loving a single place, which stands for the emotional attachment to home and parental love. This attachment is depicted as naivety, the consequence of which is homelessness, not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual or identity-related sense: one becomes a person without an inner centre. Later metaphors such as the "orphan" in a "shelter" again emphasize the loss of home, security, connection and personal identity.

The central image of the poem is that of the cemetery. The speaker's parents are dead, and so the idea of home ends with death. Home becomes just a memory, no longer a place to live. The line "I've seen you press your face against the granite markers" evokes longing, sadness and a slipping away from life, as the speaker seeks a connection to the dead due to her intense emotional attachment to what she has lost. The image of the cemetery evokes sadness in the reader, memories of the deceased, memories of joyful and sorrowful moments spent with them and, above all, a sense of the emptiness they leave behind.

In the final stanza, we encounter the metaphor of the lichen, representing a person trying to grow in a barren, dead place. The lichen, an extremely resilient organism, symbolizes the condition of a desperate person who draws his strength for survival from an inhospitable surface: a gravestone. The situation of such a person becomes almost parasitic, completely incapable of independence. This behaviour is described as futile attachment and the metaphor describes a person's emotional loyalty to the past, which at the same time prevents the speaker's personal growth. The metaphors in the poem thus revolve around the loss of home and identity, grief and the inability to rebuild one's own life emotionally or physically.

Due to its phonological structure, English allows for a dense use of alliteration and assonance – repetitions of sounds that reinforce meaning. An example of this is the line "you are the

lichen, trying to grow there”, in which the vowels “o”, “u”, “e” and “i” create a soft, melancholic echo. In the Slovenian translation: “lišaj si, ki poskuša rasti tam,” this phonetic softness is not equally foregrounded, as only the vowels “a” and “i” recur. While the semantic content of the line remains similar, its phonetic texture is less fluid and undulating.

Consider also the line “you were obstinate / pathetically blind to change”, in which the word “pathetically” hits the reader almost mockingly. In the translation: “bila si trmasta, bedno slepa za spremembe”, the meaning is retained, but the acoustic sharpness is weakened as the word “bedno” lacks the same tonal intensity as its English counterpart. Due to its longer, more syllabic word forms, Slovenian often softens the directness and sharpness of English diction.

In addition, the rhythmic simplicity of English lends certain lines a strong, percussive effect, that is partially weakened in the translation. The original is characterized by short, rhythmically dynamic lines that resemble a direct accusation or an inner monologue, conveying a sense of raw honesty. As already mentioned, the line “There has never been a parent kept alive by a child’s love” (Glück 1985, 51) is extremely short and pointed, while in Slovenian it reads: “Ni še bilo starša, / ki bi ga pri življenju ohranjala otrokova ljubezen”, the verse is more extended and diffuse. This inserted enjambment is remarkable because it foregrounds the theme in such a way that it emphasizes the break in the parent-child relationship visually and, above all, rhythmically. In this sense, it could even be seen as a form of “explication for the sake of expressiveness” (Mozetič 2014, 108).

The repetition of the negation is particularly effective in the original:

you will not grow,
you will not let yourself
obliterate anything. (Glück 1985, 51)

Here, the repetition creates a sense of entrapment and psychological constriction. The translation “Toda rasti ne moreš, / ne dopustiš si izničiti ničesar” retains the semantic pattern, but its rhythm and tone are softer, less strict.

We may conclude that the English original is acoustically more tense, with sharp intonations and an unforgiving rhythm that deepens the emotional register of guilt, regret and loss. The Slovenian translation remains true to the meaning of the poem, but due to the phonetic characteristics of the language it comes across as muted and contemplative, rather than confrontational. This difference may also affect the reader’s emotional response: Instead of the acute, raw pain evoked by the original, the translation elicits a more subdued, quiet sadness. However, this is also the result of deliberate translation choices that take into account the nature of the Slovenian language, where rhyme, assonance and other tonal devices are easier to achieve but sound more sentimental than sublime. A rhythm based on these characteristics would therefore not achieve the same poetic effect in both languages.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

The poem is interspersed with a series of motif fragments that together form a depiction of grief, loss and the human inability to accept transience. One of the central thematic elements

is the motif of home, which is usually associated with warmth, parental love, attachment and security. In the poem, however, home is transformed into a space of death, memory and stagnation as it dies along with the parents. Those who are too attached to their home – who never really leave it or develop an emotional distance from it and the people connected to it – are labelled “foolish” by the speaker in the first line.

