

Oh! You're so Cute: Use of Baby Talk in Veterinary Settings

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In many cultures, adults alter their speech directed to infants and young children. Referred to as motherese, parentese, or baby talk, this form of speech is also evident in the way humans communicate with animals and is known as "secondary baby talk." In this paper, I applied speech act theory to content analyze approximately twenty hours of human-animal interaction, drawing out the relevant speech acts in secondary baby talk to a wide variety of animals during veterinary visits. This study contributes to our understanding of the communicative practices that occur within human-animal interactions.

The analysis revealed that during visits to the veterinarian, directives were performed with the greatest frequency followed by expressives that communicate the speaker's psychological state. Assertives, commissives, and declarations were less likely to be used by participants. When the sources of baby talk were compared, it was observed that guardians were more likely to use directives while the medical experts were more likely to use commissives, assertives, and expressives. The use of commissives, assertives and expressives by the vets points to the communicative functions served by speech acts.

Finally, the results of the study demonstrated systematic variations in speech acts. In cases where the respondents were speaking for the animal, they were more likely to use assertives. When talking about the animal, the interactants were more likely to use expressives. When talking to the animal, the interactants were more likely to use directives. In all these instances, the results support the articulation of a functional perspective in studying interaction in the veterinary clinic. Implications can be drawn for developing communication skills training and communicative competence assessment for veterinary personnel.