

The expression of affect in spoken English

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When we speak, we do not merely transfer information from one individual to another; we also give expression to a whole range of emotions, attitudes and evaluations. This phenomenon, 'pervasive, because no text or utterance is ever absolutely free from it [and] elusive, because it may be difficult to say exactly what it is that gives the text or utterance that certain quality' (Dossena & Jucker 2007:7), is known as *affect*.

At present, affect tends to sit on the periphery of models of language and language proficiency, treated as an 'optional overlay of emotion' (Thompson & Hunston 2000:20) to the expression of 'core' informational meaning.

Affect can be broken down into two core areas: emotion and attitudes. Emotion covers feelings such as anger and happiness, while attitudes are an individual's opinions of the world, formed through predisposition, experience and ideology, and which colour his or her perceptions. Attitudes are realised in language by *evaluation* (Thompson & Hunston 2000), which are essentially good or bad value judgements. Evaluation 'does not occur in discrete items but can be identified across whole phrases, or units of meaning, and ... is cumulative' (Hunston 2007:39).

Affect can be expressed towards many different objects. These are most likely to be previous utterances, the proposition being made, agents implicated within the proposition, the listener or the speaker; there could, however, be still more.

Many different resources are employed in the expression of affect, and they interact in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. To reflect this, this study is grounded in a *complex systems* view of language (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008). The study considers how different elements of language interact within a specific context to create affective meaning.

Complex systems theory and language

'Tidy explanations survive as long as all that has to be explained is the meaning of sentences invented by armchair linguists' (Coates 1990:62).

Coates captures one of the tensions at the heart of applied linguistics. By focusing on small, manageable areas of the language and producing clear, tidy explanations, we can lose sight of the fact that real-life language simply does not behave in this fashion. In reality, the production of meaning is a highly complex process involving the interaction of a variety of components: lexis, grammar, phonology, discourse-level features, paralinguistic and non-verbal features and, crucially, context. Indeed, language exhibits many, if not all, of the properties of a *complex*

dynamic system (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008), and treating it as such provides a suitable framework for investigating the expression of affect.

Complex systems involve a large number of components interacting, often in a non-linear fashion (i.e. when a change in input results in a disproportionate change in output). Complex systems exhibit certain key features. Let us consider these, following Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008), with examples of how they relate to language:

1. **Heterogeneity of elements and agents:** the elements or agents in a complex system are often extremely diverse, and can be *processes* rather than entities, or even complex subsystems. Although the components may be diverse, they are interconnected – change in one component affects others. Language elements include phonetic and phonological features, lexis, grammar and discourse-level features; agents include users of the language (at an individual level) and society (at a higher level).
2. **Dynamics:** complex systems are in a permanent state of flux. Change takes place on *scales* (time) and *levels* (size): change may occur at the level of the whole system, a subsystem within it, or only a very small part of it. Different levels and scales influence each other upwards and downwards. Languages change on both micro levels (such as the introduction of a new word) and macro levels (such as changes in the formation of tenses), and both over short and long scales.
3. **Non-linearity:** due to the interconnected nature of the elements in a complex system, change can result which is out of proportion to the external stimulus. An example of this is the famous 'butterfly effect' (weather is an example of a complex system). Some language innovations spread rapidly through a language while others are ignored. Similarly, a slight change of intonation could render a completely different interpretation to an utterance.
4. **Openness:** complex systems are open. They can – and must – take on new elements and energy in order to remain in a state of *dynamic stability*, where the system is stable but not static or fixed. New words are constantly being created, either to label new developments in society and the world (the source of external energy), or from other languages through 'borrowed' words.
5. **Adaptation:** many complex systems are adaptive, meaning that change in one part of the system leads to change in the system as a whole, as it adapts to the new situation. Although languages are in constant flux, the basic requirement of intelligibility dictates that the language incorporates changes by adapting to new circumstances without losing its overall integrity.
6. **The importance of context:** context is crucial when considering complex systems – indeed, the context

within which a system operates cannot be considered separate from the system itself; it actually forms a part of the system. For example, no utterance in any language can be fully interpreted without consideration of the context it was uttered in, such as who uttered it, to whom and in what situation.

