

055 – Could you kick a robot puppy?



Aibo - Self-learning robot dog. Oh, the cuteness!

Hello my lovely English learners! Lori here, your teacher from BetterAtEnglish.com. I love technology, so we're talking about robots today, but not in the way you might expect. A lot of conversations about robots have to do with whether or not a robot or machine could ever develop genuine feelings or emotions. But today we're going to be thinking about our own emotions and feelings toward robots, particularly empathy. Can we feel empathy toward robots? And if so, why?

Allow me to introduce you to Kate Darling. She is a super cool researcher who is looking into this very question. I'm going to play you a little bit from the beginning of her TED talk, where she explains how she got into this line of research. The link to the full presentation is in the show notes. It's as entertaining as it is interesting and thought provoking, so I can wholeheartedly recommend you check out the whole thing. OK, here comes Kate:

Kate Darling:

"There was a day, about 10 years ago, when I asked a friend to hold a baby dinosaur robot upside down. It was this toy called a Pleo that I had ordered, and I was really excited about it because I've always loved robots. And this one has really cool technical features. It had motors and touch sensors and it had an infrared camera. And one of the things it had was a tilt sensor, so it knew what direction it was facing. And when you held it upside down, it would start to cry. And I thought this was super cool, so I was showing it off to my friend, and I said, "Oh, hold it up by the tail. See what it does." So we're watching the theatrics of this robot struggle and cry out. And after a few seconds, it starts to bother me a little, and I said, "OK, that's enough now. Let's put him back down." And then I pet the robot to make it stop crying.



Pleo: Self-learning robot dinosaur

*And that was kind of a weird experience for me. For one thing, I wasn't the most maternal person at the time. Although since then I've become a mother, nine months ago, and I've learned that babies also squirm when you hold them upside down.
(Laughter)*

But my response to this robot was also interesting because I knew exactly how this machine worked, and yet I still felt compelled to be kind to it. And that observation sparked a curiosity that I've spent the past decade pursuing. Why did I comfort this robot? And one of the things I discovered was that my treatment of

this machine was more than just an awkward moment in my living room, that in a world where we're increasingly integrating robots into our lives, an instinct like that might actually have consequences, because the first thing that I discovered is that it's not just me."

She's right, it's not just her. I found a short video on Youtube that shows somebody being really mean to the same type of robot dinosaur that Kate uses in her research. It's only one minute long, so if you want to pause the podcast and go watch it, feel free. The link is in the show notes. Anyway, when I watched this video myself I felt really uncomfortable, even though I knew it was just a toy robot. I'm not alone; here are some of the Youtube comments.

"Why would you do this!!!! It looks so scared, please stop and let me hug it."

"The last part when he was hitting him to the table I heard it crying; that's so sad."

"I feel bad for him, although I know it's just a pile of plastic and metal that can't even think."

Of course, Youtube comments being what they are, there were also people saying things like *"This made me laugh so hard,"* and *"How do I get this job,"* but I'm fairly sure those people were just trying to be funny. At least I hope so.

We humans have evolved to have empathy for our fellow human beings and for most of us this also extends to animals. Well, cute animals at least. But why in the world would we feel empathy or any kind of emotional connection to a robot, or a machine? I mean, they don't have emotions or feel pain. They can't actually have any feelings toward us. Why do we still want to be kind to them?

This is what we discuss in the following conversation. You'll hear me talking to Yasmin, who by the way is an active teacher on italki -- there is [a link to her profile](#) in the show notes if you would like to get to know her better. She's from the UK but lives in Canada now, and we got over Zoom to talk about Kate Darling's presentation, and our own emotional connections to inanimate objects. You'll hear us starting out with some small talk about podcasts, which leads us naturally into the main topic of our conversation. The small talk is not relevant to our topic, but I'm leaving it in as an example of the natural flow of informal conversations from one topic to another.

As always, you can find the transcript and links to supplementary material on my website, [betteratenglish.com](https://www.betteratenglish.com). The links and a preview of the transcript should also be right in your podcast player. Don't worry, everything on my website is free for you to download and use for your English learning.

All right...are you ready? Here comes the conversation.

Conversation transcript

Lori: Do you have any, just for yourself, favorite podcasts that you like to listen to?

Yasmin: Um...

Lori: ...if you don't mind saying?

Yasmin: My favorite one, my favorite one is...oh, what's it called? Into the...Into the Wild, I think it's called...

