



Communication Accommodation Theory

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Abstract

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is a general theoretical framework of both interpersonal and intergroup communication. It seeks to explain and predict why, when, and how people adjust their communicative behavior during social interaction, and what social consequences result from those adjustments. In this entry, a brief historical overview of CAT's development is first provided and some of its basic concepts are introduced. Second, the different adjustment strategies that speakers may enact are explained, and objective and subjective measures of accommodation are distinguished. Third, the motivations underlying communicative adjustment are examined, and the ways in which they can be shaped by the sociohistorical context in which an interaction is embedded are discussed. Fourth, the social consequences of communicative adjustment (and non-adjustment) are explored, and some of the many factors that mediate and moderate people's evaluations of others' behavior are discussed. Finally, previous CAT Principles are refined and elaborated, and directions for future research are suggested.

In interaction, we adjust and adapt our communication to our fellow speakers. Sometimes these adjustments are conscious and deliberate: we simplify explanations for children, or talk louder when chatting with someone who has difficulty hearing. In some cases, they are unconscious and automatic: without realizing it, we often change our speech rate, volume, pitch, lexical choices, and even syntax to be more (or less) similar to our interlocutor's. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) seeks to explain and predict such communicative adjustments, and model how others in an interaction perceive, evaluate, and respond to them.

Communicative adjustment has been the subject of academic inquiry across a number of disciplines, including sociolinguistics, sociology, social psychology, and communication. Not surprisingly, each discipline has labeled the phenomenon differently, and cultivated different theories and models around it. Examples of these include *audience design*, *mimicry*, *linguistic style matching*, and *recipient design*. Of the manifold theoretical frameworks seeking to

understand how and why people adjust to and for each other's communicative styles, be it face-to-face or electronically, CAT is arguably one of the most fully elaborated. It has been invoked across a wide range of cultures and languages, methodologies, and disciplines and, subsequently been the springboard for a number of satellite theories in, for example, intergenerational relations, bilingualism, and ethnolinguistic identity.

In the following sections, a brief historical overview of CAT's development is first provided, and some of the theory's basic concepts are introduced. Second, the different adjustment strategies (and their related forms) that speakers may enact are introduced; objective and subjective measures of accommodation are also distinguished. Third, the motivations underlying communicative adjustments are examined, and the ways in which they can be shaped by the sociohistorical context in which interactions are embedded are discussed. Fourth, the social consequences of communicative adjustment (and non-adjustment) are explored, and some of the many factors that mediate and moderate people's evaluations of others' behavior are discussed. Finally, previous CAT Principles are refined and elaborated, and directions for future research are suggested.

Historical backdrop and basic concepts

CAT was developed in the 1970s (Giles, 1973) – initially under the name *speech accommodation theory* (SAT), a label still retained in some quarters – as a way to understand how and why people shift their languages, dialects, and accents when interacting with each other. Giles (1973) offered an analysis of speech variability centered on the addressee rather than the context, suggesting that findings of context-based shifts in speech style could usefully be re-interpreted as having been mediated by interpersonal accommodation processes. This early work moved the focus in research on communication adjustment to receiver characteristics as an important consideration driving speakers' stylistic shifts. In the 1980s, the theory began to embrace adjustments on dimensions other than speech, extending into nonlinguistic and discursive domains. To reflect this broader scope, the theory was then renamed *communication accommodation theory*.

In the 40 years since its inception, CAT has undergone several conceptual refinements and been elaborated in propositional terms a number of times (e.g., Giles, et al., 2007; Thakerar, Giles, & Cheshire, 1982). The theory has provided the impetus for research in a wide range of contexts. Although the majority of research utilizing CAT as a theoretical framework has been conducted on intercultural and inter- and intragenerational communication, the theory has also been fruitfully invoked across a wide range of applied contexts, including medical, health, legal, and organizational spheres, and more recently, in mediated contexts such as e-mail, voicemail, texting, synchronous chat, and in video chatrooms (for a meta-analysis, see Soliz & Giles, in press). As testament to its interdisciplinary nature, CAT-based research has been published in 67 different journals, spanning a wide array of academic fields including communication, psychology, linguistics, sociology, medicine/health, tourism, and marketing, among others.

A majority of work using CAT has been quantitative in nature, and both experimental and correlational research studies have repeatedly supported the theory's major tenets. The largest effect sizes have been found when participants reported on their own behavior (as opposed to others' behavior, a combination of self and other, or a third-person scenario); in general, correlational studies have also had slightly larger effect sizes than experimental studies. However, in recent years, there has also been a growing body of literature taking a more interpretive approach to CAT research. Indeed, to date, nearly a third of published empirical articles using CAT are qualitative inquiries or discourse analysis. CAT-based studies have been

conducted in over 35 countries around the world, including ones in North America, Eastern and Western Europe, (South) East Asia, Australasia, and Africa. In fact, the majority (60%) of studies using CAT include samples outside of the United States (Soliz & Giles, in press). Today, CAT is a general theoretical framework of both interpersonal *and* intergroup communication (Gallois & Giles, 1998) that, as above, seeks to explain why and how people adjust their communicative behaviors during social interaction, and what social consequences result from those adjustments.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

Essentially, CAT proposes that speakers come to interactions with an initial orientation, which is informed by past interpersonal and intergroup experiences, as well as the prevailing sociohistorical context. In interaction, speakers adjust their communicative behavior based on evaluations of their fellow interactants' communicative characteristics, as well as their own desire to establish and maintain a positive personal and social identity. Each speaker evaluates and makes attributions about the interaction, as well as about the other speaker, on the basis of their perceptions of that other speaker's, as well as their own, communication. These attributions and evaluations then affect the quality and nature of both the present interaction between these speakers and speakers' intent to engage in future interaction with each other (for a schematic of the full CAT model, see Figure 1).

Adjustment strategies and types of adjustment

CAT has suggested a number of ways in which speakers can adjust their speech behaviors in response to each other. These can be characterized in terms of: objective speech variables; the goal of adjustment; and how they are experienced by speakers and recipients, including others present in a group setting.

