The construal of empathy in language: Strategies at the level of speech sounds

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It is a well-known fact that empathy can be construed by means of paradigmatic gestural choices and lexical alternates, framing the communicative situation from a variety of perspectives and negotiating the nature of the social interaction that takes place between the participants in the speech event. In this paper we discuss strategies that pertain to levels of linguistic structure below the lexicon and argue that a number of linguistic models on variation and attitudes such as Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles et al. 1987), Audience Design (Bell 1984) and Speaker Design (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998) can be situated along a scenario of communicative situations that all involve the (conscious or unconscious) manipulation of linguistic variants which enable interlocutors to locate themselves and place one another on a cline from empathy to apathy. The framework within which this talk is envisaged is that of Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Kristiansen and Dirven 2008; Geeraerts and Kristiansen 2010), a novel trend within Cognitive Linguistics that examines the meaning of language variation within social contexts.

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