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Communication Accommodation Theory

Howard Giles and Tania Ogay
University of California, Santa Barbara

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a conversation between an older male professor of British origin, a male African American undergraduate student, and a female postdoctoral student from Switzerland taking place in an American University. Think of the variety of social dimensions involved in this situation: gender, culture and ethnicity, social and occupational status, age, and so forth. How are the different personal and social identities negotiated during the interaction? Who changes his or her communicative style to accommodate whom? What are the outcomes of such accommodating behaviors on the relationship between the interactants? In what follows, we shall make frequent use of this scenario.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a wide-ranging framework aimed at predicting and explaining many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction. It explores the different ways in which we accommodate our communication, our motivations for doing so, and the consequences. CAT addresses interpersonal communication issues, yet also links it with the larger context of the *intergroup* stakes of an encounter. In other words, sometimes our communications are driven by our personal identities as Janet or Richard while at others—and sometimes within the very same interaction—our words, nonverbals, and demeanor are fueled, instead and almost entirely, by our social identities as members of groups; that is Janet now speaks not so much *as the individual Janet* but as someone who represents communication scholars to groups of chemists, biologists, and physicists.

Since its inception in the early 1970s, CAT has undergone several conceptual refinements and theoretical elaborations, as exemplified by moves from speech into the nonlinguistic (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). Originally a sociopsychological model exploring accent and

bilingual shifts in interactions (Giles, 1973; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973), CAT has been expanded into an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (N. Coupland & Jaworski, 1997, pp. 241–242). Although language remains a central focus of the theory, other communicative symbols that people use to signal their identities (e.g., dress and hair styles, cosmetics, and eating patterns) can also be understood from a CAT perspective. Because the extensive amount of CAT research and theorizing can be somewhat overwhelming, predictive models have been developed in an effort to better organize and summarize thinking on these matters. In addition, recent theoretically driven reviews of research, engaged in a more textually flowing nonpropositional fashion, have emerged. References for specific work in these domains are presented at the end of the chapter. For now, we’ll begin with a presentation of the basic principles and concepts of the theory, and thereafter we will review different areas where CAT has been applied and expanded.

BASIC PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPTS OF CAT

Basic Principles of CAT

- Communication is influenced not only by features of the immediate situation and participants’ initial orientations to it, but also by the socio-historical context in which the interaction is embedded. For example, an isolated encounter between any particular police officer and citizen could be marred by alleged and past hostile relations between other members of these two groups in the neighborhood or on the media (as would be apparent probably for many citizens of color in the Rampant area of Los Angeles);
- Communication is not only a matter of merely and only exchanging information about facts, ideas, and emotions (often called referential communications), but salient social category memberships are often negotiated during an interaction through the process of accommodation. For example, when being quizzed by Howard Giles British relatives on some (for them, curious) aspect of American entertainment and media, his shift from a British into a more American dialect is meant to be far more telling than the overt answer provided. Being conveyed here is the feeling that he is no longer a recent immigrant to the United States, but now a fully fledged American citizen who has embraced many American ideals;
- Interactants have expectations regarding optimal levels of accommodation. These expectations are based on stereotypes about outgroup members as well as on the prevailing social and situational norms. Calibrating the amount of non-, under-, and overaccommodating one receives can be an important ingredient in continuing or withdrawing from an interaction;
- Interactants use specific communication strategies (in particular, convergence and divergence) to signal their attitudes towards each other and their respective social groups. In this way, social interaction is a subtle balance between needs for social inclusiveness on the one hand, and for differentiation on the other. As this last principle was the original cornerstone of CAT and spawned many of the empirical studies flowing from it, we shall move to a discussion of convergence and divergence studies next.

Strategies of Convergence and Divergence

CAT suggests that individuals use communication, in part, in order to indicate their attitudes toward each other and, as such, is a barometer of the level of social distance between them.

This constant movement toward and away from others, by changing one's communicative behavior, is called *accommodation*. Among the different accommodative strategies that speakers use to achieve these goals, *convergence* has been the most extensively studied – and can be considered the historical core of CAT (Giles, 1973). It has been defined as a strategy whereby individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic (e.g., speech rate, accents), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, utterance length), and nonverbal features (e.g., smiling, gazing) in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor's behavior. For instance, during the (1973) Watergate Hearings, John Dean (counselor to then President Nixon) accommodated the formality of his language style to that of four of the Senators questioning him, presumably so as to sound convincing to them (Levin & Lin, 1988). Thomson, Murachver, and Green (2001) examined accommodation in communication via e-mail and found that, even in this rather “bare” context, women and men converged to the language style (more female- or male-like) of their Net-pals.

