

**Exploring novel impact pathways in variationist research:  
Discourse variation in healthcare settings**

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In this workshop, we address the societal relevance of discourse variation research, with a specific focus on healthcare settings. While medical interactions have been thoroughly explored from a qualitative perspective, quantitative variationist research in healthcare talk is relatively rare; even though such research has the potential to identify clinically significant, generalisable patterns in language use with implications for providers as well as patients. We demonstrate the value of applying variationist methods to physician-patient consultations by highlighting a context in which the interpretation of discourse-pragmatic features has diagnostic and therapeutic consequences. Our objective is to show that the cross-disciplinary study of institutionally framed talk can provide novel opportunities for researchers interested in discourse variation while generating meaningful insights for practitioners.

To this end, we present a systematic variationist analysis of the use of I DON'T KNOW in the Verilogue corpus, a large US-wide database of physician-patient interactions. Our analysis of I DON'T KNOW in child counselling sessions reveals that correct interpretation of the construction's interactional meaning crucially depends on its phonetic and prosodic realization, its optional modification through interpolation, and its varying distribution in question-answer adjacency pair sequences. We contrast phonetically non-reduced tokens that carry primary stress on *know*, are modified with *even* or *really*, and are followed by an explanation for the declaration of insufficient knowledge with phonetically reduced and non-modified tokens that constitute the sole element of a turn. The later uses do not generally signal a lack of knowledge. Instead, these reduced/non-modified tokens tend to signal children's attempts to decline or curtail a topic, thus signalling their resistance to answering unwelcome questions and discussing problematic topics. Counsellors' awareness of and sensitivity to the differential use of I DON'T KNOW and other such stance indicators may impact their ability to develop rapport with patients and offer effective therapeutic interventions.

The presentation of our analysis is intended to initiate a discussion about novel impact pathways in variationist research. Whether it is in healthcare or other service-oriented fields, targeted analyses rooted in sociolinguistic theory have the potential to expand the audience for discourse variation research.