Ageing and the death of parents are alluded to in the lines:

Before your eyes, two people were becoming old;
I could have told you two deaths were coming. (Glück 1985, 51)

With these lines, the speaker emphasizes the inevitability of ageing and death and explicitly links the house, the parents, ageing and death with her own experience, thereby establishing grief as the basic motif of the poem.

With the death of one's parents, a person becomes homeless and an orphan: two key thematic images that emphasize the loss of stability and identity. Without parents, one no longer has any roots. Although the poet emphasizes a certain type of person – someone who is unprepared for the death of their parents, someone who has not come to terms with the impermanence and changeability of life – what is depicted here is in fact a profoundly existential human condition, the moment that anyone can experience after the death of a loved one. Even the most independent person who has come to terms with death intellectually can feel at such a moment that their world is momentarily collapsing and they are losing their balance.⁵

The speaker makes a bitter indictment of humanity and refuses to forgive its tendency to cling to home and loved ones. Her sharp tone expresses the motives of reproach and (self-) criticism:

you were trapped in the romance of fidelity [...]
you will not let yourself
obliterate anything. (Glück 1985, 51)

These lines reveal the inner conflict, guilt and sadness that arise from human helplessness and attachment. The idea of blaming human stupidity, which runs throughout the poem, becomes a leitmotif along with the motifs of home and parents in relation to the persona. The speaker portrays human love and loyalty as misguided values that lead to despair, i.e. to grief. Death is inevitable, part of life and must be accepted by every human being. The death of our parents is expected, it is foreseen:

Before your eyes, two people were becoming old;
I could have told you two deaths were coming. (Glück 1985, 51)

The poem evokes feelings of helplessness, failure and guilt, mainly due to the accusatory tone of the speaker, who turns the accusations against herself. The poem constructs a fascinating

⁵ The mother-daughter relationship is indeed a recurring theme in Louise Glück's poetry; among other things, she articulates this relationship through the figure of Persephone, as discussed by Markova (2021, 474).

form of inner dialogue as the speaker addresses her younger self. She mourns not only the death of her parents, but also the foolish decisions she once made. Addressing the reader directly, for example, “because you were foolish enough,” “now you are homeless, an orphan,” “you did not prepare yourself,” “you were obstinate, pathetically / blind to change”, “you are lichen”, creates the impression of an intimate dialogue and a shared emotional space. The reader assumes the guilt of the person whom the speaker accuses of excessive attachment to home and an inability to accept transience and change. These accusations, which are directed against a specific character and thus also against the reader, accumulate over the course of the poem and intensify the emotional atmosphere of sadness and devastation:

now that time's past: you were obstinate, pathetically
blind to change. Now you have nothing. (Glück 1985, 51)

The persona confronts the sentimental belief that love can withstand the inevitability of death, a belief that she considers false. The child or now adult being addressed, who is obviously grieving, has missed the opportunity to prepare for such an outcome. Yet the poem recognizes that no one can ever truly prepare for the death of a loved one, even if it is expected. The persona is addressing her younger self, which explains the harsh tone. People are often more ruthless with themselves than with others.

Nevertheless, the grief caused by the death of a loved one is inescapable. The poem goes beyond mere sadness, however, as the recurring motifs relating to time and the personas relationship to her own past show. What is expressed here is grief: a complex and enduring emotional state.

The poet depicts the situation of a person who has never accepted the fundamental characteristic of life: its transience. This motif is symbolized by gravestones. Consequently, such a person is unable to adapt to change, which is the only constant in life. In this respect, they have failed. They lose themselves in grief; their clinging to gravestones and their search for solace in the dead is in vain.