Conversely, the strategy of *divergence* leads to an accentuation of speech and nonverbal differences between self and the other. For instance, recently, Linford Christie (a Black British Olympic gold medal winner) was accused in the press of deliberately using divisive and incomprehensible Creole English by an influential fellow (White) athlete. Clearly, his motive for speaking in this manner was very different from the intent attributed by others to it; one possibility being that he was emphasizing the value of his ethnic identity in the context of this sport's administrative leadership being White, and perhaps exclusionary (see Bourhis & Giles, 1977). A phenomenon similar to divergence is *maintenance* whereby a person persists in his or her original style, regardless of the communication behavior of the interlocutor (Bourhis, 1979). One of us recalls the occasion in which he first went to a Heads of Physical Sciences Meeting attired in his typical casual manner. Our *hero* will never forget the aghast looks with which he was greeted by a dark-suited assembly upon entering the room! Yet sometimes our accommodations can be miscarried as the following week our dresser convergently—so he thought—wore a suit and tie to a complementary Heads of *Social* Sciences Meeting. Discomfort was again experienced for a couple of hours as he discoursed with his new colleagues, all of whom were (not uncharacteristically) sweated and jeaned!

Another important conceptual distinction is whether the convergence or divergence is “upward” or “downward” in terms of its societal valence (Giles & Powesland, 1975). Upward convergence would be illustrated by an interviewee's adoption of the prestige patterns of an upper class interviewer. Upward divergence would be indicated by the adoption of a swifter speech rate and more cultured accent with someone nonstandard-sounding, whereas downward divergence could be seen in the emphasis of one's low-prestige minority heritage. A classic case of downward convergence has been documented with regard to the talk of Japanese Emperor Hirohito. Before the end of the Pacific War, the Emperor had never addressed his subjects. However, after the defeat, he traveled the countryside in an effort to bolster reconstruction and a revived sense of community. During this time and for a period of 8 years, rather than adopting the usual highly formal and distancing style of those considered “god-like,” he assumed (often to apparent excess) a gentle, informal style typical of everyday people (Azuma, 1997). This counterintuitive tactic was received with overwhelming approval from the populous as it signified not only genuine camaraderie but, more particularly, mutually endured hardships.

We will now examine some of the principal motives that lie behind the strategies of convergence and divergence, consider their evaluative demeanor as well as the importance of stereotypes and social norms in defining participants' expectations about how much convergence or divergence a speaker should display.

Motives for Convergence and Divergence

An important *motive* for convergence is the desire to gain approval from one another. The premise is that of similarity attraction (Byrne, 1971): The more similar we are to our conversational partner, the more he or she will like or respect us, and the more social rewards we can expect. Converging to a common linguistic style also improves the effectiveness of communication, this, in turn, has been associated with increased predictability of the other and hence a lowering of uncertainty, interpersonal anxiety, and mutual understanding (see, e.g., Gudykunst, 1995). But convergence is not only rewarding, it may well entail some costs, such as the possible loss of personal or social identity. In our opening example, if the student converges towards the professor's communicative style, he may be rewarded by the professor who will perceive him as particularly competent, but the student may also feel deprived of his social identity. Members of his ingroup (i.e., other students) who happen to hear him might also perceive him as a "traitor" and label him derogatorily (Hogg, D'Agata, & Abrams, 1989).

This is where the strategy of divergence comes in: The motive lying behind divergence is precisely the desire to emphasize distinctiveness from one's interlocutor, usually on the basis of group membership. Following the premises of Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this will likely occur when interactants define a situation more in "intergroup" than "interindividual" terms; the former activates one's shared social identity, the latter a personal identity. An intergroup interaction is when individuals treat each other entirely in terms of their social category memberships (e.g., when Jack and Jill communicate with each as "typical" males and females and their personal idiosyncracies are totally irrelevant at that time). An interindividual interaction is when interactants communicate with each other entirely on the basis of their individual differences in temperament and personality and where their ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth are not at a premium (e.g., rival team members discussing shared leisure interests at a bar after the game).

Intergroup theorists would contend that intergroup encounters are actually much more common than realized and that their interindividual counterparts are actually much more infrequent than we would perhaps have given them credit. Given that communication features (e.g., dress style, tattoos, earrings, slang, gait, and hand movements) are often core dimensions of what it is to be a member of a group (e.g., a gang member), divergence can be regarded as a very important tactic of displaying a valued distinctiveness from other. This not only reflects a sense of ingroup pride but also enhances a feeling of self-worth. As we belong to many different social groups (and or are put into them by others conversing with us), we have, then multiple social identities which are more or less salient across interactions (or in any one of them). The dynamics of communication are made even more complex by the fact that some of these social identities are shared between the interactants, and some are not. In our example, we have an interaction between two men and one woman, two English-speaking and one French-speaking, two of European origin and one of African origin, or also between one professor and two students! In this vein, Jones, Gallois, Barker, and Callan (1994) showed that the visible (and potentially potent) intercultural dimension of whether an individual was Anglo- or Chinese Australian was quite nonpredictive of their communicative behavior together; what was predictive, however, was their occupational group members as professors and students.

However, divergence can also be adopted in order to shape receivers' attributions and feelings. In our example, the French-speaking student could purposely say some words in French during the conversation, in order to remind her interactive partners that she does not belong to the same linguistic group. By so doing, she signals that her possibly unobtrusive discourse

should be attributed to her linguistic (in)competence rather than to deficient intellectual capacities. Divergence can also be an attempt to entice an interlocutor to adopt a more effective communicative stance. Again referring to our example, if the student is talking loudly and very expressively, the professor may exhibit a divergent response (e.g., speaking softly and with a neutral affect) in order to encourage the student to adopt a more reserved and seemingly thoughtful style. Note also that a strategy of maintenance can not only result from insensitivity to the others' styles, it can also be a deliberate attempt to affirm one's identity or autonomy in a low-key fashion without emphasizing it. All in all, it appears that satisfying communication requires a delicate balance between convergence—to demonstrate willingness to communicate—and divergence—to incur a healthy sense of group identity (see Cargile & Giles, 1996).