Convergence, divergence, and maintenance

Early CAT work focused primarily on objective speech variables, and conceptualized adjustment in terms of *convergence*, *divergence*, and *maintenance*. *Convergence* refers to adjusting communicative behaviors to be similar to another's. Convergence can occur across a wide range of variables, including language, accent, utterance length, and pitch, and has been studied extensively in laboratory as well as naturalistic settings. One example of the latter is Coupland's (1984) detailed phonological analysis of how a travel agent strategically shifted her pronunciation to match the different socioeconomically-based language styles of her Welsh clientele.

Divergence, in contrast, refers to adjusting communicative behaviors to accentuate verbal and nonverbal differences with others, to appear more dissimilar. For example, Bourhis and Giles (1977) found that when an English speaker described Welsh as a "dying language with a dismal future," Welsh participants overwhelmingly broadened their Welsh accents, and some even introduced Welsh vocabulary and phrases into their responses, thereby emphasizing their Welsh identity and distancing themselves from their English interviewer. Speakers may also engage in *maintenance*, which is sustaining one's "default" way of communicating without adjusting for others. Bourhis (1984) had a female confederate approach Anglophone and Francophone pedestrians in downtown Montreal (Quebec) to ask for directions in either English or French. When the request was voiced in French, nearly half of the Anglophone pedestrians nonetheless responded in English (i.e., maintenance of their default language). Tellingly, maintenance tactics such as this can sometimes be seen as "underaccommodative" (see below). Some speakers are habitual nonaccommodators, or maintainers, given their self-confidence and

high self-esteem, together with a desire to be their own person and not concerned with being liked by all.

Convergence and divergence can each take multiple forms (Gallois & Giles, 1998; see, for example, Table 1). When the dimension of adjustment has some social value, convergence and divergence can be conceptualized as *upward* or *downward*. Upward convergence refers to shifts toward a more prestigious variety of speech, whereas downward convergence refers to shifts towards a less prestigious, or even stigmatized, variety. Adopting the high-prestige accent of one's interviewer is an example of upward convergence, whereas adopting the more colloquial or stigmatized accent of one's interviewer is an example of downward convergence. Conversely, emphasizing one's own low-prestige accent with an upper class interviewer is an example of downward divergence, whereas adopting a high-prestige accent with a lower class interviewer is an example of upward divergence. Additionally, these shifts can be either *full* or *partial*. For instance, a student may increase her usual speech rate from 100 to 200 words per minute to match exactly the speech pattern of her renowned professor (full convergence), or else may shift her rate to 150 words per minute to only partially match his rate. Similarly, interactants may diverge from one another to varying degrees, ranging from partial to complete divergence (e.g., from code-switching for a few words to speaking an entirely different language).

Sometimes accommodation is *symmetrical* and one speaker's (convergent or divergent) shifts are reciprocated by the other. For instance, speakers from different religious or ethnic groups may converge to each other by sidestepping sensitive topics (e.g., religion, politics) during intergroup conversations to avoid conflict. In other situations, however, speakers' shifts may not be reciprocated by their partners. Indeed, convergence is often directed towards those with greater, rather than lesser, power; such shifts tend to be uni-directional, or *asymmetrical*. For example, salespersons may be more likely to converge to shoppers than vice versa. Similarly, Bourhis (1991) reported that English was the language speakers most often converged to in government offices in New Brunswick, Canada, even though French speakers were the demographic majority (64%) in that organizational context. Indeed, this was the case even when French supervisors were communicating with an English-speaking subordinate, presumably due to the higher status of English, relative to French, in that cultural context.

A similar pattern of asymmetrical accommodation frequently occurs in male-female interactions, where women converge to men more often than men converge to women. For instance, Mulac, Studley, Wiemann, and Bradac (1995) found that females converged to the gaze patterns of males, but not so much the opposite. Indeed, the more a male endorses a masculine sex-role ideology, the less likely he is to converge towards women. However, and as discussed later, in such cases asymmetrical accommodation may more accurately be described as "speech-complementarity," and be perceived positively by both parties.

Convergence and divergence can also both be *unimodal* or *multimodal* – the former refers to shifts on only a single dimension (e.g., accent), whereas the latter refers to shifts on multiple dimensions simultaneously (e.g., accent, posture, topic initiation). Moreover, convergence and divergence are not mutually exclusive strategies, and both may be enacted simultaneously in the same stretch of talk. Thus, to meet their interlocutors' multiple conversational needs, speakers may converge on some of their partners' communicative features and simultaneously diverge on others. For example, Bilous and Krauss (1988) found that although women converged towards men's utterance length, interruptions, and pauses, they diverged on backchannels and laughter.

Accommodation strategies

Adjustment can also be conceptualized in terms of its focus or goal relative to a conversational partner's perceived needs and characteristics (Coupland et al., 1988), in at least four ways. First, when speakers are focused primarily on their interlocutor's productive language and communication, they can employ *approximation* strategies, which involve (as above) adjusting their verbal (e.g., accent) and nonverbal (e.g., posture) behaviors toward (convergence) or away from (divergence) their interlocutor. Most CAT research has focused on approximation, and this entry reflects this in subsequent sections. Second, attending to their partners' ability to comprehend what is being said will lead speakers to adopt *interpretability* strategies, such as decreasing the diversity of vocabulary, simplifying syntax, or becoming louder to increase clarity. Third, speakers focused on their partners' more macro-conversational needs can adopt *discourse management* strategies, such as offering speaking turns and selecting or sharing particular topics of mutual interest or concern. Fourth, when speakers are focused on role relationships in an interaction, they can adopt *interpersonal control* strategies, such as the use of interruptions or honorifics to remind the partner of their relative status or role. Just as speakers can converge and diverge on different dimensions at once (see Bilous & Krauss, 1988), speakers can adopt multiple strategies simultaneously—for example, one could simplify an explanation to aid interpretability *and* remind a subordinate of their social position—and what goals or characteristics speakers attend to may vary over the course of an interaction.

