

1. Accommodation theory: Communication, context, and consequence

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1.1. Introduction

When academic theorizing addresses everyday communication phenomena, there are losses as well as gains. Research may, selectively or otherwise, partially represent the full subtlety of contextualized interaction. Methodological constraints may impose their own selectivity, so that we tend to access the accessible and learn what is most readily learnable. The real-time nature of programmatic research will reflect epistemological shifts and disciplinary development. It is altogether likely that academic and lay versions of the phenomena themselves and their boundaries will not perfectly mirror each other at any one point.

On the other hand, research can discover regularities within communicative interchanges and identify, and perhaps even predict, contextual configurations that relate systematically to them. If it is amenable to methodological triangulation upon data and research questions, and if it incorporates within its own activities a mechanism for building cumulatively on empirical insights, communication research can begin to impose order on the uncertainty that interaction presents to us. More particularly, research that addresses the contexts as much as the behaviors of talk can tease out the ordering – motivational, strategic, behavioral, attributional, and evaluative – that interactants themselves impose upon their own communication experiences, and the ways in which the social practices of talk both are constrained by and themselves constrain goals, identities, and social structures.

In the case of “accommodation theory,” the focus of the present collection, we have a research program that has developed over more than a dozen years, undergoing many extensions and elaborations, as an account of contextual processes impinging on sociolinguistic code, style,

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and strategy selections. Our primary goal in this introductory chapter is in fact to trace the growth of accommodation theory from its origins as a strictly sociopsychological model of speech-style modifications to its current status as an integrated, interdisciplinary statement of relational processes in communicative interaction. Indeed, in the view of some commentators, it may even be considered the predominant theory at the interface between language, communication, and social psychology (Bradac, Hopper, and Wiemann 1989; Messick and Mackie 1989).

At one level, accommodation is to be seen as a multiply organized and contextually complex set of alternatives, ubiquitously available to communicators in face-to-face talk. It can function to index and achieve solidarity with or dissociation from a conversational partner reciprocally and dynamically. At another level, accommodation strategies can characterize wholesale realignments of patterns of code or language selection, although again related to constellations of underlying beliefs, attitudes, and sociostructural conditions. A noteworthy, and perhaps unique, characteristic of accommodation is precisely this openness to micro and macro contextual communicative concerns within a single theoretical and interpretive frame.

But there is necessarily some slippage between lay and academic formulations, and, indeed, variation across academic treatments of “accommodation” and related concepts. For some, the notion of cooperativity in talk is the defining essence of all communicative acts (cf. Grice 1975; Heritage 1987). Similarly, “interactional synchrony” (e.g., Erickson and Schulz 1982; Jasnow et al. 1988) is held to be universal, even in early life (Lieberman 1967; Street 1983). Terms that overlap with those we shall introduce in this chapter (accommodation, convergence, divergence) have likewise surfaced in other academic arenas (see, e.g., Abrahamson 1966; Bormann 1985; Kincaid 1988; Piaget 1955; Thibaut and Kelley 1959). A variety of related constructs can also be identified (e.g., Bauer 1964; Chapple 1939; Durkheim 1964; Flavell et al. 1968; Krauss and Glucksberg 1969; Le Page 1968; Mead 1934; Peng, 1974; Sacks 1987), as well as many contemporaries who examine some overlapping interpersonal influences in communication under one or other of the following rubrics: “listener adaptedness,” “person-centered or other-related/directed speech,” taking the role/perspective of another (e.g., Applegate and Delia 1980; Burleson 1987; Graumann and Hermann 1988; Isaacs and Clark 1987; McCann and Higgins 1990), and positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987).

All of these approaches have made inroads into what “being accom-

modative'' may constitute and implicate linguistically and interactionally, though the single theoretical frame offered in the accommodation model is necessary to integrate and indeed distinguish different traditions.¹ There are many ways of performing acts we could deem to be accommodative, many reasons for doing or not doing so, and a wide range of specifiable outcomes. Sometimes there are beneficial outcomes to one or the other participant in talk, or both; the effects of accommodation can be altogether unexceptional and routine or, on the other hand, critical. For instance, speakers' ability to adapt their messages to take account of listeners' characteristics can induce good health habits among patients in health care establishments (Kline and Ceropski 1984), peer acceptance (Burlison 1986), and willingness in sharing (Burlison and Fennelly 1981) in childhood. But again, a more qualitative perspective exploring degrees and modes of accommodation will, as we shall see, permit more differentiated, and ultimately more deeply explanatory, interpretations in particular social contexts.