5 Data Analysis and Results

5.1 Specifying a Measurement Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) shows quasi-acceptable fit indices ($\chi^2 = 205.4$; $df = 120$; $p < .001$; $CFI = 0.945$; $TLI = 0.930$; $RMSEA = 0.073$; $SRMR = 0.071$) with standardized loadings between .45 and .93. A review of the modification indices does not indicate reasonable model adjustments to improve model fit. The EFA shows that two items (one for each factor) at both time points have commonalities under the minimal accepted boundary of .40 for item retention (items: *krivda* and *usmiljenje*). In addition, the item measuring identification with the lyrical theme showed significantly lower commonality at the second time point, just below the threshold for item retention ($h^2 = .39$), raising concerns about its stability over time. The refined model (Figure 2) shows a good fit ($\chi^2 = 57.6$; $df = 42$; $p = .055$; $CFI = 0.986$; $TLI = 0.977$; $RMSEA = 0.051$; $SRMR = 0.046$), with standardized loadings between .66 and .93, and was adopted for all subsequent analyses since it best represents the data.

5.2 Measurement Invariance

The results of invariance testing between first reading language groups show that invariance holds strongly until at least the scalar level. Residual invariance is marginally retained. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small group sizes ($n = 69$ and $n = 74$), likely limiting the statistical power of the test. We can thus meaningfully compare results across language conditions as the structure of the instrument does not significantly change when applied to reading in different languages.

5.3 Longitudinal Stability

Correlations between conceptual factors across time points are reasonably high and show good longitudinal stability of the measure ($r_{\text{EmpSymp}_1,2} = .76$ and $r_{\text{EmpDis}_1,2} = .88$).

5.4 Extraction of Factor Scores and Internal Consistency

Factor scores for participants were extracted from the refined CTCU-CFA model with the regression method. Extracted factors show good internal consistency of both pairs of factors ($\omega_{\text{EmpSymp}_1} = .816$; $\omega_{\text{EmpDis}_1} = .863$; $\omega_{\text{EmpSymp}_2} = .808$; $\omega_{\text{EmpDis}_2} = .868$), and thus can be reliably interpreted.

5.5 Changes in Factor Content After Refinement

Model refinement did not significantly change the possible interpretation of factors from the conceptual model.

The first factor, *empathic distress response*, is represented by sadness (*žalost*), helplessness (*nemoc*) and dejection (*potrstost*) – a constellation of negative emotions in line with the poems' message and themes. Guilt (*krivda*) was the least conceptually related item, since it reflects a complex negative emotion; however, it was initially included because of the perceived accusatory tone present in the poem.

The second factor, *empathy/sympathy response*, reflects a more sympathetic and less distressed type of response. The core of this factor constitutes a feeling of compassion (*sočutje*) and being moved (*ganjenost*) while feeling transported by the story ("Koliko ste se vživeli v dogajanje pesmi?").⁶ Mercy (*usmiljenje*) is generally used to indicate an action rather than a feeling, while the identification item ("Koliko ste se poistovetili v protagonistko?")⁷ seems to be unstable through time.

We propose that the stability issues of the identification item may reflect real effects. It could be that identification is felt most strongly when we first connect with the persona, and therefore weakens when we have already connected with the character. As our interest is in testing differences between language conditions, we felt it was more useful to minimize any other systematic effects on the individual factor scores, which is why we excluded the item from the model.

⁶ "To what extent did you immerse yourself in the events of the poem?"

⁷ "To what extent did you identify with the protagonist?"

5.6 Convergent and Divergent Validity

To assess the convergent and divergent validity of the measure, correlations between the factor scores and the raw scores of the IRI were calculated and ranged between .07 to .35. As expected, all factors are most strongly associated with the *empathic concern* and *fantasy* subscales, while only the response factors for *empathic distress* are more strongly associated with *personal distress* than their counterparts.

Perspective taking was more closely related to the two measurements at the second points in time. This would be consistent with proposals in the literature suggesting that *perspective taking* is a conscious act that first requires a level of immersion or a point of contact before it occurs (Kaufman and Libby 2012).

The correlation between the pairs of conceptual factors was high ($r_{ES_1-ED_1} = .72$; $r_{ES_2-ED_2} = .65$), indicating that the two response types are related constructs, although they are conceptually different. The *empathy/sympathy response* is an almost exclusively other-orientated feeling, whereas the *empathic distress response* is more self-orientated and tends to express a lack of self-other differentiation.

