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Accommodating New Vistas

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Abstract

In this special issue, we aim to provide a diverse sample of current research that uses and/or extends Communication Accommodation Theory in innovative ways. With this prologue, we provide a general overview of the tenets and recent developments of theory, discussing how each of the seven original research articles included herein fits in the theory's ever-evolving framework and body of research.

Keywords: communication accommodation theory

It is extremely common—and one could argue human nature—to change our style of speaking as a response to the behavior of our conversational partners. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) is a framework developed to identify and account for how people adjust language and other communicative behaviors in different social contexts. In the 40-plus years since its inception as *speech accommodation theory*, CAT has emerged as “one of the most influential behavioral theories of communication” (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005, p. 147). While CAT has been characterized as a theory that “. . . can be beneficially applied to any situation where people from different groups or cultures come into contact” (Griffin, 2009, pp. 397–398), its tendrils have extended beyond social and applied settings emphasizing cultural and group differences to interpersonal and relational contexts (Giles and Soliz, 2014; Harwood et al., 2006; Palomares et al., forthcoming). CAT's attention to both interpersonal and intergroup dimensions of social relationships allows it to capture the

socio-historical, attitudinal, and relational landscape of our interactions with strangers and close friends alike.

Since the last special issue in *Language and Communication* dedicated to CAT (Coupland and Giles, 1988), the theory has undergone a quantum leap in terms of both its theoretical content and the empirical interest it has garnered across disciplines and applied contexts. A recent meta-analysis of empirical work up to 2010 found that more than half of all CAT research has been completed since 2000 (Soliz and Giles, 2014). Although ethnolinguistic/cultural and intergenerational contexts have historically received the most attention from CAT scholars, there has been significant growth in family and legal contexts with growing intersections with healthcare, instructional, and mediated contexts in recent years (Gnisci et al., forthcoming). Indeed, the fact that there are a significant number of papers in this special issue devoted to accommodative condundra and dilemmas in medical settings is a testament to the growing realization that accommodative moves can have life-and-death implications.

Through this work, a number of area-specific satellite theories and models have been developed based on CAT, including ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles and Johnson, 1981), group vitality theory (Harwood et al., 1994), the communication predicament model of aging (Ryan et al., 1986), and the intergroup accommodation model of tourism (Giles et al., 2013). There are no signs of this empirical work decreasing, as numerous empirical articles have been published since the last meta-analysis in 2010 across a variety of contexts (see Soliz, forthcoming). These contexts include the traditional purview of CAT research mentioned above often with more specific foci. For instance, whereas previous work has investigated accommodative dynamics of patient-physician interactions, more recent scholarship provides insight into *specific* illnesses and conditions, such as Baker et al.'s (2011) inquiry on patient-physician accommodation in managing musculoskeletal disorders and Bonnin's (2014) analysis of interaction in psychotherapeutic settings. Scholars are also identifying areas of inquiry at the intersections of these contexts such as the role of dialects and speech codes in fostering educational community environments (Bigham, 2010).

That said, a number of these new inquiries also represent understudied or new domains for CAT research. The theory has been applied, for example, to better understand online and digitally mediated interactions such as decision-making in an online context (e.g., Huffaker et al., 2011; Wang and Fussell, 2010), convergence in text-based computer-mediated communication (e.g., Scissors et al., 2009; Riordan et al., 2013), and accommodation via social media such as Twitter (e.g., Danescu-Niculescu-Mizel et al., 2011), blogs (e.g., Goode and Robinson, 2013), and online fan groups (Reysen et al., 2010). Similarly, CAT has been applied to new topics in traditional media realms, including investigations of race- and gender-based evaluation of sports reporting (Mastro et al., 2012) and analysis of accommodation in fictional storylines on television dramas (Mickel et al., 2013). Finally, in the last ten years, CAT has been applied to the study of human-to-computer interfaces (Oviatt et al., 2004; Tomko and Rosenfeld, 2006), as well as interaction between non-human primates (Candiotti et al., 2012). The heuristic value of CAT is clearly evident in the scope and endurance of research applying the theory.

Although much of the early research using CAT was purely quantitative, scholars have also employed various qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, conversational and interaction analysis) in their inquiries in more recent years (Gallois et al., forthcoming; Gallois and Giles, in press; see <http://catqualstudies.weebly.com> for a representative sample of such studies). Likewise, scholars have coupled CAT with linguistic methodological software such as the LIWC (Pennebaker and Francis, 1999) in the Zelig Quotient for normalizing accommodation (Jones et al., 2014). This methodological pluralism is evident in this special issue, which includes studies analyzing interview data and recorded interactions qualitatively (e.g., Chakrani, Hajek, Hewett et al., Nilsson) and with new text analysis tools (e.g., Watson et al.), using classic (e.g., Gasiorek et al.) and more advanced (e.g., Van Hofwegen) quantitative methods.