It is in fact the *applied* perspective that predominates in the following chapters and in accommodation theory as a whole. As the title of the volume implies, we present accommodation theory here less as a theoretical edifice and more as a basis for sociolinguistic explanation. The book as a whole seeks to demonstrate how the core concepts and relationships invoked by accommodation theory are available for addressing altogether pragmatic concerns – in particular, understanding relational alternatives, development, difficulties, and outcomes in medical, clinical, and caring settings; strategic options in legal discourse; the alignment of radio broadcasters with their audiences; processes of second-language learning and of acculturation in an interethnic context; and language switching in organizational settings in a bilingual community. We will see that accommodative processes can, for example, facilitate or impede language learners' proficiency in a second language, as well as immigrants' acceptance by certain host communities; affect audience ratings and thereby the life of a program and its contributors' viability; influence job satisfaction and hence productivity; affect reactions to defendants in court and hence the nature of the judicial outcome; affect

¹A thorough critical comparison of past and contemporary theoretics is not yet available, although Street and Giles (1982) provide a critical comparison of some earlier models [namely, Webb's (1972) adaptation of the activation-level model, Natale's (1975a) communication model, and Cappella's (1981) adaptation of discrepancy arousal (see also Cappella and Greene 1982)]. Such a task is beyond the limits of the present chapter, and in any case, we would now construe other positions as holding, in the main, complementary accounts of some phenomena.

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satisfaction with medical encounters and thereafter compliance with certain crucial regimens; and be an enabling or a detrimental force in allowing handicapped people to fulfill their communicative and life potentials. Although many subdisciplines of the language and communication sciences have, of course, paid sustained attention to these and similar social environments of talk, the accommodation model holds out the possibility of inferring underlying similarities in the relational options and tensions that render them researchable as key dimensions of our social lives.

In the primarily historical overview that follows in this chapter, it will be apparent that accommodation research has spanned several radically different methodological designs. Consistent with its sociopsychological origins and interests in motivational and evaluative trends, much of the earliest work was laboratory based and relatively insensitive to the descriptive linguistic dimensions of the varieties and speech styles it researched. In fact (see later), it was precisely to redress an insensitivity to social contextual variables in early (linguistically sophisticated) sociolinguistic research that the basic tenets of accommodation theory were developed. Today, however, we can point to an established history of fine-grained sociolinguistic and discourse analytic research explicitly within the model's limits, and the counterbalancing of experimentally controlled empirical efforts with observational studies in wide-ranging naturally occurring settings.

Our overview presents accommodation theory as a robust paradigm in the particular sense that it is, perhaps uniquely, able to attend to (1) social consequences (attitudinal, attributional, behavioral, and communicative), (2) ideological and macro-societal factors, (3) intergroup variables and processes, (4) discursive practices in naturalistic settings, and (5) individual life span and group-language shifts. As we shall see, the theory has attracted researchers from a wide range of disciplines and hence very broad levels of communicative and linguistic analysis, and has the potential for future application across a very wide range of media (see Bell, this volume), including writing [cf. the social and listener-oriented approaches of Fish (1980), Nystrand (1986), and Rafoth and Rubin (1987)], song (Prince, 1988; Trudgil 1983; Yaeger-Dror 1988), human-computer interaction (Leiser 1988), and doubtless many other media (e.g., telephonic, teleconferencing, electronic mail).