The pattern and strength of correlations confirms that the developed instrument can be utilized in the context of our research question as a valid measure of state empathy that is able to differentiate between self-oriented and other-oriented empathic responses.

5.7 Quantifying Language Differences

The results of the two within-subjects analysis of variance showed significant effects of the language condition for both *empathic distress* and *empathy/sympathy responses* ($F_{EmpDis} (1, 142) = 7.80; p = .006$; $F_{EmpSymp} (1, 142) = 7.35; p = .008$). Effect sizes were very small ($\eta^2_{g-EmpDis} = 0.003$; $\eta^2_{g-EmpSymp} = 0.006$).

5.8 Language Related Covariates

Table 2 shows results of the analysis of variance computed with Satterthwaite's method (Hrong-Tai Fai and Cornelius 1996) for the effects of language and other language variables on empathic responses. Apart from the language reading condition, only exposure to content shows a statistically significant effect on the empathic responses.

TABLE 2. Results of analysis of variance II computed with Satterthwaite's method for effects of language and language related variables.

	SS	MS	df _n	df _d	F	p	
Empathic Distress responses							
Language	139.21	139.21	1	144.8	141.89	<.001	***
First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.04	.837	
Exposure to content	0.62	0.62	1	149.2	62.84	.013	*
Language x First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.02	.902	

Empathy/Sympathy responses							
Language	215.15	215.15	1	146.9	116.51	<.001	***
First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.00	.962	
Exposure to content	0.76	0.76	1	156.7	41.04	.044	*
Language x First measured language	0.00	0.00	1	143.0	0.01	.909	
* <i>p</i> <.05; ** <i>p</i> <0,1; *** <i>p</i> <.001							

5.9 The Interactions of Language and Trait Empathy

The bootstrapped confidence intervals (computed on 5,000 samples) for the coefficients of fixed effects of IRI trait empathy measures and language variables are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Fixed effects and interactions with bootstrapped confidence intervals for trait and language.

			Bootstrapped CIs (95%)		
	Estimate	SE	LL	UL	
Empathic Distress responses					
Intercept	-0.36	0.12	-0.51	-0.19	*
Language (Slovene)	0.17	0.04	0.11	0.23	*
Empathic Concern	0.28	0.09	0.23	0.33	*
Personal Distress	0.09	0.08	0.05	0.13	*
Perspective Taking	0.05	0.08	0.00	0.09	
Fantasy	0.17	0.08	0.13	0.20	*
Exposure	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.09	*
Language (Slovene) x Empathic Concern	-0.11	0.04	-0.17	-0.05	*
Language (Slovene) x Personal Distress	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.12	*
Language (Slovene) x Perspective Taking	0.01	0.04	-0.05	0.07	
Language (Slovene) x Fantasy	0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.08	
Personal Distress x Fantasy	0.21	0.06	0.19	0.23	*
Perspective Taking x Fantasy	0.16	0.07	0.13	0.19	*
Personal Distress x Perspective Taking	-0.07	0.07	-0.09	-0.04	*
Empathy/Sympathy responses					
Intercept	-0.37	0.16	-0.56	-0.15	*
Language (Slovene)	0.21	0.06	0.11	0.29	*
Empathic Concern	0.32	0.09	0.26	0.39	*
Personal Distress	-0.12	0.08	-0.18	-0.06	*
Perspective Taking	0.06	0.08	0.00	0.11	
Fantasy	0.15	0.07	0.10	0.21	*
Exposure	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.11	*
Language (Slovene) x Empathic Concern	-0.14	0.06	-0.23	-0.06	*
Language (Slovene) x Personal Distress	0.09	0.05	0.01	0.18	*

Language (Slovene) x Perspective Taking	0.01	0.06	-0.07	0.10	
Language (Slovene) x Fantasy	0.04	0.05	-0.03	0.12	
Personal Distress x Fantasy	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.09	*
Perspective Taking x Fantasy	0.09	0.07	0.05	0.13	*
Personal Distress x Perspective Taking	-0.06	0.06	-0.09	-0.02	*
* <i>p</i> <.05					

The results show *empathic concern* as the best predictor of both *empathic distress* and *empathy/sympathy responses*. *Fantasy* and the interactions between *fantasy* and other trait empathy measures were also significant for both responses. *Personal distress* positively predicts *empathic distress responses* and *empathy/sympathy responses* negatively. *Personal distress* and *perspective taking* have a mutually attenuating effect.