In this special issue, we aim to provide a diverse sample of current research that uses and/or extends CAT in innovative ways. In the remainder of this prologue, we provide a general overview of the tenets and recent developments of theory (for different histories of the evolution of CAT, see Gallois et al., 2005; McGlone and Giles, 2011), discussing how each of the articles included herein fits in the theory's ever-evolving framework and body of research.

Giles (e.g., 1973) first developed CAT to explain how we manage certain facets of interpersonal communication, particularly our choice of languages, accents, and dialects. In short, CAT states that we use communication to manage our social relationships: we affiliate and disaffiliate with others not only through what we say, but also how we say it. The theory proposes that speakers come to interactions with an *initial orientation*, which is informed by past interpersonal and intergroup experiences (see Dragojevic and Giles, 2014) as they relate to their interlocutor(s), as well as the prevailing socio-historical context. In interaction, individuals adjust their communicative behavior (which may be verbal, written, computer-mediated) based on their evaluations of their fellow interactants' communicative characteristics, as well as their own desires to maintain a positive personal and social identity. Each individual in an interaction evaluates and makes attributions about the interaction, as well as about the other person, on the basis of their perceptions of behavior in the conversation. These attributions and evaluations then affect the quality and nature of both present and future interactions between these communicators (for a schematic of the full CAT model, see for example, Dragojevic et al., in press).

Accommodation, as a process, refers to the way interactants adjust their communication behaviors to either diminish or enhance social and communicative differences vis-à-vis their fellow speakers. The initial and primary focus of the theory examined motivations underlying the interactional strategies of *convergence* and *divergence*, and the social consequences of these interactive moves (e.g., Giles et al., 1991). Convergence occurs when interactants' communication styles become, to varying degrees, more similar to another or others present, and it has been proposed that there are optimal levels and rates of such accommodative moves (Giles and Smith, 1979). Generally, convergence is motivated by a desire to affiliate with or decrease social distance to a fellow interactant. As such, convergence is a means of signaling attraction to, respect for, and/or seeking the approval of, another person. Additional motivations and/or outcomes of convergence include under-

scoring common social identities, negotiating joint goals, conveying empathy, and developing relational and family bonds with others (see Harwood et al., 2006). Convergence can be symmetrical or asymmetrical: in other words, they can be reciprocated or not (see Gallois and Giles, 1988). Those in socially subordinate roles generally converge more to those in socially dominant roles than vice versa. However, this is not set in stone: in this issue, Nilsson's study of the use of specific dialect features in West Sweden shows that both dialect and "leveled" (i.e., more Standard) speakers both accommodate each other.

Divergence occurs when interactants' communication styles become, to varying degrees, more different or deviant from the communicative desires and/or norms of others. Generally, divergence is motivated by a desire to increase or maintain social distance to a fellow interactant, though it can also be used as a means to influence the nature or quality of an interaction (e.g., speaking more slowly to slow down an ultra-fast speaker). CAT has assumed that speakers have the ability to converge and diverge as they desire; in this special issue, Gasiorok and colleagues examine what speakers do when the situation demands that they linguistically accommodate (i.e., converge), but they are unable to because of a language barrier.

By their nature, both accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors shape and are shaped by relational, identity, and attitudinal (e.g., perceptions of individuals and groups) factors. Specifically, individuals have expectations and cognitive schemas about what constitutes appropriate and desirable accommodation depending on the general context, the sociocultural backdrop to an interaction, and idiosyncratic preferences. As such, a defining feature of CAT is that it attends to interactions that are either interpersonal or intergroup in nature (Palomares et al., forthcoming) and sometimes both (see Dragojevic and Giles, 2014). Intergroup communication is said to occur when a person in a social interaction defines self or other in terms of their social identity (i.e., as a group member, see Giles and Giles, 2012) rather than their personal identity (i.e., as a unique individual with their own particular mood, temperament, and personality). Indeed, the interplay between interpersonal and intergroup elements can be complex and fascinating: in this issue, Van Hofwegen examines how adolescents can accommodate (or not accommodate) to salient social groups in conversation, and how their prior relationship with an interlocutor can influence if and how they accommodate. In Chakrani's study herein of conversations within a group of Arabic speakers from different dialectal backgrounds, it becomes clear that participants' attitudes about different dialects—and by extension, the social groups those dialects represent—influence the extent to which they converge or diverge with another individual in interaction.