While these strategies can be used to facilitate interaction, adjustment can also be enacted toward more malicious ends in what can be called “strategic” or “exploitative accommodation”. For example, tourists sometimes fall victim to this in service settings abroad. At the outset, service persons seem very accommodative and helpful, although effortful in their English proficiencies. Once the accommodator had garnered tourists' trust, wines requested from the menu suddenly become mysteriously unavailable and local, more expensive varieties are recommended instead. Subsequently, the bill comes in an undecipherable syllabic script; the tourist, on requesting the menu, discovers that costs have been inflated. Not uncommonly and in response, other service staff – who previously claimed no knowledge of the tourist's language – come to their colleague's defense with surprising English proficiency: in short, it is accommodation as means to an (exploitative) end. In certain situations, non-native speakers may also strategically emphasize their accents to advertise their non-nativeness, which may then excuse their committing social faux pas or engaging in other (locally) non-normative behavior.

Psychological, subjective, and objective accommodation

Adjustment can also be conceptualized in terms of how it is *experienced* by recipients, and by speakers. Here, communication is considered accommodative if it is experienced as appropriately adjusted and unproblematic. Overaccommodation is communication that overshoots recipients' desired level of adjustment in some way. Underaccommodation, in turn, is communication that is insufficiently adjusted relative to the recipient's needs or desires (Coupland et al., 1988). These accommodative strategies are generally recognized by communicators as taking these separate forms (e.g., Speer, Giles, & Denes, 2013), though speakers may simultaneously over- and underaccommodate on different dimensions of their communication in the same stretch of talk.

Although speakers' motives and intentions to accommodate and their actual communicative behaviors (e.g., convergent versus divergent) can be isomorphic, this need not always be the case. To account for this potential incongruence, Thakerar et al. (1982) distinguished between *psychological* and *linguistic accommodation*. The former refers to speakers' motives and intentions to converge, and the latter to their actual speech behavior. For

example, in many-role discrepant situations, dissimilarities are not only acceptable, but also expected. Thus, a job interviewee wishing to accommodate her interviewer (i.e., psychological convergence) may do so by *not* assuming the directive, interrogative language of the interviewer (i.e., linguistic convergence) but, rather, by crafting a more tempered, and reserved communicative style (i.e., linguistic divergence). Similarly, psychological *divergence* can sometimes be enacted precisely through linguistic *convergence*. In this vein, Woolard (1989) reported that when Castilian speakers converged to Catalan during conversations with Catalan speakers, they received replies in Castilian. Although both Castilian and Catalan speakers converged to one another in their respective choices of language, Catalan speakers' seemingly accommodative behavior (i.e., switching to Castilian) actually represented psychological *divergence* in an attempt to emphasize intergroup differences and boundaries (i.e., not allowing an outgroup to use Catalan).

Thakerar et al. (1982) further distinguished accommodation as being objective and/or subjective. *Objective* accommodation refers to a directly observable or measurable change in behavior toward (convergence) or away from (divergence) one's interlocutor. In contrast, *subjective* accommodation refers to individuals' *perceptions* of their own or their interlocutors' behavior as convergent or divergent. Like its psychological and linguistic counterparts, objective and subjective accommodation are not always aligned. For example, speakers may perceive their behavior as convergent when, in fact, it is objectively divergent. In this vein, Thakerar et al. (1982) observed that, in dyads characterized by status inequality, high-status participants slowed their speech rates and made their accents less standard when interacting with low-status speakers. In contrast, low-status speakers made their accents more standard and increased their speech rate. Although both were objectively *diverging* from one another, each perceived that they were *converging*.

In the previous example, both high- and low-status speakers were likely adjusting their communication to their (status-based) expectations of their conversational partners. Indeed, people often adjust their communication toward where they *believe* others are communicatively, rather than where they actually are (Thakerar et al., 1982). For example, radio announcers often adjust their speech patterns so as to accommodate their reading pronunciation to what they *anticipate* are different audiences, without of course any knowledge of the *actual* speech patterns of those audiences. Although sometimes speakers' expectations of others' behaviors and their actual behaviors may be one and the same, other times they may be incongruent. Errors are especially likely to occur during intergroup encounters – that is, situations in which people view one another primarily in terms of their social identities (i.e., social group memberships) rather than their personal identities (i.e., idiosyncratic characteristics) – because social categorization depersonalizes people's perceptions of others and leads to stereotyped expectations. For instance, Rubin (1992) found that American participants rated the *same* standard-English speaker as *more* “accented” when they believed that she was Asian, rather than Caucasian. In other words, categorizing the speaker as Asian activated the stereotype that foreigners are accented and, potentially, incomprehensible.

During intergroup encounters, speakers tend to converge toward a stereotyped rather than an individualized view of their interlocutor. Indeed, such encounters may be far more common than traditionally expected and it has been argued that *most* interactions are actually intergroup in nature. Erroneous expectations can lead to misfired communication adjustments, often resulting in over- or underaccommodation. For instance, Bayard (1995) found that women and men swore at similar rates during *intragender* conversations, but that women swore more than men (i.e.,

overaccommodated) during *intergender* conversations, arguably because they *expected* men to swear more than women.

Overaccommodation of this sort has been studied extensively in the context of intergenerational communication. This research shows that when younger people interact with elderly people, they often adjust their communicative behaviors to compensate for what they believe are physical or psychological deficits in older adults. However, these perceptions are often exaggerated and reflect negative age stereotypes, rather than older adults' actual competencies. Drawing on these stereotypes, younger adults tend to *overadjust* their communication to elderly targets, using simplified grammar and vocabulary, unnecessary repetition, slow speech, and exaggerated intonation; such speech is often perceived as patronizing. Underaccommodation can trouble intergenerational communication as well: examples include older adults' engaging in painful self-disclosures, rambling speech, and excessive talk about their ailments, all of which generally fail to adequately take younger adults' preferences for topic-sharing and turn-taking into account.