In the remainder of this chapter, then, we aim to update developments and ideas, as well as to lay out the parameters of "communication accommodation theory (CAT), "alluding to contributions made by au-

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thors in this volume as appropriate. This is an important quest not only in its own right but because the background is fundamental to appreciating the content of the chapters that follow. A reading of the chapters relies on a shared review of CAT that is provided here. Hence, we will review the origins of CAT together with its fundamental strategies and important conceptual distinctions. Then we will examine the motives underlying convergence and divergence as well as their social consequences, discussing the complexities and caveats necessary for considering these when grounded in particular contexts. Next, we will introduce a recent sociolinguistic elaboration of the theory, considering its implications for the health context. Finally, we will conclude with a brief overview of the significance of the subsequent chapters, assembling, as they do for the first time in this volume, analyses of communication accommodation in an array of crucial applied settings.

1.2. Basic concepts and strategies**Convergence and divergence**

The first publications concerning “speech accommodation theory (SAT)” emerged in 1973. Giles (1973) demonstrated the phenomenon of interpersonal accent convergence in an interview situation and introduced his “accent mobility” model in the context of a critique of some aspects of the Labovian (1966) paradigm (see also Bell 1984). It was argued that the presumed role of formality-informality of context and the criterion of “attention to speech” that was seminally associated with the prestigiousness of speech styles by Labov could be reinterpreted, at least in part, as having been mediated by interpersonal accommodation processes. For example, casual speech may have been produced not so much because of the informality of the context but perhaps because the interviewer (equally prone to sociolinguistic forces) had shifted to less standard speech forms when the interview was supposedly over (i.e., the tape recorder was supposedly turned off) and when he introduced certain topics (e.g., being close to death, nursery rhymes). In other words, the supposition was that context formality-informality determining the prestigiousness of phonological variants could be supplanted by an interpretation in terms of interpersonal influence – the interviewee’s convergence with the interviewer. At that time, “context” was the zeitgeist of sociolinguistic theory, and we wished to redirect theoretical attention to more focused contextual dimensions, including language itself (Smith,

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Giles, and Hewstone 1980), and to argue the primacy of receiver characteristics over other considerations (Giles and Powesland 1975). More recently, and more elegantly, Krauss (1987: 96) argued that

the addressee is a full participant in the formulation of the message – that is, the vehicle by which meaning is conveyed – and, indeed, may be regarded in a very real sense as the cause of the message. Without the addressee that particular message would not exist. But the message, in the concrete and particular form it takes, is as much attributable to the existence of the addressee as it is to the existence of the speaker.

This then was the legacy and blueprint for subsequent formulations addressing a wide variety of speech variables (Giles and Powesland 1975). To this end, Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis (1973) confirmed empirically some fundamental ideas inherent in what subsequently became labeled as SAT. In the bilingual context of Montreal at that time, they found that the more effort at convergence a speaker was perceived to have made (e.g., the more French that English Canadians used when sending a message to French Canadians), the more favorably that person was evaluated and the more listeners converged in return. Moreover, a plethora of convergent strategies was discovered even in what, for some, would be described as a socially sterile laboratory setting (see Bourhis, this volume, for further details). Since then, theoretical refinements have come in profusion (see Coupland and Giles 1988a for a catalog of these), particularly in the 1980s (namely Ball, Giles, and Hewstone 1985; Coupland et al. 1988; Gallois et al. 1988), and have intermeshed with significant empirical developments as well (e.g., Coupland and Giles 1988b; Giles 1984).

SAT focused in the pioneering years upon the social cognitive processes mediating individuals' perceptions of the environment and their speech styles as a foil to the omnipresent and determining role ascribed to norms in molding sociolinguistic behaviors. Its theoretical framework developed out of a wish, in those days, to demonstrate the value and potential of social psychological concepts and processes for understanding the dynamics of speech diversity in social settings. SAT therefore aimed to clarify the motivations underlying speech and intermeshed in it, as well as the constraints operating upon it and their social consequences. Specifically, it originated in order to elucidate the cognitive and affective processes underlying speech convergence and divergence, although other speech strategies (complementarity, over- and underaccommodation – see later) have more recently been recognized theoret-

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[More information](#)Table 1. *Convergent features and selected source*