7. **Constructions:** *construction grammar* (Goldberg 2003) provides a model of grammar which is consistent with complex systems theory, and within which we shall frame this study. Constructions range from morphemes through words and chunks, up to abstract grammatical structures. Constructions carry inherent semantic or discoursal functions, rather than being 'empty' syntactic shells for meaning-carrying words. These semantic meanings can change over time – for example the *be going to* construction originally only denoted movement: *I'm going to the shops* (literally), but developed its present future meaning, as in: *I'm going to buy some bread there* (Perez 1990).

Discourse and complex systems

We try to understand language in use 'by looking at what the speaker says against the background of what he might have said but did not, as an actual in the *environment* of a potential' (Halliday 1978:52). This Systemic Functional viewpoint is echoed in a complex systems approach, where discourse is 'action in complex dynamic systems nested around the microgenetic moment of language using' (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008:163). Individuals adapt their utterances to take into account all relevant contextual features.

In discourse, different scales and levels interact to create complex systems phenomena we have already encountered: self-organisation (the progression of the discourse), emergence (of meaning and new semiotic entities within the discourse) and reciprocal causality (between the interlocutors, and between the speakers and the discourse itself). The expression of affective meaning can be viewed as an *emergent phenomenon* from the interaction of the elements and agents of the complex system of discourse.

Affective resources

Speakers use a range of resources within the language to create affective meaning: lexis, grammar, phonology, discourse-level features and context. We will term these *affective resources*, and consider them in turn.

Lexis

Individual lexemes

Some words and phrases serve purely affective functions; *brilliant*, for example, has no ideational meaning beyond the evaluative. However, the affective meaning of an *utterance* is not determined by lexis alone. The utterance *That was brilliant* could convey its 'natural' semantic meaning, but in a different context and with sarcastic intonation, it could also convey precisely the opposite meaning. As Vološinov (1986:68) notes regarding the

malleability of language: 'What is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is always a stable and self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign.' This is not to negate the importance of lexis, but merely to underline that it is one of several affective resources employed in an utterance; this holds true of all affective resources. In analysing a text, we need to consider the interaction of the affective resources.

There are other lexemes which encode ideational meanings whilst also expressing an affective *connotation*; these often exist in apposition to more affectively neutral alternatives. For example, the words *dog*, *doggie*, *cur* and *mutt* all have the same ideational referent, but encode rather different affective connotations.

Semantic prosody

A form of connotation can exist at another level through *semantic prosody* – how 'a given word or phrase may occur most frequently in the context of other words or phrases which are predominantly positive or negative in their evaluative orientation' (Channell 2000:38). In this way, connotations of collocants are 'inherited' by the word or phrase, often lending them an affective meaning which can develop across a text or texts. Corpus analysis of semantic prosodies has produced some interesting, not always intuitive, results – the phrase *par for the course*, for example, almost exclusively appears in cases of negative evaluation, so although it may not directly encode a negative connotation, it carries a negative semantic prosody (*ibid.*).

Grammar

Affective constructions

Wierzbicka (1987) argues that certain constructions encode specific affective meanings that cannot be accounted for by reference to conversational implicature alone. I will term such constructions, which encode an affective meaning either instead of or in addition to an ideational meaning, *affective constructions*. A simple example of an affective construction is the *What's X doing Y?* construction which expresses incongruity, e.g. *What's this scratch doing on the table?* (Kay & Fillmore 1999).

Other constructions, particularly focusing constructions, may contribute to the expression of affect indirectly. For example, non-defining *which*-clauses, particularly continuative ones, have been shown to encode an evaluative function in the majority of cases (Tao & McCarthy 2001). The use of such marked forms may be considered a case of *grammatical metaphor* (see below).

Grammatical metaphor

'A meaning may be realised by a selection of words that is different from that which is in some sense typical or unmarked. From this end, metaphor is variation in the expression of meanings' (Halliday 1994:341).

Halliday's concept of *grammatical metaphor*, analogous to the concept of lexical metaphor, holds that grammatical choices are made in the production of any utterance, and that such choices are meaningful. Halliday uses the term

congruent to describe typical or unmarked forms – a congruent form can be viewed as ‘the one that is most *functionally transparent or motivated*’ (Veltman 2003:321). Grammatical metaphor can encode affective meaning; by employing an incongruent form which does not encode any additional ideational meaning, an affective motivation is likely to be inferred.