Motivating accommodation

CAT proposes two distinct motives for adjusting communication. The first is an *affective* (identity maintenance) motive, related to managing social distance and identity concerns. The second is a *cognitive* (organizational) motive, related to facilitating comprehension and increasing communicative efficiency. The two motives are not mutually exclusive, and communicative behaviors may be motivated by concerns about both identity and comprehensibility. Below, each of these goals is overviewed, followed by the model CAT proposes for the process by which these motives affect behavior.

Affective motives

CAT is premised on the assumption that communication conveys not only referential, but also social and relational information. CAT also assumes, per social identity theory (SIT: e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), that part of people's self concept derives from their social group memberships (i.e., social identity), and that people want to create and maintain positive personal and social identities. Following from this, CAT posits that speakers use communication to manage and regulate social distance and to signal their attitudes towards each other and their respective social groups.

One important motive for cooperative accommodation (including convergence) is a desire to gain another's social approval. In line with the similarity-attraction paradigm, CAT argues that speakers can increase interpersonal liking and secure potential social rewards by becoming more similar to one another in terms of their communicative behaviors. For instance, speakers may converge to their interlocutors' idiosyncratic communicative characteristics (e.g., speech rate, gestures) so as to appear more similar to them, and thus engender liking. Indeed, speakers with a high need for social approval tend to converge to their interlocutors to a greater extent than those with a low need for social approval. Similarly, speakers may stress their accent or dialect to signal that they belong to the same social group as their interlocutor. For example, a New Yorker may emphasize his or her accent when conversing with other New Yorkers as a way to signal their shared group identity and, thus, garner potential social rewards.

Convergence of this sort, however, need not always be an honest signal. Indeed, speakers may sometimes linguistically converge to their interlocutor in an attempt to *falsely* signal a shared social identity and thus conceal their true social group membership(s). For instance, speakers may try to mask their own accent and instead mimic the accent of their interlocutor and/or strategically avoid words or phrases that could signal their actual group affiliation(s).

People may be especially likely to engage in such behavior when they fear that revealing their true identity could lead to negative social repercussions or—even more extremely—put them in danger. During the height of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, for example, language was a very salient marker of ethnic identity. Those who were caught speaking the “wrong” language on the “wrong” side of the border often found themselves in rather uncomfortable, if not dangerous, circumstances. The potential repercussions of failing to linguistically accommodate to the majority were made rather clear by one café located in an area of Bosnia and Herzegovina controlled by Croats at that time. On its menu, the café offered its customers coffee at three different prices, depending on which (ethnically-linked) pronunciation customers used to order the item. *Kava*, indexing a Croatian, and by extension, Catholic identity, was sold for the modest price of 1 Deutsche Mark. *Kafa*, indexing a Serbian and Orthodox Christian identity, was not available for sale. Finally, *kahva*, indexing a Bosnian Muslim identity, cost the customer a “bullet in the forehead.” As this example illustrates, *not* converging to the speech of one’s interlocutor can, in some situations, be deadly. In situations such as these, speakers may sometimes linguistically converge towards others in an attempt to conceal their true identity and “pass” as ingroup members. Here then, the underlying motive may not be a desire for affiliation, *per se*, so much as a fear of *disaffiliation* and its associated consequences.

An important motive for non-cooperative accommodation (including divergence and maintenance) is a desire to emphasize distinctiveness from one’s interlocutor as a means to positively reinforce one’s own social identity. As such, during intergroup encounters – that is, situations in which people view one another primarily in terms of their social identities – people are motivated to search for and create dimensions on which they may be seen as positively distinct from relevant outgroups, as a means to reinforce their positive sense of self. Because communicative behaviors represent important dimensions of social identity, divergence (and maintenance) on these dimensions may be used as a strategy to establish positive intergroup distinctiveness and differentiate oneself from relevant outgroups. One such way would be to adopt the communicative behaviors believed to be prototypical of their *ingroup*. For instance, members of ethnic or social minorities may adopt features of their own (perhaps stigmatized) dialects when they become aware and proud of their cultural identity. In this respect, people often diverge from select others (e.g., in terms of clothing and apparel) to avoid signaling socially undesirable identities (e.g., geek) and, thus, potential misidentification. The tartan kilt provides an interesting example: although we stereotypically associate it with Scots, it actually was not a particularly common form of dress in Scotland until the English outlawed its wearing in 1746. Thereafter, Scots divergently adopted it as a sign of rebellion.

In sum, CAT provides a model for how people pursue positive personal and social identities and regulate social distance through communication: by converging and cooperatively accommodating when they wish to affiliate (or, alternatively, when they fear the consequences of *disaffiliation*), and diverging and non-cooperatively accommodating when they wish to disaffiliate or accentuate their distinctiveness. Although these distinctions and patterns seem straightforward, the actual dynamics of conversation are often more complex, as suggested by the notions of strategic and exploitative accommodation discussed above and in the interactional management of conflict (Gasiorek & Giles, 2013). People belong to many different social groups; in a given conversation, they are likely to share some (e.g., ethnicity, age) but not all (e.g., gender) with their interlocutors. These different group identities may vary in salience across different encounters, as well as at different points during the same encounter, with accommodative moves following accordingly.

Cognitive motives

In addition to the identity maintenance concerns outlined above, CAT posits that communicative adjustment may also be motivated by a desire to facilitate comprehension and increase communicative efficiency (Thakerar et al., 1982). Motivated as such, speakers can assess their interlocutors' communicative needs and characteristics, and adjust their speech to be more (or less) intelligible, predictable, and comprehensible for others.