Lori: Okay.

Yasmin: ...or something like this. And it's basically a lot of different people who have adventured all over the world. And they talk about loads of different things. Like my favorite one was with this man called Levison Wood. And he was talking about his trip to Botswana, and dealing with the elephants or learning about elephant behavior and working with the conservation team out there. And so that was really interesting. So things like that I really liked listening to

Lori: Okay, interesting. Yeah, I think I have seen that one in either in iTunes or in the podcast app somewhere into the wild. Sounds familiar, but I haven't actually listened to that.

Yasmin: But yeah, it's worth listening to. They have many different, totally different topics, which all are quite interesting.

Lori: Yeah. And you being a traveler, I can, I can imagine that that's extra interesting.

Yasmin: Yeah, absolutely. I want to go to Africa and see the elephants. That's probably the main reason.

Lori: I love elephants. I love elephants. You know, I don't know. Have you ever seen I think it's one of the David Attenborough nature shows where there's these elephants walking across the desert. And it's like an aerial view, and it's all...they're in a drought. And it's really, really dry and horrible. And then at some point, you see this little baby elephant walking all by itself. And he's gotten lost, and he's walking the wrong way. It's like the saddest thing I think I've ever seen. I cried when I saw that poor baby elephant (link to video below).

Yasmin: Oh, my God. So sad, isn't it?

Lori: Yeah. So sad. I...that's...if my, my partner, we almost use that as a benchmark. When I see something sad about animals, I'm like, "Yeah, it was really sad, but still not as bad as that baby elephant going the wrong way."

Yasmin: Aww. I mean, these elephants are so smart, they have like, you know, their internal compass, which is why it's like surprising when you have such young elephants who go the wrong way. And I suppose they have such strong family connections almost, you know, stronger than human connection.

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: Which is quite, quite amazing.

Lori: It's incredible. I would give anything to be able to actually get inside the mind of an animal and be able to understand what they're thinking.

Yasmin: It'd be amazing, wouldn't it? It's very sad, though, you know, all the hunting in the poaching which goes on and the human animal conflict out in Africa when these sorts of countries it's, it's quite sad.

Lori: Yeah. Yeah, it is really sad. And I know that it must be a really complex issue. I mean, I can look at it and just totally condemn them for doing that. But then, you know, everyone always has their reasons. I think it's a horrible, horrible thing. And it's just sad that some people are, you know, they feel that that's the only way, the only thing that they can do...

Yasmin: Absolutely

Lori: ...is terrible. But yeah, it's it's funny, we're talking about this because, you know, I had wanted to talk to you about that video, about...

Yasmin: Yeah!

Lori: ...we have so much empathy for real real animals and people, but we can actually have empathy for robots.

Yasmin: Isn't it crazy? And you know what though, is it's funny because we look at animals and we think they're so cute. We see a little puppy and we just want to go and cuddle it. It's so sweet. And I think that people do create attachments to robots because often they they look kind of sweet they look they don't look like something scary they look like something which we could actually have a connection to.

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: And so super soft people are too, too kind and caring, they just want...anything that they feel like they can protect I suppose they want to.

Lori: Yeah, I thought...what was really kind of blew me away about that video was the way that the military guys would actually develop these attachments to the landmine robots, the bomb disposal robots..

Yasmin: Absolutely. It's, I mean, I think though, that robots who perform, like, services to help people, I think maybe, maybe it's possible that humans create a stronger connection to those robots because they feel bad for them. They feel like empathy towards them, because this robot is doing what technically the maybe the people should be doing. And so, you know, like it says, in the video, you do see so many of these robots who work in the in the army, or the military, having funerals. and people really taking care of them, which is insane.



A soldier and a bomb disposal robot

Lori: Yeah, amazing. And and it does bring up that issue that maybe it's not so good that a soldier is, like, feeling sorry for his bomb disposal robot. I mean, in a training exercise, it's one thing but if it's actually out in the field? And yeah, just makes you really think about that, actually. And it's interesting point you bring up about the idea that it's these machines that are serving us or providing a service, because I've been thinking about this, since I saw that video. And I have these weird emotional attachments to things that can't even move. Machines.

Yasmin: Yeah. Well, thing with sentimental value. Right?

Lori: Yeah. Well, I'm curious, go ahead.