The language condition and exposure to the content remain significant predictors after including trait empathy measures. The interaction between language condition and *empathic concern* shows the presence of a ceiling effect. The interaction between language condition and *personal distress* is significant, while there is no significant interaction with cognitive measures of trait empathy.

6 Conclusions

The results confirmed our assumptions that *empathic concern* and *fantasy* are the primary predictors of both *empathy/sympathy* and *empathic distress responses*. The distinct prediction pattern of the *personal distress* subscale (positive prediction of *empathic distress responses* and negative prediction of *empathy/sympathy responses*) suggests an expected split between a less regulated empathic resonance and a more regulated, compassionate, other oriented engagement. The *empathy/sympathy response* thus appears to involve an engagement with the other, whereas *empathic distress* reflects more of an embodiment of the negative emotions expressed in the poem that one transfers to oneself.

Perspective taking in combination with *fantasy* showed an amplification of both types of empathic responses, confirming Keen's (2006) hypothesis that empathy in the context of narratives can be better conceptualized as a cognitive-affective process involving both imaginative immersion and *perspective-taking*, acting synergistically. Similarly, the coupling of *fantasy* and *personal distress* led to comparable synergistic effects, suggesting that imaginative immersion acts as a gateway to deeper empathic responses to the poem. Further support for such an interpretation comes from the mutual dampening effect between *perspective taking* and *personal distress*. This could mean that individuals who tend to experience high levels of stress in interpersonal contexts have difficulty engaging in proactive *perspective taking*, which reduces *empathy/sympathy responses*. Conversely, for those who adopt *perspective taking* despite this tendency, the result may be emotional regulation of distress, reducing the intensity of *empathic distress responses*.

In the Slovenian language condition, *personal distress* increases both types of reactions. This finding builds on the work of Decety and Lamm (2006) by showing that language can act as a salient social identifier and disrupt the process of self-other differentiation. The

interaction being significant for both response types may suggest that the process of self-other differentiation in a literary context can be modulated by language or other social identifiers to enhance not only distressed feelings of emotional resonance but also compassionate engagement. As Keen (2006) points out in her work, the reader always maintains a higher degree of psychological distance from fictional characters than from actual people in a social situation. However, this distance can be reduced through an imaginative and emotional engagement with the text. As the reader is aware that this is a fictional context, they are not overwhelmed by their feelings to the exclusion of other empathetic and compassionate responses. Instead, they coexist and allow the reader to have a complex experience of narrative empathy – feeling with and for the character in the story while processing negative and distressing emotions within a controlled imaginative framework.

We also found that there was a ceiling effect in the interaction between the language reading condition and *empathic concern*. This ceiling effect, previously found in the work of Koopman (2015), suggests that individuals high in the trait *empathic concern* consistently show intense emotional responses across narrative conditions, making experimental manipulations such as the language condition less effective. Highly empathic individuals may thus respond empathically even to characters from out-groups, which is consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and the empirical work of Cuddy et al. (2007).

The language reading conditions and the cognitive measures of trait empathy did not interact, supporting the view that any language-related differences were not due to cognitive processing or processing style. Furthermore, there were no main effects of language proficiency to suggest that reading skill modulates empathic responses. However, the generalizability of these null findings is severely limited due to the small and inconsistent sample sizes of the groups, which are due to random sampling and limited resources.

There is also no evidence to support our hypothesis that a cognitive bias towards one language or another could lead to a more intense empathic response. However, we did observe a limited main effect of exposure: participants who reported being more exposed to content in a particular language showed slightly stronger empathic responses when reading in that language, regardless of their native status. This could mean that empathic responses to literary texts also reflect an aspect of learnt familiarity with stories that depends on a particular language. Therefore, even a native Slovenian speaker who frequently engages with English-language content may experience stronger empathic reactions to literary texts in English due to habitual exposure and linguistic familiarity than due to emotional anchoring in the native language alone.

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