Influenced by social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1978) and its communicative extension (ethnolinguistic identity theory, cited above), CAT has argued that the more a person psychologically invests in, or affiliates with, a valued ingroup (be it ethnic, family, or a sexual orientation), the more they will want to accentuate that social identity through their communication. In this special issue, Hajek provides an absorbing analysis of how early mid-life gay men manage their identity by converging and diverging with younger gay men.

Although CAT's original focus was convergence and divergence, in the years since its inception, a number of other means and modes of adapting communication have been invoked and studied (e.g., Coupland et al., 1988), resulting in a broad array of behaviors to

be classified as *accommodative* or *nonaccommodative*. With this expansion of behaviors under study, research using CAT has also increasingly addressed interactants' subjective *perceptions* of each other's behaviors. The adjustments individuals make for each other are based on where they *believe* others to be (see Thakerar et al., 1982), which may or may not be where those others actually are. There are times when individuals "hit the mark," attuning their communication to the preferences and needs of others. However, there are also times when they "miss": individuals may not adjust their communication enough in the appropriate manner (i.e., underaccommodation) or do so in a manner which seems to be overkill, and which can be attributed as patronizing (i.e., overaccommodation). Thus, while accommodative moves can certainly be assessed objectively, the *subjective* perceptions of speakers and listeners are also important to consider, as these generally dictate the overall evaluation of the communication. In this special issue, Hewett and colleagues provide a fascinating (and, arguably, cautionary) look into how doctors from different specialties underaccommodate each other in their entries on patients' medical charts.

In recent years, the major tenets of CAT have been (re)formulated in a set of four Principles (Dragojevic et al., in press; Giles, in press). The first of these claims that communicators will increasingly accommodate to the communicative patterns as well as the conversational goals and affective dispositions they believe characteristic of others, the more they wish to (a) affiliate (e.g., decrease social distance) with them on either an individual or group level (see Dragojevic and Giles, 2014), and/or (b) to make their messages more easily understood. Being the recipient of perceived accommodation, the second Principle states, increasingly and cumulatively decreases perceived social distance, enhances interactional satisfaction and positive evaluations of speakers, and facilitates mutual understanding and a sense of shared identity (e.g., Harwood, 2000; Soliz and Harwood, 2006). Such benefits, however, depend on the intentions and motives (positive or negative) attributed to the accommodator (Gasiorek and Giles, 2012).

The third Principle claims that communicators will increasingly nonaccommodate the communicative patterns they believe characteristic of their interactants the more they wish to (a) disaffiliate (i.e., increase social distance) with them on either an individual or group level, or (b) make their messages more difficult to understand (Coupland et al., 1988) or otherwise regulate the quality of the interaction. Finally, the fourth Principle states that being the recipient of perceived nonaccommodation (e.g., speech maintenance or divergence) increasingly and cumulatively increases perceived social distance, diminishes interactional satisfaction and positive attributions about speakers, and can impede mutual understanding. As alluded to above, such nonaccommodation can take the form of either overaccommodation or underaccommodation relative to a recipient's needs, with the former typically resulting in more negative evaluative responses than the latter (Gasiorek, forthcoming; Gasiorek and Giles, 2012; under review). However, as above, the negative outcomes associated with nonaccommodation depend on the intentions and motives (positive or negative) attributed to the nonaccommodator.

Together, these principles outline how speakers adjust their language use in interaction to both manage social distance and regulate comprehension. As they stand, however, they speak primarily to the content and outcomes of a single interaction. The accumulation of these interactions, and their outcomes, over time is not currently addressed by CAT's

framework. In this issue, both Chakrani's and Nilsson's studies speak to this question: Chakrani's results underscore how asymmetries and instability in interdialectal accommodation in Arabic may result in language shift among members of the Arabic-speaking diaspora. Nilsson's study, in turn, shows how interpersonal accommodation on the micro-level can translate into linguistic change or stability on the macro level. This work opens up new vistas for CAT, theoretically and empirically.

As we hope this brief prologue has highlighted, the goal of this special issue is to showcase cross-disciplinary scholarship that applies CAT in a manner in which the context, methods, and/or focus of inquiry extends CAT in novel and innovative ways. Following the issue's seven empirical articles, an epilogue by Pitts and Harwood synthesizes the body of work in this special issue, highlighting important conceptual, methodological, and practical implications relevant to CAT theorizing and research. Building on current developments with a visionary perspective, they propose new questions and connections that pave the way for future work in exciting new directions, for example, by construing accommodation in lifespan terms, and as a communicative skill.

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