Indeed, converging to a common linguistic style often improves communicative effectiveness and has been associated with increased predictability of the other and, in turn, reduced uncertainty and interpersonal anxiety, as well as increased mutual understanding. For example, doctors may refrain from using specific medical jargon ("cardiac arrest") and instead use more lay terms ("heart attack") to facilitate patient comprehension. Speakers may also offer speaking turns, elicit information, and use conversational repair as a way to facilitate a partner's contribution to an interaction (Coupland et al., 1988). Somewhat counterintuitively, comprehension can also be facilitated strategically through divergent shifts. For instance, speakers may diverge from their interlocutors to encourage the latter to adopt a more effective communicative style – for example, by slowing down speech in order to re-calibrate an overly fast-talking partner.

Divergence can also be used to indicate that certain spheres of knowledge and behaviors may not be shared among interactants, with the goal of preventing misunderstandings or misattributions. For instance, as mentioned above, non-native speakers sometimes deliberately "self-handicap" by broadening their accent when talking to native speakers in their host community. Such a divergent shift signals that they are not members of or familiar with the host community, and that any norms they violate should be attributed to their ignorance and non-nativeness, rather than to malevolent intent. In some situations, speakers may also diverge from others intentionally with the goal of *making* communication problematic.

Motivational processes

As stated at the outset, how people initially adjust their communication is generally a function of their *initial orientation*, which is the goals, beliefs, and predispositions speakers bring to a given encounter. CAT identifies several macro-factors that can exert a significant influence on interlocutors' initial orientation, including their interpersonal history, sociocultural norms and values, and the current and past state of relevant intergroup relations. Interactants' interpersonal history can range from no contact (e.g., meeting someone for the first time) to an intimate relationship (e.g., a romantic couple). When interactants share a positive interpersonal history, they are more likely to adopt an interpersonal orientation and converge towards one another. In contrast, when their interpersonal history is negative, they are more prone to divergence.

Sociocultural norms and values specify with whom, when, and how it is appropriate to interact. Such norms can circumscribe the available opportunities for intergroup contact as well as shape interactants' behavior. For instance, in many Asian cultures norms of politeness oblige speakers to avert their gaze, bow, and employ a complex system of honorifics when addressing higher-status individuals. Sociocultural norms also often specify what (sort of) language is appropriate to speak in a given situation. For example, there is often the expectation that speakers will converge to those who speak the "standard" or prestige variety of a language (e.g., standard American English), and particularly so in status-stressing situations, such as a job interview. In line with this, Marlow and Giles (2008) found that although multiethnic locals in Hawai'i prefer to speak the local creole, Hawai'i Creole English (colloquially known as Pidgin), they nonetheless often converge to Standard English in the context of work and education out of

necessity. Such adjustment, based on norms of respect, obligation, and/or social hierarchies, has been termed *reluctant* accommodation (Soliz & Giles, in press). That is, although speakers may adjust their communicative style to others, they do so not out of an attempt for relational closeness, but rather based on situational or cultural norms, which often vary widely from one culture to the next.

The tendency to treat others in interpersonal versus intergroup terms is also likely to vary culturally. The placement of cultures along the spectrum of individualism to collectivism underscores the relative importance that a cultural group attaches to the individual versus the group. Compared to individualistic cultures, collectivistic cultures tend to share stronger beliefs about ingroup identification and loyalty, place more emphasis on group identity over personal identity, and perceive firmer intergroup boundaries. As a result, members of collectivistic cultures tend to be less receptive to convergence from outgroup speakers and are more likely to diverge from them than are members of individualistic cultures. For instance, when non-native (e.g., English) speakers traveling abroad attempt to converge linguistically toward their collectivistically-oriented foreign host interlocutors, they sometimes receive replies in their own language (e.g., English) rather than the language of their hosts. When cultural boundaries are valued and strongly adhered to, attempts to cross them are not always welcome.

Current and past relations between social groups can also be an important determinant of whether people initially construe one another in interpersonal or intergroup terms, and whether they are motivated to converge or diverge. When interactants belong to groups that have historically been involved in hostile or violent relations, they are more likely to construe the encounter in intergroup terms, and to diverge from one another as a way to emphasize their valued ingroup identity and reinforce a positive sense of self. One important construct in the analysis of the relations between cultural and ethnic groups is *ethnolinguistic vitality* (Giles & Johnson, 1987). A group's vitality is determined by three factors: its *status* (i.e., economical and sociocultural prestige), *demography* (i.e., the relative number of ingroup members and their distribution across different locales), and the degree of *institutional support* (e.g., representation in governmental bodies, formal education, places of worship) it enjoys. A comparison of groups' vitalities helps to define which one is more dominant in society. Although many dimensions of vitality can be measured objectively, interlocutors' *perceptions* of their respective groups' vitalities have been found to be better predictors of their attitudes during interaction than are groups' objective vitalities.

CAT posits that historically strong collectives (i.e., high vitality groups) are more likely to diverge in intergroup situations, and that group members who have a strong attachment and loyalty to their ingroup (i.e., high ingroup identification) are more likely to diverge than those who have only a weak attachment. In this vein, Giles and Johnson (1987) found that Welsh participants who were strongly identified with the ingroup diverged from a threatening English person even when their sense of group vitality was low. However, for those Welsh participants who only moderately identified with the ingroup, a sense of high ingroup vitality was required for divergence. CAT also suggests, drawing upon SIT, that divergence is more likely to occur when group members feel that their status in the intergroup hierarchy is illegitimate.

Once people begin to interact, their initial orientation is transformed into their *psychological accommodative stance*, or their immediate and ongoing intentions with respect to accommodation (see again Figure 1). A speaker's accommodative stance is shaped by their perception of the salience of personal and social identities in the interaction, as well as their perceptions of their partners' motives and behaviors. In this respect, one's stance can be dynamic

and has the potential to shift on an ongoing basis throughout the encounter, as interlocutors react and respond to perceptions of each other's behaviors, needs, and motives. For instance, an initially accommodative stance can quickly become nonaccommodative when one of a speaker's social identities becomes salient, and they wish to positively differentiate themselves from their partner on this dimension. In this vein, Bourhis, Giles, Leyens, and Tajfel (1979) found that when a French confederate asked trilingual (Flemish-English-French) Flemish students a content-neutral question in English, the students converged to English. However, when the French confederate diverged into French to voice an ethnically-threatening question, the Flemish students overwhelmingly diverged into Flemish and vehemently disagreed with the French confederate's statements. In other words, the French confederate's threatening question changed the Flemish students' initially accommodative stance into a *nonaccommodative* one.