Features converged	Selected sources
Utterance length	Matarazzo et al. (1968)
Speech rate	Street (1983)
Information density	Aronsson et al. (1987)
Vocal intensity	Natale (1975a)
Pausing frequencies and lengths	Jaffe and Feldstein (1970)
Response latency	Cappella and Planalp (1981)
Self-disclosure	Ehrlich and Graeven (1971)
Jokes, expressing solidarity–opinions–orientations	Bales (1950)
Gesture	Mauer and Tindall (1983)
Head nodding and facial affect	Hale and Burgoon (1984)
Posture	Condon and Ogston (1967)

ically. As we shall see later in this chapter, SAT has been moving in a more interdisciplinary direction and the focus has broadened from exploring specific linguistic variables to encompass nonverbal (see von Raffler-Engel 1980; also Goodwin 1981; Grabowski-Gellert and Winterhoff-Spurk 1987) and discursive dimensions of social interaction; hence the wider notion of CAT (*communication accommodation theory*; Giles et al. 1987).

“Convergence” has been defined as a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-nonverbal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze, and so on [cf. the notions of “congruence,” “synchrony,” and “reciprocity” in the work of Feldstein (1972), Argyle (1969), and Webb (1972), respectively]. Table 1 provides a sample of studies showing how widespread convergence has been shown to be, although not all studies listed were conceived and interpreted explicitly in a CAT perspective. Most of these studies were laboratory-controlled investigations, but many studies have also emerged showing convergence in naturally occurring contexts (Ray and Webb 1966), such as the demonstration of John Dean’s convergence of median word frequencies (a measure of formality) to his different Senate interrogators in the Watergate trials (Levin and Lin 1988) and Coupland’s (1984) fine-grained phonological analysis of a travel agent’s convergence to her many clients of varying socioeconomic status and education. Although most studies have been conducted in the West

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and in English-language settings, convergence on temporal, phonological, or language-switching dimensions has been noted in many different languages, including Hungarian (Kontra and Gosy 1988), Frisian and Dutch (Gorter 1987; Ytsma 1988), Hebrew (Yaeger-Dror 1988), Taiwanese Mandarin (van den Berg 1986), Japanese (Welkowitz, Bond, and Feldstein 1984), Cantonese (Feldstein and Crown 1990), and Thai (Beebe 1981). Pertinently, Yum (1988) argues that East Asian communication is far more receiver centered than the more sender-oriented communications of the West, and Gudykunst, Yoon, and Nishida (1987) observe that members of collectivistic cultures (e.g., Japan and Korea) perceive their ingroup relationships to be more synchronized than those of individualistic societies (e.g., Australia and the United States). Hence future research may show more of the ubiquity of CAT phenomena and processes in the East (see, however, Bond 1985 for an implied cultural caveat) and perhaps elsewhere.

Although convergent communicative acts reduce interpersonal differences, interindividual variability in extent and frequency of convergence is, perhaps not surprisingly, also apparent, corresponding to sociodemographic variables such as age (Delia and Clark 1977; Garvey and BenDebba 1974; Welkowitz, Cariffe, and Feldstein 1976). (There is, however, some contradictory evidence in some of the relationships characterized later). Hence, it has been found that field dependents (individuals who found it difficult to disembed core perceptual features from their field) and those with strong interpersonal orientations converge on noncontent features of speech more than their opposite-trait partners [Welkowitz et al. (1972) and Murphy and Street (1987), respectively]; high self-monitors match the emotionality, intimacy, and content of their interactants' initial self-disclosure more than low self-monitors (Schaffer, Smith, and Tomarelli 1982); and extroverts as well as cognitively more complex communicators who are high on construct differentiation are more listener adaptive than introverts and low differentiators (Burleson 1984a; Hecht, Boster, and LaMer 1989; Kline in press). Obviously, other measures of cognitive and perceptual functioning, as well as those of social sensitivity [e.g., Paulhus and Martin's (1988) construct of functional flexibility], should provide positive relationships with convergence.

