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# Communication accommodation competence: The nature and nurture of accommodative resources across the lifespan



Margaret J. Pitts\*, Jake Harwood

University of Arizona, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This Epilogue briefly reviews some themes present in this collection, and highlights its many contributions. We then look beyond the contributions of the Special Issue papers to consider the continued conceptual development of communication accommodation theory. We argue for re-conceptualizing CAT as a theory of competence, suggesting that accommodation competence is a developmental phenomenon built on the accumulation of accommodation resources and repertoires over the lifespan. We address contexts in which communicative resources are stretched and competent accommodation becomes difficult. The competence approach provides one useful avenue for future empirical and theoretical development of CAT.

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## 1. Introduction

The sheer presence of communication accommodation theory (CAT) in nearly every domain of language and communication studies points to its importance and versatility as a theory, but the theory's importance extends farther than that. CAT originated as speech accommodation theory (SAT) in the 1970s, and was deeply rooted in social psychology from the start (Giles and Powesland, 1975; Street and Giles, 1982). Since then, CAT has been applied to describe and explain intergroup and interpersonal encounters across a multitude of contexts, and its disciplinary tendrils extend into communication, linguistics, gerontology, law enforcement, family studies, and more. CAT has stood the test of time due to its continual testing and refinement (Gallois et al., 2005; Giles, in press; Giles and Gasiorsek, 2013) and its clear practical application across social contexts and issues (Giles, 2008).

At its core, CAT taps into the essentially adaptable and improvisatory character of human interaction making it a foundational theory of *communication processes*. The theory explains when and why interlocutors adjust their communicative behaviors to facilitate their identity, relational, and message goals and how that process is managed by both parties in interactional context. All of this occurs utterance by utterance, as interactants anticipate, strategize, and maneuver their communication. This communicative ritual is a dynamic process of micro- and macro-level adjustments that allow interlocutors to coordinate and align their communicative efforts (accommodation), to distance and/or misalign communication (nonaccommodation), or to hold the line (maintenance). CAT is well regarded for its predictive and explanatory power, and for its socially significant practical application (Giles, 2008).

In this Epilogue, we pursue two main goals. First, we examine the papers in the Special Issue, noting their unique contributions to CAT in terms of methodology and topic areas. In reviewing the Special Issue, we pay particular attention to the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [mjpitts@email.arizona.edu](mailto:mjpitts@email.arizona.edu) (M.J. Pitts).

themes that are novel here, and that deserve continued attention in the future. Second, we begin a discussion of CAT as a theory of communication *competence*. Building from themes in some of the Special Issue papers, we suggest that scholars should examine the ways in which accommodative resources are developed across the lifespan, are differentially challenged in certain contexts, and are perhaps open to training and active intervention.

## 2. Communication accommodation theory: innovation, application, and beyond

The theme of this Special Issue, and the challenge set for contributors, was to demonstrate novel applications and contexts for CAT. As discussants, our question is whether the Special Issue achieved this goal and whether this novelty stimulates additional innovation. On the latter question, we believe the papers in the Special Issue provide a starting point for some major new ideas in CAT. Before discussing such advances, we first present a thematic summary of the Special Issue, summarizing some of the novel applications achieved by the papers. Contributors pushed CAT's boundaries in terms of method, context, and application. The papers allowed us to "visualize" and "listen" to data in new ways, and to consider communication accommodation at the micro-level of moment-to-moment discourse in relational context, as well as the macro-level of accommodative dynamics across time and social contexts.