Evaluation of Convergence and Divergence

Attempts at social integration or identification by means of convergence have been generally accorded positive *evaluation* by receivers (Bourhis, Giles, & Lambert, 1975). In this sense, it validates the recipients' own ways of expressing themselves. Increasing similarity in communicative behavior such as speech rate increases both speakers' perceived attractiveness as well as their ability to gain addressees' compliance (Buller, LePoire, Aune, & Eloy, 1992). Converging speakers are generally viewed more favorably than diverging and maintaining speakers and are perceived as more efficient in their communication as well as more cooperative. After all, being the receiver of nonaccommodation tells you that the speaker dares not to value your approval—a stance we have difficulty applauding! However, there can also be negative outcomes for convergence too. Preston (1981) found that full convergence, in the case of foreign language learning, is not always desired by either the speaker or the addressee. He stated that full convergence, or native-speaker-like fluency, is often considered with distrust and seen as controlling by the addressee.

How listeners attribute motives for convergence is crucial to whether it garners positive or negative reactions. Addressees take at least three factors into account in making their inferences and ultimate evaluation: the other's language competence, the effort he or she engendered, and the external pressures impelling the speaker to act in a particular way (Simard, Taylor, & Giles, 1976). Hence, if a speaker is known not to have the necessary communicative competence and has been distracted by a close and recent bereavement, their nonaccommodative stance could be excused (if not justified). The power variable should not be left aside neither. It is generally expected that people in subordinate positions would converge to those in superordinate positions (called *upward convergence*). Returning once again to our example, it is very likely that both students will strive to speak an elaborate version of formal English and use scientific terms in order to persuade the professor that they are worthy interactional partners. In contrast, a higher status individual (like our professor) may converge by use of colloquial and lay language to the relatively lower status trainees gathered, that is, his students. This so-called *downward convergence*, however, might be perceived by the students as suspicious, inappropriate or even condescending.

Upward and downward convergence was demonstrated in a popular American TV talk show, where the presenter, Larry King, was found to change the pitch of his voice as a function of his guests' status (e.g., he would converge toward President Clinton). Conversely, guests of King that were held in lower social regard (e.g., Vice-President Dan Quayle) would accommodate more to Larry King than he would to them (Gregory & Webster, 1996).

Accommodative moves are also diversely appreciated by ingroup members, depending on the strength of their attachment to the group. In a study conducted in Hong Kong one year before its handover to the People's Republic of China, respondents with a strong identification to Hong Kong evaluated more favorably their ingroup members who, by using Cantonese, diverged from Mandarin-speaking Chinese people than did respondents who identified themselves with mainland China (Tong, Hong, Lee, & Chiu, 1999).

Communicative behavior as objectively measured, the intent that was behind it, and how the addressee perceives the behavior can be three different things. The latter two of these three levels has been termed *psychological* and *subjective accommodation*, respectively (see Thakerar, Giles, & Cheshire, 1982). Speakers may converge to their listener objectively (as assessed through direct observation of communication behavior); however, the intent behind this convergence may not be to show intimacy but, on the contrary, to indicate social distance. Woolard (1989) reported on a language norm in Spain at that time stating that Catalan should only be spoken between Catalans. Hence, Castillian speakers who attempted to speak Catalan often received a reply back in Castillian. At one level, the Castillians were recipients of objective convergence, but the psychological intent here was to keep them in their own social-linguistic space and hence was actually perceived and felt as a decisively divergent act. Likewise, subjective accommodation does not necessarily correspond with the objective behavior nor with the intent that was behind it. Returning to our example, the professor might interpret any converging behavior of the student not as a sign of competence, but as forwardness or a lack of modesty.

Expectations About Optima Levels of Convergence and Divergence

As alluded to previously, accommodation can vary (e.g., as "full" or "partial") to the extent speakers approximate the communicative patterns of their receivers (Bradac, Mulac, & House, 1988; Street, 1982). Moreover, receivers have *expectations* about optimal levels of convergence and divergence. Violation of these expectations can result in a negative evaluation of the interlocutor. These expectations are based on *stereotypes* regarding outgroup members (and, in particular, their level of communicative competence). In our example, the Swiss student could have a stereotype of African Americans being forthcoming and sociable, and accommodate her behavior to become similarly expressive and outgoing. By so doing, she might offend the African American student who might, in fact, see such behavior as exaggerated and artificial, according to the situational norms and to his own stereotype of Swiss people. In this scenario, the Swiss student could be said to be *overaccommodating*. Other expectations regarding characteristics and behaviors of outgroups may similarly affect convergence. For instance, the fact that the professor expects the French-speaking student to experience linguistic difficulties may lead him to view nonconvergence on her part less negatively than if this nonconvergence could be attributed to a lack of effort.