Outcomes of accommodation

As outlined above, CAT proposes that speakers form judgments of each other, and each others' communication, on the basis of the accommodation they perceive; these judgments also inform speakers' desire to engage in future interaction. Most CAT work to date has focused on evaluations (of the speaker and of the quality of communication) as outcomes of accommodation; however, other correlates studied include compliance, credibility, and relational solidarity.

Generally, convergence elicits favorable evaluations, particularly when it is symmetrical, and has been shown to increase a speaker's perceived attractiveness, intelligibility, interpersonal involvement, and perceived competence and credibility, as well as to facilitate compliance and build rapport. Typical effect sizes for these results range from $r = .20-.60$ and, as discussed above, these relationships have been demonstrated consistently across a broad range of contexts (Soliz & Giles, in press). Following self-attribution principles, speakers alert to their own convergent moves are likely, in turn, to view recipients of them as more likeable and be more cooperative with them as well.

In contrast, divergence and maintenance tend to be associated with negative relational outcomes and are often characterized as insulting, impolite, or hostile. Speakers who diverge from the standard language by adopting nonstandard language varieties (e.g., a Birmingham accent in the UK, African American Vernacular English in the USA) are typically evaluated less favorably on status (e.g., intelligent, educated) and solidarity (e.g., friendly, pleasant) traits than those who converge (Giles & Watson, 2013). Although this pattern is seen globally, the severity of negative evaluations can vary across different groups and cultures. In general, members of low vitality and stigmatized ethnolinguistic groups who fail to accommodate to the standard language tend to garner more negative evaluations than members of high vitality groups. However, when a group is perceived to pose a threat to the majority, members of high vitality ethnolinguistic groups may be likely to suffer more extreme sanctions than members of low vitality groups due to the former's relatively higher (perceived) influence within society.

Negative outcomes stemming from linguistic divergence/maintenance often go beyond mere speaker evaluations and can result in real and important social consequences. Examples of these include discrimination in the workplace and housing, judgments about suitability for high-status employment, and even attributions of guilt and criminality. For instance, Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, and Foster (1994) found that so-called "colored" suspects in South Africa who diverged into a Black-accented version of Cape Afrikaans with a White-accented interrogator were judged guiltier of a crime than those who did not diverge so.

Relatedly, even maintenance of one's linguistic patterns (e.g., dialect) may lead to potentially deadly consequences when it occurs in charged and hostile intergroup environments. This point is rather poignantly illustrated by the biblical story of Shibboleth. A linguistic shibboleth is a word or phrase that, when uttered, can identify someone as a member of a distinct social group. In the Bible, an account is provided of the Gileadites who inflicted a military defeat on the Ephraimites. When surviving Ephraimites would try to cross the Jordan River they would be asked by the Gileadites, "Are you an Ephraimite?" Those who answered negatively to the question would then be required to pronounce *Shibboleth*. If they said *Sibboleth* because they could not articulate the appropriate *sh* sound, then their outgroup status was revealed and they were killed. Purportedly, 42,000 Ephraimites were murdered in this manner. Similar tactics to identify potential outgroup members have been employed even in modern times. By some accounts, Dominican President Rafael Trujillo in 1937 ordered his soldiers to apply a shibboleth in order to determine whether the people living in the borderlands with Haiti were Dominicans or immigrant Haitians. The soldiers would approach locals holding up a sprig of parsley in their hand and ask, "What is this?" Those who could not pronounce the Spanish word for parsley (*perejil*) with a trilled *r* would be considered Haitians and duly killed. The ensuing murder of an estimated 20,000 ethnic Haitians came to be known as the Parsley Massacre. Although such morbid repercussions of linguistic diversity may well be restricted to times of war, maintenance of one's own linguistic style *can* and *does* have very real communicative, social, and other consequences even in peacetime.

Of course, these patterns do not always hold. As alluded to above, there are optimal levels for accommodation; convergence in excess of that threshold is likely to be viewed unfavorably, but divergence that achieves a desired level of distinctiveness should be viewed favorably.

Multiple meanings and optimal levels

Communicative behaviors often have multiple social meanings and, in this way, convergence can entail costs as well as rewards. Although the tendency of members of linguistic minorities to converge to the language of the dominant majority may garner them social rewards (e.g., economic opportunities) in some settings, it may also lead to the potential loss of a valued aspect of their identity, as well as ridicule and social marginalization from members of their own group. For instance, a Mexican American who speaks English rather than Spanish may be called a *vendido*, a sell-out, while a French Canadian who attempts to speak English may similarly be labeled a *vendu*. Indeed, linguistically diverging from outgroup members may actually be evaluated positively by members of one's ingroup in some contexts. Tong, Hong, Lee, and Chiu (1999) found that one year prior to Hong Kong's handover to the People's Republic of China, Cantonese speakers who diverged from Mandarin-speaking Chinese by emphasizing their Cantonese linguistic identity were evaluated more positively by members of their ingroup than were those who converged to Mandarin.

As these examples highlight, different individuals' perceptions of the same behavior can vary considerably. What one person perceives as convergence, another may perceive as divergence, depending on the listeners' social identity, and what dimensions of that identity the context makes salient. The same behavior may be especially likely to invite multiple interpretations during interactions involving more than two people or, more generally, those that occur in the public sphere. For instance, President Obama has on several occasions shifted his speech style away from Standard American English and towards African American Vernacular English when addressing primarily black audiences. Although these audiences tend to welcome

such shifts, undoubtedly perceiving them as convergent moves, others (i.e., primarily white, non-audience members of the electorate) tend to be highly critical of the President's speech, likely perceiving it as divergence (from their social group). Communication occurring in the public sphere is especially likely to invite evaluations by recipients and observers alike, who may have markedly different interpretations of the same behavior.