### 2.1. Unique methodological approaches

One of CAT's strengths in understanding and predicting language shifts is its flexible approach to generating and analyzing data. This collection of papers illustrated such flexibility as authors applied a range of social scientific and interpretivist methodologies. Overlaying such breadth, a significant strength of this collection is the focus on real conversations and naturally generated messages. The majority of papers drew from naturally-occurring messages in contexts that ranged from a "comfortable" laboratory setting to an informal dinner conversation and from medical conversations to handwritten medical charts. The authors used a variety of strategies to analyze data. Van Hofwegen and Nilsson drew upon naturally-occurring speech to investigate language variation in ongoing conversations (i.e., variety in dialect usage). Also, both authors used a composite measure of dialect use to demonstrate how much of the speaker's language featured cues specific to a dialect. Van Hofwegen used the composite index to measure presence of AAE (African American English) in individual's speech and then employed dyadic statistical analysis to test within-dyad similarity (peer language accommodation) vs. between-dyad similarity (accommodation levels across the group of adolescents). In contrast, after ascertaining a baseline level of dialect use for individuals (i.e., number of dialect variants recorded), Nilsson used conversation analysis to investigate dialect accommodation between individuals in conversation (see also Chakrani's paper for a similar approach).

The [Watson et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Hewett et al. \(2015\)](#) pieces departed somewhat from these discourse-focused studies, but again included analysis of naturally generated messages. Specifically, [Watson et al. \(2015\)](#) investigated accommodation and communication effectiveness among physicians engaging in an open disclosure conversation with patients by analyzing the transcripts of actual discourse generated during training sessions with model patients (i.e., actors). Although the interaction was hypothetical, the discourse was real. And, in a unique departure from naturally generated conversations, [Hewett et al. \(2015\)](#) examined perceptions of accommodation effectiveness within (real) written medical records.

The papers included other methodological strengths and ventures. Hajek took a novel approach applying grounded theory methodology to better understand the unique accommodation strategies in intergenerational encounters among midlife gay males. [Watson et al. \(2015\)](#) introduced a new analytic tool (i.e., Discursis) to visually represent and analyze communication accommodation as it unfolded over time in ongoing conversations. This technique uncovered both problematic and positive discursive maneuvers between physicians and patients, allowing analysts to reveal and analyze instances of poor or optimal accommodation. An additional feature included in this collection was participant self-reflection. [Hewett et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Gasiorek et al. \(2015\)](#) asked participants to reflect on, and give an evaluation of, their own or others' accommodation in medical settings. We see the incorporation of self-reflection and the visual representation of accommodative maneuvers across a conversation as valuable contributions to CAT, especially for the purposes of training and increasing communication mindfulness.

### 2.2. Innovative contexts

Concerning the "innovative contexts" aspect of the Special Issue theme, this collection of papers hit its mark. The authors drew from both age-specific categories (e.g., Van Hofwegen's study on African American adolescent peers) as well as intergenerational communication (e.g., Hajek's study on intergenerational communication among gay males). Nilsson collected and examined naturally-occurring discourse in both intergenerational and age-specific (adolescents) encounters. Three contributors (Van Hofwegen, Chakrani, and Nilsson) explicitly focused on language variation within unique language contexts, African American English, variations of the Arabic language spoken within the United States, and Swedish language dialects. [Gasiorek et al. \(2015\)](#) examined a unique language context in Belgium in which medical professionals were expected to work in multiple languages due to their language-diverse patients, but physicians were not able to accommodate via language selection for all of the presenting languages.

In addition to novel linguistic contexts, the papers also operate in novel (or at least under-examined) socio-interactional contexts by examining dyadic and multiparty data. [Van Hofwegen \(2015\)](#) and [Watson et al. \(2015\)](#) included dyadic data, and Chakrani and Nilsson included multiparty conversations. Using dyadic and multiparty data considers the "call and response"

nature of utterances and the mutuality of interlocutors who are engaged in the negotiation and management of accommodation. This is a big step forward in the development of CAT. Software programs like Discursis might help analysts to manage even more complex data in the future. Complementing the inclusion of dyadic discursive data, several authors directly investigated (Van Hofwegen, 2015) or mentioned (Hajek, 2015; Chakrani, 2015; Gasiorek et al., 2015) multiple social and personal identities that are in play during conversations that influence the accommodation process – a point we take up later in the section on competence and intergroup communication.