Speakers' expectations about adequate levels of convergence and divergence are also based on societal norms for intergroup contact that determine, for example, what is the appropriate language to be used in the situation (Gallois & Callan, 1991). When groups coexist in a society for a long period of time, they establish norms about how members from the groups should interact with each other. A pervasive norm is that individuals will converge to the language of those who speak the standard or prestige variety of a language. Thus, it would be expected that Latino migrants converge to English speakers in the United States and Turkish Gastarbeiter and their families converge to their hosts in German. Interestingly, and in contrast, members of the German-dialect-speaking majority frequently converge to the French-speaking minority in

Switzerland more so than vice versa. This is so because members of the French-speaking minority do not learn the majority's localized *dialect* at school but, rather, standard German. Swiss Germans, then, would often prefer to risk speaking French than be converged to in a more prestigious variety of German than they themselves use as many Swiss Germans do not identify with this language variety. Standard German is the language of "their" dominant group and one from which they wish to distance themselves. This segues appropriately into the next theme.

The Sociohistorical Context

Communication embedded in a broader macrocontext, rather than a social vacuum. In our example, we do not only have *individuals* interacting, but also those who represent their differing social category memberships. Current, and particularly past, relations between these social groups build the sociohistorical context for the interaction. Its influence on accommodation attempts and their outcomes is a core concern of CAT, which posits that the relations between the social groups affect the degree to which the interactants accommodate to one another. In our example, it is not impossible that the heavy history of Black–White relations in the United States could play a role in the behavior of the interactants. A key construct for the analysis of the relations between cultural or ethnic groups is a comparison of their so-called *ethnolinguistic vitalities* (Giles & Johnson, 1987). Ethnolinguistic vitality can be understood and measured using three types of factors: status (economical, political, and linguistic prestige); demography (population numbers, birth rate, geographical distribution); and institutional support (recognition of the group and its language by public authorities, the educational system, and other agencies). The resultant comparison of the relative ethnolinguistic vitalities of the groups helps define which one is the more dominant. Moreover, having a high vitality could mean that groups have sufficient resources for it to be worthwhile and meaningful to invest energetically in their being good group members. In our context, this would mean that historically strong social collectivities will diverge in intergroup situations. For instance, when certain Native Americans became aware of their vitality (e.g., through casino business and the unique value of their histories and identities), many would wish not only to resurrect their heritage languages but adopt their distinctive dialect, phrases, and dress styles across all manner of interethnic contexts.

However, research has shown that *subjective* ethnolinguistic vitality is more influential in determining attitudes in the interaction than is the objective ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g., Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994). Here, subjectivity refers to the individual's perceptions of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the ingroup compared to the outgroup. In our example, ethnic identity could be salient for the African American undergraduate student. His perception of the ethnolinguistic vitality of African Americans at his own campus and in American society more widely could lead him to show loyalty to his heritage, for example, by emphasizing the speech and nonlinguistic markers of this group (i.e., Ebonics). CAT also suggests that such divergence will occur the more group members feel their status in the intergroup hierarchy is illegitimate and unfair (e.g., that they have been historically, and even currently, unfairly discriminated against because of their skin color. But threat is not the province of subordinate groups in society only. Barker et al. (2001) suggest that Anglo American support for the English-only movement—speech maintenance *par excellence*—is, at least in large part, due to the increasing perceived vitality of Latinos (especially in terms of the growing number of immigrants with political influence and the increasing amount of Spanish appearing on the linguistic landscape of shop, road, and other signs)—a process that clearly impacts Anglos' perceived distinctiveness and communicative superiority.

Thus far then, we have introduced some of the assumptions underlying CAT together with its major communicative strategies—convergence and divergence—and the motives underlying, as well as the attributions associated with, their enactment. After this, we discussed expectations regarding optimal levels of these strategies and emphasized the need to take into account the roles of the socio-historical context in which communication takes place for a truly comprehensive picture of how and why accommodation unfolds. In the remainder of this chapter, we look at how CAT has been applied to communication between members of various social groups (including interethnic, intergenerational, and between gender) and within different institutions such as in organizations and through the media.

SOCIAL APPLICATIONS OF CAT

The state of the theory as it stands now spans several disciplines, contexts, and language groups (see Meyerhoff, 1998). From its original roots in speech style modification, CAT has been expanded into a generalized model of communicative interaction. It has been applied to study communication between different social groups (cultures, genders, generations, and abilities), in different contexts (in organizations, in the healthcare system, in the courtroom, or simply in the streets), through different media (face-to-face interactions, but also radio, telephone, e-mail, etc.). Such research has occurred in different countries and been conducted by researchers of different cultural and language backgrounds. The rest of the chapter will provide an introduction to the variety of empirical investigations conducted under CAT's hat. These developments have not necessarily been systematically planned, and finding a post-hoc logic to why research has unfolded in the way they have is hazardous. This is why the following presentation of new areas of development does not pretend to give a coherent typology, and compelling overlaps between the areas (such as gender and the workplace) are unavoidable. The first three areas identify populations (communication between cultures, generations/ability groups, and genders), the fourth relates to a specific context of communication (organizations), and the last area considers media use.