Semantic prosody – collocations

The concept of collocation can be extended to constructions as *collocations* (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003) by considering the strength of attraction between a construction and its *collexemes* (lexis which appears in slots within the construction). Collocational analysis shows that the concept of semantic prosody, by extension, also applies to constructions; for example, collocational analysis of the construction *N waiting to happen* shows that it features strong negative lexical association, overwhelmingly favouring *accident* and *disaster* as collexemes (ibid.).

Features of spoken grammar

Spoken grammar differs from that of the written language and some of these differences have a bearing on the expression of affective meaning. For example, subject ellipsis, a feature of informal spoken English, frequently encodes affective meanings (Nariyama 2006). An elided utterance has a more subjective, evaluative nature (Zwicky 2005), as illustrated by the first sentence below:

Odd that Mary never showed up.
It is odd that Mary never showed up.

Similarly, the flexible word order of spoken English often serves evaluative functions. Carter and McCarthy (1995:151) note that tails (right-dislocated phrases) tend to occur ‘with phatic, interpersonal functions, usually in contexts of attitudes and evaluations’, for example: ‘Good winter wine *that*’.

Phonology and prosody

Phonemic modification

At the smallest phonological level, the modification of individual phonemes contributes to affective meaning. On a global level, anger (or heavily negative evaluation) increases the accuracy of articulation, while sadness reduces it (Kienast, Paeschke & Sendlmeier 1999).

Vowel duration also seems to be influenced, with happiness producing a particular lengthening effect on (stressed) vowels, followed by sadness and anger (a slight lengthening effect); conversely, fear produces a shortening effect (Kienast et al 1999).

Consonants are also modified when expressing emotions and strong attitudes. For example, a link between plosive and fricative sounds and the expression of affect, in particular aggression, has been noted (Walsh 1968) – ‘spitting out’ or ‘hissing’ words. A similar effect on the duration of voiced fricatives to that on stressed vowels has been observed, although in this case anger tends to cause a slight shortening (ibid.).

Intonation

It is notoriously difficult to establish any concrete rules regarding the use of intonation for affective purposes; although a relationship between intonation and affective meaning clearly exists, different speakers have their own ways of exploiting intonation patterns to produce affective results (Jenkins 2000). There appear to be norms at some level, however, although such norms vary from dialect to dialect (Tarone 1973).

Voice quality

The quality of a speaker’s voice – whether it is neutral, tense, breathy, whispery, harsh or creaky – is an important contributor to affective meaning. Again, the processes at work are complex, and voice quality combines with other phonological and prosodic features such as speech rate to create overall effect (Gobl & Chasaide 2003).

Other prosodic features

Marked stress, pauses and other features including those outlined above, combine to create *phonological metaphor*, which operates in a similar manner to grammatical metaphor (Veltman 2003).

Discourse-level features

Presupposition

Beyond what is directly said in a text lies a whole set of presuppositions, which together form a *presupposed world*, in which ‘the narrator has given form to an idea of what an agent and an action are, and of what an expected succession of events is’ (Marsen 2006:261). Within the presupposed world, identities are ascribed to agents by means of presupposition and relationships between agents and entities are constructed. These identities and relationships can provide the key to discovering the evaluative message of a text.

Implicature

Lexical choices (e.g. *young* versus *old*) reveal evaluative judgements; such choices are motivated, and *imply* ‘an association between these signs of identity and the actions that are ascribed to the agent’ (Marsen 2006:254). For example, an utterance such as ‘gangs of black youths were mugging elderly white women’ (Mumford & Power 2003:206) implies a connection between the identity of the agents as *black* and *youths* and their action of *mugging*.

Conversational implicature

Grice’s (1975) Co-operative Principle, with its maxims can explain much ‘unstated’ evaluation. Grice posits a set of unwritten conversation rules, or *maxims*, under the headings of *quantity*, *quality*, *relation* and *manner*. When a speaker *flouts* a maxim, the listener must deduce the reason for the speaker’s flouting of the maxim – this is a *conversational implicature*. Such conversational implicata are often attitudinal or affective.