Yasmin: I think I think things, people have connections with all sorts of things, not necessarily just robots. Take my jacket, for example, I had my jacket for 10 years, it came with me for all my travels, in the end, it had so many holes in it, that I just had to get rid of it. It wasn't, wasn't serving its purpose any longer. And so with a heavy heart, I had to say, "Okay, I'll get a new one. And I'll give this one away." But I was

so sad about it, because I had all these memories that came with this coat. And it sounds it sounds totally ridiculous. I know.

Lori: No, not at all! Not to me!

Yasmin: But I mean, things people people do create, I think, some form of connection to things which they have a sentimental, well, things which have a sentimental value. And so it's not surprising that people do create a connection with with robots, I think.

Lori: Yeah, yeah. I totally agree.

Yasmin: It's not a rational, it's not a rational thing. But...

Lori: No. Yeah, it's it's sad if you have to part with you know, something you've had for a long time that you have a lot of, like, just like you said, memories attached to or maybe it was a gift from someone who means a lot to you and, and that I understand, but there are like weird things. Like I realized the other day, I have this sort of emotional attachment to my rice cooker.

Yasmin: Oh.

Lori: And it is it's the cutest little rice cooker. It's one of the Japanese style with the fuzzy logic. But it's it's small it's it's designed for you know, if you're just a person or household of two people.

Yasmin: Yeah

Lori: So it can only do these small batches of rice but it is so just little and round and cute. And it does the rice perfectly. I find myself, when it's done, I'm like, "Oh, good job!" and petting it and really feeling almost like I do with my dog.

Yasmin: Aww, because that rice is so perfect at the end.

Lori: I know and if something happened to it, if it broke or if I'd oh my gosh, God, God forbid if I dropped it or something...

Yasmin: Then that wouldn't be like a full blown funeral for your rice cooker.



Lori's rice cooker - so small and round and CUTE!

Lori: Yeah, I would feel so bad about that. And it's just it's a rice cooker. But the, the weird thing is though, that you know, the rice cooker helps me it does things for me. So I guess you could say it serves me, or takes care of me. But my phone, which I use, you know, I do so many things on my phone, like reading and you know, listening to podcasts. I'm like everything I do on my phone, but I have no attachment to that thing at all. I mean, I'd be sad if...

Yasmin: Is that because you know, it's backed up? Is that because you know that it's up in the cloud somewhere and so you will always be able to access everything that's on there anyway?

Lori: I don't really know why, actually, because I'd be really sad if I broke it. I mean, it was not a cheap phone. So I'd be I'd be kind of sad if I if I broke it, but it wouldn't be that kind of, that emotional thing. Like, "Oh, my phone! Oh, no! Oh, no!" You know, like feeling sorry for the phone. But like, Oh my God, even our car. I love our car so much. And I'm not a car person. But it's like it's a really cool car. And I really really love it. And it's it's so awesome. And the other day my partner banged his head on the the...what do you call it? The thing in the back? The hatch for the...yeah, it's like a hatchback. And he banged his head on the hatch. And of course, I felt sorry for him because he hurt himself. But I really felt like, "Oh, no, the car's gonna be sad because it hurt him."

Yasmin: Oh!

Lori: Oh, sorry for the car. 'Cause I'm like, "Oh, no, no, the car feels bad because it..."

Yasmin: Maybe it did feel bad. You don't know.

Lori: It makes no sense at all. But I mean, it was a real feeling. And I don't know if that means I'm crazy or if I maybe just have a little extra of this, this empathy that she was talking about in the video.

Yasmin: It could be a mix of the two!

Yasmin: Oh, dear me.

Lori: Crazy, crazy. But I wonder what did you think about...she also shows not only that dinosaur robot, but the, the I think it's called a Paro seal?

Yasmin: Oh, yes. With the dementia patients.

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: That was really interesting. Because she was saying that it wasn't taking away from from humans taking care of it. It was basically substituting animals...

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: ...taking care of them, which poses an interesting question. Like, should should we be using animals to help people? for which different things should we be allowing this to happen? Because, you know, a lot of people have dogs or service pets or you know, if you're dealing with anxiety or depression, and a lot of people are recommended to get a pet to help them with things.

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: But I mean, that little seal was so cute. And I suppose in one way or another, it It helps them better than having, I suppose, a different sort of animal with these patients.