Communication Between Cultures and Linguistic Groups

The intercultural context can be considered the most “natural” applied context for CAT, as the theory was first developed by studying interactions where linguistic markers (different languages, dialects, accents) defined membership to cultural groups. For example, Bourhis (1984) studied the strategies of convergence, divergence, and maintenance in Montreal by asking Francophone and Anglophone pedestrians about directions, either in English or in French. He found that 30% of Anglophones maintained English in their responses when they had been addressed in French, even when their linguistic skills would have been sufficient to answer in French. In contrast, only 3% of Francophone pedestrians used French in their answers to the English-speaking interlocutor. The difference in accommodative behavior displayed by the two groups of pedestrians is explained by the Canadian intergroup context. Traditionally, the Anglophone minority has higher status and power within the Francophone majority setting of Montreal. A similar research procedure was used by Lawson and Sachdev (2000) in Tunisia where Tunisian pedestrians were approached by either Arab Tunisians (speaking Tunisian Arabic) or White Europeans (speaking French) asking for directions to the post office. Although respondents generally converged to the language of the researcher, they were more likely to diverge if addressed in French. Thus, despite the prestige of French in Tunisia, Tunisians were likely to signal their distinctiveness from their former colonizers.

CAT's utility in explaining intercultural relations extends to macrolevel issues such as bilingualism, language maintenance and shift, and creolization (e.g., Burt, 1994; Lawson-Sako & Sachdev, 1996; Niedzielski & Giles, 1996). For example, Ross and Shortreed (1990) explain why, in Japan, a nonnative speaker of Japanese attempting to converge linguistically toward a Japanese partner may receive an answer in English rather than in Japanese (simultaneous convergence), even if the foreigner possesses excellent Japanese proficiency. As indicated with regard to the Catalan situation earlier, the intent of the Japanese speaker might be to sustain in-outgroup boundaries. The nonnative speaker's attempt to speak Japanese might be perceived as a threat to Japanese identity. However, another motive has to be considered: By converging to Japanese, the nonnative speaker is depriving his Japanese interlocutor of the opportunity to use the much-studied but (little used) English language, a code with high social prestige in modern urban Japanese society. Ross and Shortreed's study is another demonstration of how important it is to distinguish objective accommodation behavior from the intent that was behind it (psychological accommodation) and how it is perceived by the addressee (subjective accommodation).

A satellite model of CAT, the intergroup model of second language acquisition examines the sociopsychological variables influencing the attitude of subordinate group members towards learning the dominant group's tongue. According to this model, second language "failure" should not necessarily be attributed to incompetency, but could also be viewed in intergroup accommodative terms (e.g., Kraemer, Olshtain, & Badier, 1994). More specifically, learning another group's communicative code can be construed as convergence. When groups associate the acquisition of another tongue as an implicit loss of their own valued mode of communication, they can either infiltrate the target language with mother tongue words, syntax and pronunciation (let alone allied nonverbals), or not acquire it at all. In either instance, we have a "failure" (to master a second language) but attributed by the ingroup as *successful* maintenance, or even divergence from the communicative status quo. Put another way, the second language classroom is not purely about learning a "neutral" language code, but has sociohistorical implications for the very survival of an ingroup; the classroom can often become an emotionally-charged, intergroup laboratory.

Intergenerational and Interability Communication

Intergenerational communication is another area where CAT has made significant contributions, broadening out to health issues. Communication between younger and older adults is viewed as "involv(ing) different (internally differentiated cultural groups, who possess different values and beliefs about talk, different social and existential agendas, and different language codes" (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 159). In intergenerational conversations, older adults have been found not to make many accommodations to their younger partners (Kemper, Vandeputte, Rice, Cheung, & Gubarchuk, 1995) and may even *underaccommodate* them. On the other hand, younger communicators tend to *overaccommodate* or adjust too much, and often reluctantly so (Williams & Giles, 1996). They choose very simple topics, adopt a basic grammatical phrase structure with a very slow speech rate, and act overly polite or caring, regardless of their interlocutor's individualized capacities and personal needs; this is a telling example of the notion of "intergroup" encounter introduced earlier. Overaccommodative talk directed to the elderly has been called *patronizing speech* (see, e.g., Harwood & Giles, 1996) and, in its most extreme form, can be thought of as "baby talk." Such behavior is based on expectations about the communicative style of the elderly who are generally negatively stereotyped (e.g., frail, unattractive, slow, useless) in Western societies (Williams & Giles, 1996).

The elderly are not the only recipients of patronizing speech as data show that people with physical or mental disabilities are often spoken to in similar registers (for a review of “interability communication,” see Fox, Giles, Orbe, & Bourhis, 2000). Even if patronizing speech usually proceeds from well-meaning intentions, its recipients generally find it demeaning. Fox and Giles (1996) reported that people with physical disabilities complained about three types of patronizing speech:

- (a) baby talk, such as “poor little dear” or “honey” spoken in a condescending tone; (b) depersonalizing language, such as “it’s nice that you people get out of the house”; and (c) third-party talk, where a non-disabled person directs communication not at the person with a disability but to a disabled person who is with them, for example, “Does he take cream in his coffee?” (p. 267)

Patronizing speech is generally perceived, by those cognitively and socially active, as disrespectful and insensitive, and the majority of recipients feel less supported and less comfortable than when involved in nonpatronizing encounters. Ryan, Kennaley, Pratt, and Shumovich (2000) found that humor is a good compromise response style to patronizing speech, allowing the recipient to express opposition to being patronized, yet still maintaining an appearance of competence and politeness. Patronizing talk may even be damaging for recipients who would actually like to be nurtured communicatively, as it could encourage their dependence and passivity. It should be highlighted, however, that “patronizing talk” (as well as any form of under- and overaccommodation) is really a *social attribution* rather than a communicative given; what is deemed patronizing for one could be invited, reinforced, and believed appropriately caring by another.