Even when convergence is positively evaluated, *full* convergence may not always be appreciated by interactants. For example, Giles and Smith (1979) found that full convergence in terms of pronunciation, speech rate, *and* message content was perceived as patronizing (i.e., overaccommodative) and evaluated negatively. Conversely, convergence only on speech content and speech rate was perceived more positively. Although divergence may be a blow to recipients' self-esteem, full convergence may also make them uncomfortable, perhaps because it implies that their communicative characteristics can easily be matched, as in the case of realizing that one is being mimicked. In this vein, Giles and Smith (1979) suggested that people have different *tolerance* levels for convergence, and that any shifts beyond a person's desired (i.e., optimal) level will be evaluated negatively by recipients.

Speakers' notions of what constitutes adequate and optimal levels of convergence or divergence are partially rooted in sociocultural norms for intergroup contact. For instance, during intergender conversations, mutual divergence on some speech characteristics (e.g., pitch) may be construed as socially, if not sexually, appealing and desirable by both parties. Indeed, when men and women interact, men often adopt more-masculine sounding voices by lowering their pitch whereas women adopt more feminine-sounding voices by raising their pitch. Although these are, objectively, instances of mutual divergence, they may actually more accurately be labeled as "speech complementarity," given that they may involve *psychologically* convergent motives, with both parties aiming for a nonverbal stance that conveys their respective gender identity and appeal.

Perceptions and attributions

How convergence and divergence are evaluated is based, in part, on the attributions recipients make about those behaviors. Attribution theory suggests that people explain and evaluate others' behavior in terms of the motives and intentions that they think caused it. After considering what we know about the situation and the people involved, we determine whether behavior is intentional or unintentional, and if it is intentional, what motives might underlie it. A person who performs a desirable behavior tends to be evaluated more positively if the behavior is considered intentional and attributed to their own positive intent, rather than if it is considered unintentional, or otherwise compelled by the situation. Conversely, a person who performs an undesirable behavior tends to be evaluated less negatively when the behavior is considered unintentional and/or attributed to the situation, rather than considered intentional.

In line with this, Simard, Taylor, and Giles (1976) found that convergence was evaluated more favorably when attributed to a speaker's desire to break down cultural barriers (i.e., attribution of deliberate, positive intent), rather than to situational pressures (i.e., unintentional on the part of the speaker). Similarly, Gasiorek and Giles (2012) found that over- and underaccommodation were evaluated more negatively when a speaker's manner of speaking was attributed to a negative motive (e.g., getting rid of a student), compared to a positive motive (e.g., desire to help a student learn) or no motive (i.e., seen as unintentional). There is also evidence that attributions of motive affect not only evaluations, but behavior as well. Gasiorek (2013) found that attributions of negative motive predicted recipients' communicative responses to underaccommodation: those who thought speakers were negatively motivated reported

engaging in more potentially nonaccommodative behavior (e.g., using negative nonverbals; stopping or withdrawing from the interaction) themselves.

These studies' findings underscore the importance of the *recipients'* perspective when explaining and predicting responses to behavior in interaction. The same communicative behavior can be interpreted quite differently by different parties (e.g., as intentional or unintentional; as positively or negatively motivated) leading to markedly different psychological and communicative responses. Indeed, what we perceive as accommodative or not—and what constitutes an “optimal level” of accommodation in a given situation—is likely to vary from person to person. This highlights the importance of understanding and accounting for each speaker's initial orientation (see above) in understanding how they will react to particular communicative behaviors. It also suggests that seeking to understand another speaker's point of view – in other words, engaging in perspective-taking – may be one avenue for helping speakers better understand and predict others' responses to what they say, and thus accommodate in ways that achieve their goals.

Other studies have suggested additional factors that may *mediate* the relationship between speakers' behaviors and recipients' evaluations. Myers, Giles, Reid, and Nabi (2008) found that negative affect associated with officers' nonaccommodative acts (e.g., being irritated and insulted) partially mediated the relationship between these communicative practices and participants' perceptions of those officers' competence and social attractiveness. Additionally, multiple studies of police-civilian encounters in the United States and around the world have shown that trust can mediate the relationship between perceived accommodation and reported compliance with officers' directives.

Epilogue: Principles of accommodation and future prospects

In their recent review of CAT, Giles and colleagues (2007) proposed four Principles summarizing the theory's central ideas. In light of the foregoing, the following refined *Principles of Accommodation* are proposed:

1. Communication accommodation is fundamental to interaction, and serves two major functions: first, to facilitate coherent interaction and, second, to manage social distance between individuals and individuals as members of groups.
2. Individuals have expectations about what constitutes appropriate and desirable accommodation in context, and these expectations are informed by the sociohistorical context of interaction, interpersonal and intergroup histories, and idiosyncratic preferences.
3. Speakers will increasingly accommodate to the communicative patterns they believe characteristic of their interactants, the more they wish affiliate (i.e., decrease social distance) with their interactants on either an individual or group level, or make their message more easily understood.
4. As a function of the intentions and motives believed to underlie a speaker's communication, perceived accommodation increasingly and cumulatively decreases perceived social distance, enhances interactional satisfaction and positive evaluations of speakers, and facilitates mutual understanding.
5. Speakers will increasingly **non**accommodate to the communicative patterns they believed characteristic of their interactants, the more they wish disaffiliate (i.e., increase social distance) with their interactants on either an individual or group level, or make their message more difficult to understand.

6. As a function of the intentions and motives believed to underlie a speaker's communication and the potential consequences of associated outcomes, perceived nonaccommodation increasingly and cumulatively increases perceived social distance, diminishes interactional satisfaction and positive evaluations of speakers, and impedes mutual understanding. Such nonaccommodation may take the form of either overaccommodation or underaccommodation relative to a recipient's needs, with underaccommodation typically resulting in more negative evaluative responses.