One feature of conversational implicata is that they avoid direct expression of the speaker’s position and are therefore more difficult to challenge: ‘conversational implicata are not part of the meaning of the expressions to the employment of which they attach’ (ibid:58).

Dialogism

As speakers (or writers) are aware of their position in an ongoing dialogue, they position themselves with respect to previous statements and anticipate future responses. This process is known as dialogism (Vološinov 1986).

The degree to which speakers acknowledge the validity of differing viewpoints (*heteroglossia*) or refuse to acknowledge them at all (*monoglossia*) itself expresses affective meaning (Martin & White 2005), and increases or decreases the interpersonal cost of challenging a position (*ibid.*).

Context

Sociolinguistic considerations

The expression of affect is not a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Sociolinguistics describes how external sociological factors influence and constrain language; affect, on the other hand, is intensely personal and *internal*. However, sociolinguistic factors constitute a key element in determining how affect is encoded, and how its expression is interpreted.

In many formal contexts, for example a business meeting, it is not considered appropriate to behave in an overtly emotional manner, so the affective resources at a speaker's disposal are circumscribed. However, this does not mean that speakers do not express attitudes; rather that the 'rules of the game' change. The result is to amplify the affective resources used – what would be considered mild in another context would be interpreted more strongly. Conversely, a group of young British men talking in a pub will often use strongly affective language without encoding a particularly strong affective meaning, and will interpret each other's utterances accordingly.

Other sociolinguistic and contextual factors – relationships in terms of familiarity, age, gender and power – also affect the nature of the expression and interpretation of affective utterances. Thus sociolinguistic and contextual factors act as 'filters' in the expression and interpretation of affective judgements, as illustrated in Figure 1.

'The history of a sentence'

Another important aspect of context is what Halliday (2003) described as the *history of a sentence*. A sentence can be placed in a historical context from different aspects.

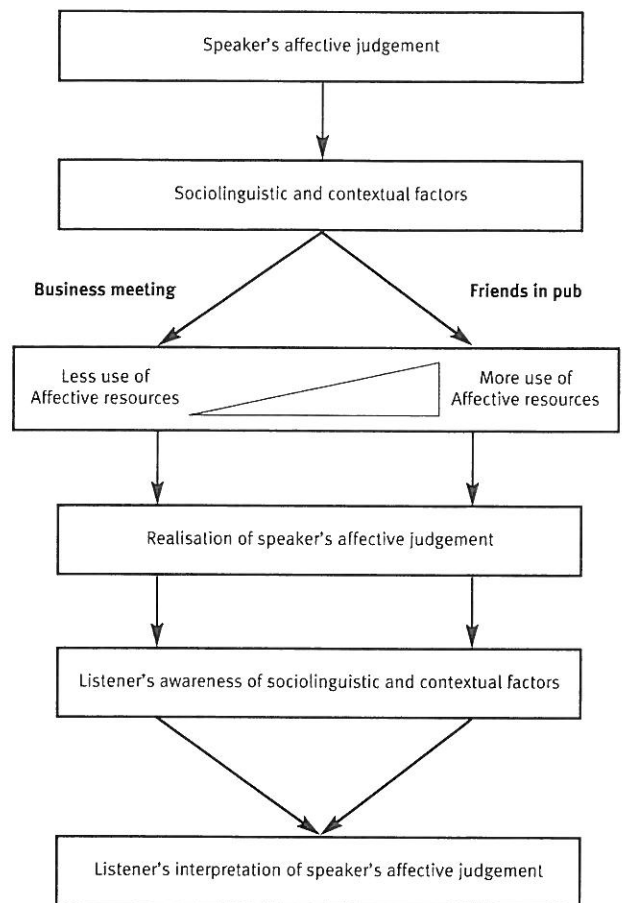
Intratextual history refers to the placing of the sentence in relation to the progression of the discourse as a whole. Schematic nuances are developed, and ideational meanings previously expressed create a framework within which the sentence is interpreted.

Development history is 'the prior semiotic experience of those who enact it, as performers or receivers' (*ibid.*:365). Development history can refer to the experience of an individual, a group or even all of humankind, and is the process by which many words and phrases develop affective connotations over time according to their usage within a particular speech community.