If excessive accommodation can often be counterproductive (but see Azuma, 1997, earlier), a certain level of accommodation between health professionals and patients is clearly necessary. For example, Bourhis, Roth, and MacQueen (1988) found that physicians, nurses, as well as hospital patients considered it more appropriate for health professionals to converge to the patients’ everyday language than to maintain their medical jargon. Doctor–patient interactions are characterized by differences in communicative roles, with greater dominance and control by the doctor. Complementary patterns of communicative exchange are created and accepted by both (e.g., both the doctor and the patient will agree that the doctor decides about the content and structure of the interaction). However, to ensure patients’ satisfaction and compliance, it has been shown that doctors need to find a balance and behave neither too domineering and directive, nor too passive. Indeed, they need to take care of the patients’ emotional needs as much as they provide patients with accurate information (Watson & Gallois, 1999; for more details on accommodation in medical consultations, see Street, 1991).

CAT research on communication in social gerontology and in the realm of health care underscores the position that accommodation has consequences not only along the information-exchange dimension, but also for self-esteem. Accommodative processes are important to health in the sense that adequate convergence is a core component of many supportive encounters. Indeed, feeling emotionally supported can often be a function of the degree of accommodation one receives. Social relationships (medical and nonmedical) affect our health in important and complex ways. If an older person is subject to being overaccommodated and condescended to in a variety of situations, it will take a very resilient person indeed not to accept this categorization of themselves as “old” and “past it.” Indeed, such negatively framed nonaccommodations could be an important constituent in the social construction of aging and ultimate (and hence accelerated) demise—a process fundamental to another CAT—satellite theory, the “communicative predicament of aging” model (e.g., Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). In

this way, accommodation forms the linchpin to understanding the complex interrelationships of social support practices, psychological well-being, and physical health.

Communication Between Genders

Although a contentious empirical and ideological issue for some scholars, the idea that men and women speak differently has been widely acknowledged (for a review, see Coates, 1986). Compared to men, women have been described as more polite and cooperative speakers. They frequently take the role of the facilitator of conversation (e.g., by offering frequent and encouraging minimal responses like “mmmh”) and their conversational goals and strategies focus on establishing affiliation with their partner. Women are also said to be more likely to emphasize solidarity and reduce inequalities in status and power (e.g., by attenuating criticisms and expressing appreciation). On the other hand, men have been described as more eager to hold the floor and control the topic of conversation. They use language to establish status and exchange information rather than to establish social connectedness. Men are reported to talk more than women in formal or public situations and to talk less in intimate relationships. Going back to our example, we could expect the male student to speak more than the female student who would wait to be offered the turn to speak and be less interruptive. However, given the context of the discussion, the influence of gender could be offset by the status dimension (the male is an undergraduate, whereas the student is a postdoctoral, student).

Interestingly, women and men do not have the same communicative behavior in same-sex situations and in mixed-sex situations. This means that they accommodate their communicative style to their interaction partners' gender. In fact, it appears that women are more prone to accommodate than are men (especially those who follow traditional sex roles), because of their concern for connectedness and societal power (Fitzpatrick, Mulac, & Dindia, 1995). However, Hannah and Murachver (1999) found that people accommodate to their conversants' speech style (more man-like or woman-like) more than to their *actual* gender. They trained female and male confederates to use a facilitative (which has been defined as more characteristic of women) or nonfacilitative (more characteristic of men) style of speech and examined the relative impact of gender and “gendered” speech style on the accommodation behavior. Their results showed gender differences in communication. Men and women responded differently to the same confederate's behavior, but the confederate's gender had a minor impact on participant behavior; what mattered was his or her “gendered” speech style. In less task-oriented situations and ones that have more *romantic* potential, a different pattern to the above can emerge. Men can accentuate their vocal masculinity by deepening their pitch (Hogg, 1985), whereas women can emphasize their femininity by doing the opposite as well as sounding softer (Montepare & Vega, 1988). Although these are, objectively, instances of mutual divergence, we would consider this to be “speech complementarity” as it can be driven by psychologically convergent motives and can be construed by some recipients as socially, if not sexually, appealing.

CAT provides a particularly powerful theoretical framework for studying how gender identities are negotiated during the interaction and their influence on the communicative behavior of the participants. Gender is a salient group membership that has been shown to have a major influence on communication in many Anglophone contexts. In his study of the impact of gender on linguistic accommodation in radio phone-in programs in Jordan, Al-Khatib (1995) demonstrated the importance of gender in the type of language used by the broadcaster and his or her interlocutors. But he also revealed that accommodation depends largely on the speaker's social knowledge and his or her ability to vary speech style. In this study, it was

more the broadcasters who accommodated to their interlocutors than the reverse. The author explained this by virtue of the goals of the broadcasters who aim at pleasing their audience as well as by their greater ability to vary speech style; to work as a broadcaster, they are required to speak Modern Standard Arabic as well as its colloquial variety.