Lori: Right. Yeah. from, from what I've seen being around in the nursing homes and with people that are in the, what they call the Memory Care Unit, I think in the States...

Lori: ...people with Alzheimer's and dementia. I don't think it would be safe for the animal a lot of times if you tried to use a real animal for animal therapy, because there's those poor people. Yeah, there, you just can't predict what they're going to do. And they don't you know, they have dementia, so they can't.

Yasmin: Yeah,

Yasmin: And gradually, they're not really able to take care of the animal.

Lori: Yeah. And so I've heard that those seals and other things like that can actually be really helpful for them. But not replacing human love and care. But just you know, they really, they need things 24 hours a day and you just can't have a person there, caring for them constantly, all day long. And you can't



Paro seal - Therapeutic robot

give them a pet so I thought, yeah, I thought it was a nice, a nice thing...

Yasmin: Absolutely.

Lori: ...in general.

Yasmin: This...it's great that they have things like that, that people can, you know, people can use to their advantage.

Lori: Yeah.

Yasmin: And it did look super cute. I mean, I would definitely be connec-- attached to that thing

Lori: Me too, me too!

Yasmin: It looks like a little baby seal, it looked like it had a little dummy in its mouth. It was just so cute.

Lori: Yeah, the little eyes with the long eyelashes. It was very cute.

End of conversation part 1 (stay tuned for part 2)

All right, I am going to stop the conversation there for today. Yasmin and I have a lot more to talk about, but I'll do that as a part two just to keep this episode from getting way too long. And if you didn't do it already, this also gives you time to watch Kate Darling's presentation before you listen to part 2. I think you'll get more out of the conversation if you can compare what we say to your own reactions.

I hope you enjoyed this episode and it gave you something interesting to think about and talk over with your friends, colleagues, or perhaps even in your English class.

And seriously, I'm curious: are there any machines or non-living objects that you have an emotional connection to? I mean, now you know all about me and my weird emotional connection with my rice cooker and my car, so it's only fair that I get to hear about yours as well. Feel free to stop by betteratenglish.com and post your reaction in the comments.

Oh, and if you want to **connect with the delightful Yasmin**, you'll find the link to her italki profile in the show notes and transcript as well.

Finally, if you enjoy or benefit from my podcasts, you know what's coming, don't you...I'm going to say it anyway...it would make me super happy if you leave a review or rating wherever you listen. In fact, while you're at it why not go on a thank you spree and leave nice ratings and reviews for all of your favorite podcasts. It only takes a few minutes, and you can totally make a podcaster's day by doing that.

That's all for this time. This is Lori, signing off from Better at English headquarters, wishing you and your little robot friends an inspired and productive day. Bye for now!

Videos mentioned in the introduction

Short video of someone "torturing" a robot dinosaur (part of a research experiment). Make sure you watch it with sound. What do you feel as you watch this?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAVtkh0mL20>

Kate Darling: Why we have an emotional connection to robots (TED talk)

https://www.ted.com/talks/kate_darling_why_we_have_an_emotional_connection_to_robots?language=en

Connect with Yasmin on italki (she would be a great tutor!)

<https://www.italki.com/teacher/6933264?ref=affbetteraten>

Full disclosure: I make a tiny commission if you sign up for paid lessons on italki via my links. It is the only online teaching platform that I really feel good about recommending, because I use and benefit from it myself. Italki is not a sponsor.

Other things mentioned in the Conversation

Short video of the baby elephant going the wrong way (this will make you cry).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7ok_6QlbpE

Into the Wilderness podcast episode with Levison Wood (the podcast the Yasmin mentions)

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/137-levison-wood-last-giants-isolation-elephants-poaching/id1037718896?i=1000470334115>

Lori's ridiculously cute rice cooker

<https://www.yumasiaworld.com/panda/>

PARO therapy robot (the cute seal robot used with Alzheimer's patients)

<https://www.google.com/search?q=paro+seal>

<https://www.parseal.co.uk/>

Military robots get awards, nicknames and funerals

<https://www.nbcnews.com/technolog/soldiers-3-robots-military-bots-get-awards-nicknames-funerals-4B11215746>

Supplementary material

Short video about "emotional support" robots

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4GvXmkyKV8>

Kate Darling's website

You can find links to all her great videos from the page below, including the talk that Yasmin and Lori discuss "Why We Have an Emotional Connection to Robots"

<http://www.katedarling.org/speakingpress>