Other contextual features

Perhaps the most important factor in determining the type of affective resources deployed in an exchange will be the

Figure 1: Sociolinguistic and contextual filters in the expression of affect



personalities of the *agents* involved. Different people express themselves differently, with more or less affective expression, or with a tendency to use more positive or negative expression than others; equally importantly, some people will adapt their utterances more according to the personality and behaviour of the other participant(s) in the exchange, or conform more to sociolinguistic norms, than others. An understanding of the nature of the participants is therefore important for a reliable analysis.

The mode of the interaction will have effects. A telephone call will require different resources from a one-to-one conversation over a cup of coffee, due to the relative availability of non-verbal resources such as gestures and facial expressions.

Methodology

The data was analysed in terms of the affective resources discussed above and how they interact to produce the affective meanings expressed in the text. The discussion presented here is summarised and narrow in scope; it does not refer to all the resources employed. For a fuller discussion, see Elliott (2008).

Context and medium

The data is taken from a BBC current affairs radio phone-in programme from 2007, featuring questions to Nick Clegg

MP, leader of the British political party the Liberal Democrats (prior to his becoming Deputy Prime Minister). The sample features a question from a female caller about immigration policy, specifically whether Clegg would 'close the borders' of the UK.

The interaction patterns within the sample are complex. While the speaker is ostensibly addressing Clegg with her question, she has another audience – the radio listeners. Indeed, it could be argued that the listeners are her primary audience, since the speaker's motivation for phoning in to such a programme seems to be to make a point rather than to make a genuine enquiry of Mr Clegg.

The medium of a radio phone-in affects the exchange. The lack of visual contact prevents the use of non-verbal communication, which means that the language itself carries all the affective meaning.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the setting of a radio phone-in, and the position of Clegg as a senior politician, are likely to have the following effects:

- the dual audience means there are two sets of sociolinguistic norms at play – those between the speakers and the radio audience, and those between the speakers and each other
- the 'exposed' nature of the discussion, conducted in such a public forum, is likely to lead to circumspection, since the speakers will not want to appear unreasonable.

Agents

Nick Clegg has been an MEP, Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Europe (2005–06) and Home Affairs spokesperson (2006–07). In the past, he has described the issue of immigration as 'the dog-pit of British politics – a place only the political rottweilers are happy to enter' and arguing for a 'liberal managed immigration system' (Clegg 2007). The caller is Mary, a woman from Coventry. The programme was hosted by Victoria Derbyshire, a BBC Radio presenter.

Discussion

The analysis focused on the following extended turn by the caller, although the previous (and subsequent) parts of the discussion were also considered.

'Um ... We have open borders within Europe. Millions of people can come in here potentially. Um ... (unclear) I want to ask you, when did you, or any of the other two leaders, ask the people of this country if this is what they want? It's not your country. Will you close the borders within Europe if we find that we are totally swamped? Our culture and our way of life have changed beyond belief, people are scared of the extent of immigration, I believe one in four in Boston, Lincolnshire is an immigrant. Would you close our borders to people from Europe, let alone the rest of the world, if the people of this country became so distressed at ... you know, I just want to know – would you close the borders, or are you so keen on Europe that you don't care how many people come here?'

The text reveals multiple objects of evaluation:

- *Immigration* and *immigrants*. Immigrants are subdivided into those from Europe and those from the rest of the world.

- *The people of this country* (or just *people*), consistently positioned as victims in the text: *people are scared of the extent of immigration: when did you ... ask the people of this country if this is what they want?* The speaker positions herself with this group, which includes the listeners.
- *Politicians* – specifically *party leaders*, and in particular Clegg himself, consistently evaluated negatively.

Throughout her discourse, the speaker employs *bare assertions* – statements with no hedging employed – to create a strongly monoglossic feel, not acknowledging any alternative viewpoints. The evaluation builds through the text; we will consider two utterances of particular interest in depth (for full analysis, see Elliott 2008).

Utterance 1:

'Will you close the borders within Europe if we find that we are totally swamped? Our culture and our way of life have changed beyond belief, people are scared of the extent of immigration ...'

The speaker uses the strongly negative term *swamped*. The term *swamped* has an interesting developmental history. It has a particular resonance in British political discourse on immigration – Margaret Thatcher was accused of racism when she used the term in 1979, and further controversy was caused in 2002 by the then Home Secretary David Blunkett's use of the term. The term *swamped* is so loaded as to create a qualitatively different feel to the discourse in affective terms. Also, *beyond belief* serves a similarly strong role.