Communication in Organizations

Organizations offer a particularly interesting communicative context, oftentimes with strong situational norms and asymmetries in the status and power of the interactants. For most organizations, accommodation is also central to their relations with their customers and the public in general. Sparks and Callan (1992) applied CAT to the hospitality industry and showed how much a convergent style of communication with consumers is important for customers' satisfaction. This has been observed in a number of settings also where, for example, a travel agent accommodated her pronunciation to the different socioeconomically based language styles of her Welsh clientele (N. Coupland, 1984) and, in Taiwan, where salespersons converged more to customers than vice versa (van den Berg, 1986). These asymmetrical convergences are based on who holds economic sway at the time and are, of course, in accord with CAT predictions. Likewise, Cohen and Cooper (1986) showed that many tourists in the developing world (e.g., Thailand) do not expend much effort to acquire much, if any, competence in the language of the country visited, whereas locals in service industries (whose financial destiny is in many ways tied to tourism) often become convergently proficient in many foreigners' languages.

According to Bourhis (1991), the accommodation framework can be very helpful to researchers of the organizational field for their analysis of communication breakdown in such institutions. Invoking the notion of a "linguistic work environment" (with civil servants in New Brunswick, Canada), he showed how Francophone employees converge more to the first language of their coworkers than do their Anglophone counterparts, and how organizational status (sub- and superordinate roles) is also a factor in the convergent process in ways that CAT would predict.

In another organizational CAT study, this time in Australia, Gardner and Jones (1999) invited 216 superordinates (i.e., supervisors) and 142 subordinates to write down what they would say at "best" and at "worst" to their counterparts in a variety of communicative situations offered them (e.g., "you have an informal chat with your subordinate" or "you are negotiating a change in your working situation with your superior"). Analysis of the data showed that, for both organizational groups, the best communications were coded, as would be predicted, accommodative. For superordinates, this was indicated by taking the listener's position and knowledge into account and being clear and direct, while for subordinates it was manifest more in listening, asking for input, and being open. The worst communications were clearly *nonaccommodative*. For superordinates, such talk would be overaccommodative, manifest in being overly familiar whereas, for subordinates, it was more underaccommodative and expressed through being too demanding and aggressive. A similar kind of study of Australian student patients' past conversations with health professionals (Watson & Gallois, 1999) showed that satisfying encounters were remembered as accommodative (e.g., the health professionals show concern, provide information, and are reassuring) whereas codings of unsatisfactory exchanges included many instances of nonaccommodation (e.g., health professionals show displeasure, lack of information, and are unresponsive to their patients). Hence, CAT is very useful for our understanding of and analyzing occupational interactions—as these studies demonstrate well that lay participants

holding different organizational roles do report varying conversations between them in accommodation terms.

An accommodation framework has also been applied to issues of organization miscommunication between men and women (Baker, 1991), a context known as the “gendered workplace”. Toward this end, and with special reference to contexts where females are hired to take on occupation roles formerly reserved for men (e.g., fire-fighting), Boggs and Giles (1999) devised yet another CAT-satellite framework, the so-called “workplace gender nonaccommodation cycle model”. In such settings, men may consider this social change as undermining their powers in the organization: If women can do the job, too, there is no reason to continue offering a greater share of rewards to the men who perform; a sense of threatened masculine identity can ensue. Moreover, if women are seen as benefiting from equal opportunity practices, then men may feel unjustly penalized by management through no fault of their own. Such men may choose to respond by adopting nonaccommodative behaviors (e.g., harassment, patronizing talk, non-inclusive networking, use of gendered jargon) to signal to the “interloping women” that their presence is unwanted. In return, the women may, understandably, reciprocate nonaccommodatively, such as by threatening to complain to supervisors, making written records of communication incidents, etc. Interpreting these as hostile responses, men may be even more inclined to nonaccommodate, thereby escalating nonaccommodation *cyclically*. Intergroup boundaries are now strengthened and communication breakdown can occur between the social factions. Consequently, women may quit their jobs or sue the organization for sex discrimination. This apparent failure of women to integrate into the male ingroup is then construed by males as data that women do not “have what it takes” to be successful in “men’s” jobs, thereby further legitimating gender-biased organizational practices.

Communication Through Media

Face-to-face interactions, with direct verbal and nonverbal exchanges, are often what we think of when we hear the concept of communication. However, communication can also be “mediated” and accommodation tendencies are no less salient. This is illustrated by Bell’s (1984) study of New Zealand broadcasters who read the news on a number of different stations. He found that these newscasters read the same material but radically accommodated their pronunciations to the *assumed* socioeconomic status of their listeners. These days, progress in technology keeps on inventing new communication media (e.g., the Internet and teleconferencing). Compared to face-to-face interactions, these media offer interesting features for communication studies. They can be audio or visual, oral or written. Moreover and particularly interesting for CAT, these media offer communicative situations where the addressee is unknown (press, radio, television, and, more recently, Web sites and chat groups), situations where context is reduced to its minimum, and situations where the exchange is nonsimultaneous or even absent (for accommodation in the mass media, see Bell, 1991).