"Divergence" was the term used to refer to the way in which speakers accentuate speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others. Bourhis and Giles (1977) designed an experiment to demonstrate the use of accent divergence among Welsh people in an interethnic con-

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text (as well as the conditions that would facilitate its occurrence). The study was conducted in a language laboratory where people who placed a strong value on their national group membership and its language were learning the Welsh language (only about 26 percent of Welsh persons at that time, as now, could speak their national tongue). During one of their weekly sessions, Welsh people were asked to help in a survey concerned with second-language learning techniques. The questions in the survey were presented verbally to them in English in their individual booths by a very English-sounding speaker, who at one point arrogantly challenged their reasons for learning what he called a “dying language with a dismal future.” Such a question was assumed to threaten their feeling of ethnic identity, and the informants broadened their Welsh accents in their replies, compared with their answers to a previously asked emotionally neutral question. In addition, some informants introduced Welsh words and phrases into their answers, and one Welsh woman did not reply for a while and then was heard to conjugate a less than socially acceptable verb gently into the microphone. Interestingly, even when asked a neutral question beforehand, the informants emphasized their Welsh group membership to the speaker in terms of the content of their replies (so-called content differentiation). Indeed, it may well be that there is a hierarchy of divergent strategies available to speakers ranging from indexical and symbolic dissociation to explicit propositional nonalignment to physical absence (e.g., emphasis of a few in-group stereotyped phonological features versus language switches, to abrasive humor, to verbal abuse and interactional dissolution; see also Segalowitz and Gatbonton 1977).

Language divergence was investigated by Bourhis et al. (1979). The study involved different groups of trilingual Flemish students (Flemish-English-French) being recorded in “neutral” and “ethnically threatening” encounters with a Francophone (Walloon) outgroup speaker. As in the previous study, the context of the interaction was a language laboratory where participants were attending classes to improve their English skills. Many Flemish and Francophone students converse together in English, as an emotionally neutral compromise (cf. Scotton 1979) between maintaining rigid differentiation and acquiescing to pressures to converse by using the other’s language. In this experiment, the speaker spoke to students in English, although revealing himself as a Walloon by means of distinctive Francophone pronunciation. It was found that when the speaker demeaned the Flemish in his ethnically threatening question, listeners rated him as sounding more Francophone (a process

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termed “perceptual divergence”) and themselves as feeling more Flemish. This cognitive dissociation was manifested behaviorally at a covert level by means of muttered or whispered disapproval while the Walloon was speaking (which was being tape-recorded, unknown to the informants) and at an overt level through divergent shifts to own-group language. However, this divergence occurred only under certain specific experimental conditions, and then for only 50 percent of the sample. It was found that these listeners diverged only when their own group membership and that of the speaker was emphasized by the investigator and when the speaker had been known from the outset to be hostile to Flemish ethnolinguistic goals. In a follow-up study, however, language divergence into Flemish did occur for nearly 100 percent of the informants under these same conditions, but only when the Walloon speaker himself diverged into French in his threatening question. Interestingly, the form of the language divergence in the first of these Belgian studies differed from that in the second. It was found that in the first setting, the ingroup initially replied to the outgroup threat in English – and then switched to Flemish. In the second (more threatening) setting, listeners replied in a directly divergent manner by an immediate shift to Flemish.

Linguistic divergence, like convergence, can take many forms, both verbal and nonverbal (LaFrance 1985). Scotton (1985) introduced the term “disaccommodation” to refer to those occasions when people switch registers in repeating something uttered by their partners – not in the sense of a “formulation” proffered as a comprehension check (Heritage and Watson (1980), but rather as a tactic to maintain integrity, distance, or identity when misunderstanding is not even conceivably an issue. For example, a young speaker might say, “Okay, mate, lets get it together at my place around 3:30 tomorrow,” and receive the reply from a disdainful elder, “Fine, young man, we’ll meet again, at 15:30, at your house tomorrow.” Although keeping one’s speech style and nonverbal behaviors congruent across situations may be construed as a communicative *nonevent* sociopsycholinguistically – and, indeed, there is a fair amount of stability in our speech and nonverbal patterns across many encounters (Cappella and Planalp 1981; Jaffe and Feldstein 1970; Patterson 1983) – Bourhis (1979) has pointed out how, in many interethnic contexts, “speech maintenance” is a valued (and possibly conscious and even effortful) act of maintaining one’s group identity. Similarly at the level of personal identity, those individuals Hart, Carlson, and Eadie (1980) take to embody “Noble Selves” would be predicted to maintain their idiosyncratic speech and nonverbal characteristics across many situations. No-