Utterance 2:

'Would you close our borders to people from Europe, let alone the rest of the world, if the people of this country became so distressed at ...'

Use of the *let alone* construction posits a scalar relationship between *Europe* and *the rest of the world* (Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor 1988), which would naturally be interpreted in terms of the relative desirability of immigration from the two parts of the world; this scalar relationship is reinforced by marked stress and intonation accorded to both *let alone* and *rest*.

Here, *so* is heavily marked, with marked stress, a markedly low fall, heavy sibilance on the vowel /s/ and an elongated diphthong /əu/, conveying an impression of anger (Kienast, Paeschke & Sendlmeier 1999, Walsh 1968).

The utterance is left unfinished, which naturally raises the question of how it would finish; grammatically, completion with a *that*-clause to create a cause-and-effect relationship is suggested. We can only speculate as to what the unexpressed effect would be, but we can note the following:

- The cause *if the people ... became so distressed at ...* evokes a fairly extreme set of circumstances, which naturalises an expectation that the response would be proportionally strong.
- The impression of an extreme response from the British people is reinforced by the fact that the utterance remains unfinished. After producing some strong, direct statements, the speaker feels unable to articulate these

consequences. She then appears to backtrack – *you know, I just want to know ...* – suggesting a reasonable position on the part of the speaker, especially with the use of *just* (with a low intonational fall).

We cannot know how the speaker intended to complete the utterance, but what is important is the interpretation that the unfinished utterance, in conjunction with previous utterances, naturalises – the *perceived* attitude. This seems to be that the consequences of the people of Britain becoming so *distressed* are rather dark – too dark to be spelled out on a radio programme.

As can be seen, the utterances need to be considered in the light of the full text, plus surrounding turns and the wider context, to realise how the interaction of the different affective resources creates the full evaluative effect.

Global overview

- The use of noun phrases (*the people of this country, people*) and pronouns (*we, our*) throughout to position the people of Britain as victims of both immigration and the politicians Mary holds responsible. The use of the noun phrase *the people of this country* is interesting; concordance analysis shows that it almost exclusively occurs in political rhetoric, and that it carries a strong positive semantic prosody (Elliott 2008).
- The repeated use of bare assertions (often in conjunction with subjective statements) lends a monoglossic feel to the whole turn: the speaker does not acknowledge alternatives. This is reinforced by (phonologically) prosodic features such as a rapid speech rate for such utterances and low final falls in intonation.
- The evaluation builds throughout the turn, reaching a peak with the unfinished utterance, as the layers of evaluation interact to reinforce each other and amplify the effect.
- The complex interaction patterns and multiple audiences have an effect on the speaker as she attempts to tailor her message to the different audiences and conform to different sociolinguistic norms simultaneously (it may have been an inability to reconcile these with the intended message that led the speaker to abort the utterance).

What is particularly striking is how different affective resources interact to produce the overall effect, and how the evaluation is dependent on previous utterances (and previous texts, as in the case of *swamped*). An analysis focusing on only one or two of these areas, or on individual utterances in isolation, would not be able to account fully for the extremely strong affective meaning expressed throughout.

Conclusions

We have seen that different elements of language combine to create affective meaning in a highly interrelated manner, but that some individual elements can create a particularly strong effect which reverberates throughout the whole text. Even what is not said often can contribute greatly to the

overall effect, as the unfinished utterance exemplifies.

The text we examined was a telephone-based exchange with a whole host of other contextual and sociolinguistic factors in play relating to *participants, medium, (multiple) audiences and interaction patterns*. The last two points in particular raise interesting questions for future research regarding their effects, since they apply whenever more than two people are involved in an exchange, even in a passive listening role.

These reflections raise questions regarding models of language and language proficiency – affective meaning, a central plank of communication, and often its main motivation, is underrepresented in current models and is a prime candidate for in-depth exploration, which would enrich our understanding of language as a whole. Similarly, the study of its progression as a key part of language proficiency could reap dividends, with consequences for language assessment – although obstacles such as the high context-sensitivity and deeply personal nature of affective communication are by no means easy to overcome within an assessment context.

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