For example, telephone-answering machines have become an everyday means of communication for most of us. This useful device is also very interesting for communication research. It allows us to record participants’ reactions to messages manipulated by the researcher, and this in what is perceived by the participants as a natural setting. This was an idea of Buzzanell, Burrell, Stafford, and Berkowitz (1996) who studied accommodation of lower status callers (students) to higher status callees’ (professors) answering-machine messages. Students were asked to telephone their professor in order to schedule an appointment. Their calls were directed to answering machines which played different types of messages (routine, humorous,

jargonistic and a message requesting much more information than would be expected routinely). The results indicated that, even in this non-simultaneous, temporally limited and less information-rich communicative situation, convergence occurs and individuals modify their language choices as well as some message features in order to display similarity.

Like the above-mentioned research of Thomson et al. (2001), Crook and Booth (1997) studied accommodation in a rather new albeit increasingly used communication media: electronic mail (e-mail). Because feedback, if there is any, is slow in this written media (compared to face-to-face interaction in which additional questions, the use of gaze and silence as well as other signals provide the sender with cues to how the message is interpreted), accommodation from the writer to the recipient is crucial to increase communication effectiveness. According to these scholars, one dimension of diversity between individuals is their preference for a sensory system over the others: the three primary visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (body) senses. These preferred sensory system are reflected in language use through words like “see,” “clear,” “looks like” (visual style), “hear,” “sound,” “ringing” (auditory style), and “feel,” “grasp,” “touch” (kinesthetic style). Their results showed that individuals who received e-mails that matched their preferred representational system reported more rapport with the sender than those who received e-mails that did not match their preferred style. An implication of this finding is that, if one does not know the receiver’s preferred sensory system in advance, one should take care to write a message that addresses the three styles.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we provided a flavor of the basics, as well as the inherent complexities, of Communication Accommodation Theory. As we have seen, many disciplines (besides Communication) have profited from its insights and herein we have selected an array of experimentally controlled laboratory and naturalistic studies from around the world designed to explore its dynamics. As readers will have gleaned from recurring treatments of our opening scenario, there are a plethora of communicative options for, and reactions of, people interacting (who have personal and many social identities). We contend that CAT—with its attention to macrocontextual forces, interpersonal and intergroup dynamics, motives, and social consequences—can handle these (and other) intricacies. That said, and although it could arguably be infinitely elaborated to take account of expectancy violations, arousal, cognitive schemas, relational development, and so forth, it was never conceived to be a theory for all interpersonal eventualities. Nonetheless, a person’s accommodative resources and flexibility may make up a hitherto unrecognized statement about their “communicative competences,” and CAT has the potential to be associated with a very wide range of individuals’ uses of communicative actions (e.g., forms of address, politeness, cosmetic styles, car and interior design choices, etc.).

Space, of course, has precluded attention to all CAT’s parameters, including the fact that in order to meet multiple conversational needs speakers can converge on some of their partners’ communicative features and, simultaneously, diverge on others (Bilous & Krauss, 1988). In addition, we have not discussed the roles of awareness in forging and evaluating accommodative inclinations (see Williams, 1999), the dilemmas communicators can face in deciding what to accommodate to or not (Pittam & Gallois, 1999), and the discourse strategies by which speakers can accommodate their listeners’ interpretive competences, emotions, patterns of control, and conversational needs (see J. Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988; Giles, Williams, & Coupland, 1990). We have also not talked to the roles of accommodation

in other applied settings such as the courtroom (see Linell, 1991) and mental health clinics (see Hamilton, 1991), but leave it to the reader now to make links to these and other arenas (e.g., diplomacy, community disputes, leadership, counseling, mentoring, bargaining, etc.).

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Readers who are interested in CAT and might revel in the complexities of seeing it in proposition format are invited to consult the following resources: Giles et al. (1987) and Thakerar et al. (1982). For those with intercultural inclinations in this format, see also Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles, and Coupland (1988) and Gallois, Jones, Giles, Cargile, and Ota (1995). For a series of earlier empirical studies on CAT, see the collections of Giles (1984) and N. Coupland and Giles, 1988). Finally, for those particularly interested in sociolinguistic extensions and elaborated reviews in nonpropositional format, see the chapters in Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) as well as Shepard, Giles, and Le Poire (2001).

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QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What aspect of CAT do you feel needs empirical attention the most, and why? Design both a qualitative and quantitative study toward this end.
2. Consider two people, on reflection, you believe to be the most and the least convergent people you know. Describe the ways they manage this communicatively. Why do you feel they act in this way, and what are the likely reactions of recipients to it?
3. Recall, in general fashion, your communications with your parents when you were a teenager. How would you describe your and their intergenerational behaviors in CAT terms? In what ways were these patterns typical or atypical of other families you knew or have observed since?
4. Again using CAT as an interpretive frame, how (in general) would you describe your interactions with elderly strangers? In what ways is your interpersonal communication in the foregoing different from that with elderly people you know very well (e.g., grandparents)?
5. Many nations around the world have more than one official language (e.g., Switzerland). Census 2000 indicates that the USA is becoming ever more ethnolinguistically diverse. Across a range of life's contexts, what accommodations should English-speakers make to other-language immigrants and vice-versa, and why should they do so?