Future research will doubtless trigger further refinements, amendments, and extensions of these Principles, particularly as more cross-disciplinary collaboration is forged and the linguistic, nonverbal, and discursive ingredients and processes of accommodation are further unpacked.

Looking ahead, a number of exciting new directions and prospects beckon. First, CAT began by positing direct effects from communicative adjustments to social outcomes. More recent research has highlighted the fact that accommodation often works indirectly through mediating mechanisms of attributed intent and trust; this is an area ripe for further research. Second, CAT empirical work has yet to fully embrace the fact (see Principle #3 above) that communicators commonly accommodate to the affective reactions they are (rightly or wrongly) producing and perceiving in. This more dynamic, sequential approach to the accommodative process is still in its infancy, but has great potential. Third, whereas most CAT research to date has focused on dyadic encounters in which accommodation is examined with respect to a single recipient, future research might examine the complex accommodative dilemmas that speakers often face when multiple conversational partners are present in interaction. During such encounters, a speaker's choice to converge towards one conversational partner may inadvertently entail divergence from another. Bilingual and bidialectical individuals face such dilemmas daily, particularly when interacting with monolingual individuals who speak different languages. How speakers deal with these dilemmas – for example, when and to whom they choose to converge – and the extent to which they are aware of their choices both remain exciting prospects for future research. Fourth, new constructs inspired by phenomena in the physical sciences, such as accommodative parallax and accommodative tropism, are introduced here and await further analysis. The former describes the idea that we may locate self-felt accommodative moves because of supposed adjustments of others in the same interaction. The latter builds off the biological notion of different kinds of tropisms as *involuntary growth movements* (or orienting responses) whose evolutionary adaptive direction and value, both positive and negative, are determined by the direction from which an external stimulus (e.g., light and heat) strikes. Applied then to human accommodative moves (toward or away from another), this idea pushes us to determine whether some of these are intuitively protective devices based on the “direction” of communicative choices. This construct brings us full circle to our thorny starting point, namely whether when, and which forms of accommodation are voluntary or involuntary, and why. Both these constructs have great potential for elaboration in future research. With these and other exciting future prospects, such as pinpointing the biochemical determinants of accommodation practices and the ways in which these, in turn and transactively, influence the former processes, it is our hope that CAT will continue to inspire innovative, cross-disciplinary research for years to come.

SEE ALSO: Communication Styles; Convergence/Divergence; Cross Generational Communication; Identity Management; Interaction Adaptation Theory; Interpersonal Communication Skill/Competence; Inter-Racial Multi-Ethnic Communication; Power & Dominance in Nonverbal Communication; Reciprocity/Compensation in Social Interaction; Social Identity Theories

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Table 1. Accommodative moves (after Gallois, & Giles, 1998). Pending permission from Greenwood Publishing Group/ABC-CLIO.

Explanation	Speaker and Partner
Symmetrical convergence	A----> <----B
Asymmetrical convergence	A----> <--B
Convergence with maintenance	A----> B
Convergence with divergence	A----> B---->
Symmetrical maintenance	A B
Symmetrical divergence	<----A B---->
Asymmetrical divergence	<----A B-->
Divergence with maintenance	<----A B
Divergence with convergence	<----A <----B

Note: lines indicate direction and amount of change over time (short- or long-term). The perspective of A is taken and should be reversed for B. Accommodation may be behavioral or perceived, intergroup or interpersonal, and may not be in accord with optimal levels.

Figure Caption

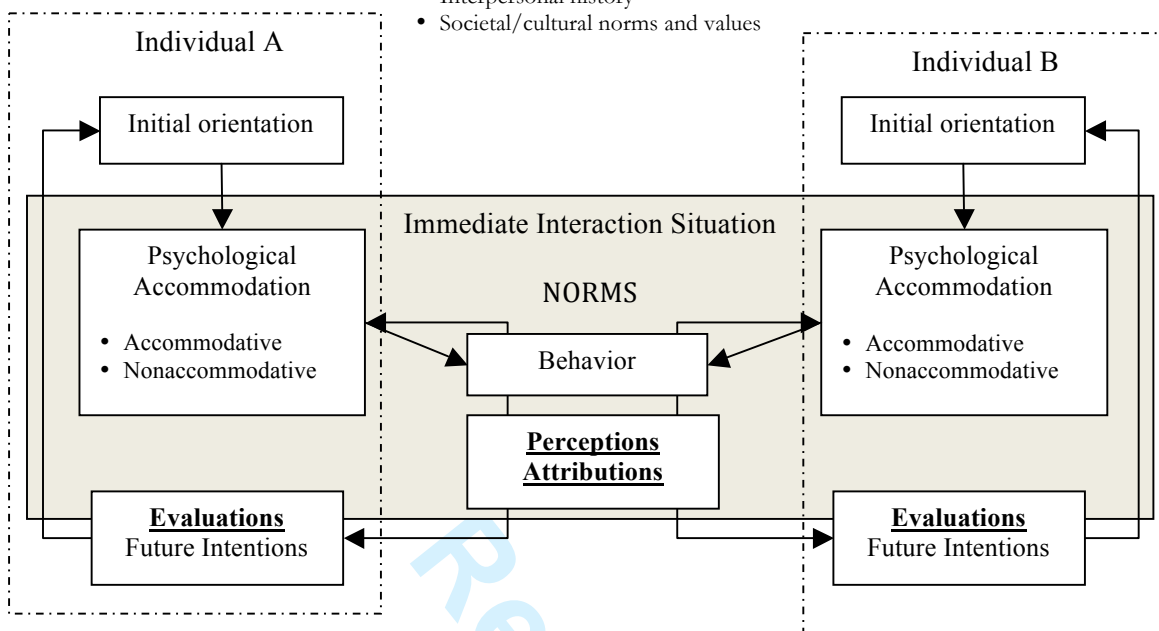
Figure 1. *The communication accommodation theory model* (adapted from Giles et al., 2007, p.

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Sociohistorical Context

- Intergroup history
- Interpersonal history
- Societal/cultural norms and values



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