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The sound shape of words in the mental lexicon: insights from studies on imitation between talkers

It has long been assumed that imitation in conversational interaction affects the phonetic characteristics of the utterances produced by both talkers. Recent work has indeed shown that perceived similarity in pronunciation between talkers increases over the course of the interaction and persists beyond its conclusion. This has been taken as indicating that the representations associated with words in the mental lexicon for each talker may dynamically evolve during conversation under the influence of the other talker's speech patterns, and retain the traces of that influence once the conversation has ended. This finding seems difficult to reconcile with standard abstractionist models of speech production and speech processing, and provides support for the existence of an episodic-memory component, which may, however, be combined with abstract phonological representations. Thus, phonetic convergence has important implications for the current debate on how words are represented in the mental lexicon, and may be used as a probe for exploring the nature of these lexical representations. In this talk, I will present a number of studies recently conducted on different varieties of French in that domain.