### 2.3. Implications for application

This collection applies CAT to inform us on *socially important issues* in these innovative contexts. Outcomes from the studies yield significant potential for communication training purposes and give deeper understanding to the important and intimate processes of language and identity management. For example, authors of the three medical papers (Gasiorek et al., 2015; Hewett et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2015) pointed at the importance of appropriate and effective communication accommodation for the health and safety of patients (and their families) as well as the well-being and satisfaction of medical personnel. The outcome is clear; poor communication in these contexts results in poor medical outcomes. These studies demonstrated that medical contexts are ripe for communication accommodation training, which could yield tremendous benefits for multiple parties.

The remaining papers explored various accommodative connections between language and identity management, all sharing the assumption that a person's native language, or language variant, is an important part of her or his identity. The Chakrani and Nilsson pieces considered the role of linguistic accommodation in language maintenance and language loss, or dialect "leveling" (i.e., conforming to a more dominant language dialect), for speakers of non-dominant language variants. Van Hofwegen (2015) demonstrated the importance of dialect convergence among African American peers during adolescence especially compared to the linguistic divergence occurring with their mother at the same time. Similarly, Hajek showed that gay males strategically used communication accommodation to develop, maintain, and enact a positive social identity during midlife, a time in which they were experiencing identity conflict. In all cases, the data demonstrate that accommodation is not just an interesting set of language phenomena, but that accommodative processes are sometimes central to establishing a sense of self that is both meaningful and personally satisfying.

### 2.4. Longitudinal necessity

One final innovation in a handful of papers in this collection was the longitudinal application of CAT. Van Hofwegen (2015) demonstrated the importance of tracking language and accommodation over time. By examining communication accommodation as part of a larger study on sociolinguistic development over a period of approximately four years, she made the case that adolescents develop the ability to competently accommodate their interaction partners over time. Nilsson applied CAT to investigate the micro-level management of language variation in everyday discourse and its implication for language stability and change (macro features) longitudinally. Finally, although less explicitly, the Chakrani paper also pointed to the importance of longitudinal data. Chakrani collected naturalistic data over the course of ten sessions among the same group of friends/acquaintances. Over time, and as a result of their frequent meeting, participants undoubtedly increased their familiarity with each other and likely also adjusted their communication accordingly. The forms, negotiation, and strategies of communication accommodation among participants very likely sounded different during initial encounters than they did toward the conclusion of their sessions. Considering similar data longitudinally could better position researchers to understand the process of accommodation and language shift over time as relationships develop and patterns of accommodation emerge.

Thus far, we have noted specific themes and features of these papers that point toward their unique contributions and innovations. As with any good set of papers, a serious reflection upon their contributions invites further discovery, opens more avenues to explore, and stimulates new questions. These papers sparked our curiosity to explore the role of communication competence in CAT. Specifically, in reading the papers, we were repeatedly drawn to questions concerning whether it is possible to "not" accommodate, whether some dimensions of accommodation might be inherent to certain personalities, whether managing multiple social identities parallels the management of multiple goals in interaction, and what sorts of resources people draw on when engaging in accommodative behaviors. These questions gave us the opportunity to explore the notion of competence as a core, yet often overlooked, feature of communication accommodation. Across this body of research, communication competence emerged as a practical necessity in managing mundane interactions (e.g., small talk between friends and acquaintances) as well as managing interactions in more critical and urgent situations (e.g., medical reports and healthcare). We turn now to the crux of our discussion – the assertion that, at its core, CAT is a theory of communication competence.

## 3. Communication accommodation theory as a theory of competence: nurturing accommodation competence

As Giles (*in press*) keenly noted, many people take pride in their ability to communicate consistently across encounters. Perhaps this pride stems from a Western notion of "this is who I am"—a genuine sense of "self" they feel transcends interactions. Not only is this assumption of consistency likely erroneous, but it would also frequently lead to ineffective and inappropriate communication (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984). It would also remove a great deal of the joy and aesthetic

experience from communication (Baxter et al., 2012). Instead, people are gifted with the great capacities, complexities, and adaptability of language and nonverbal communication. The flexibility and creativity embedded in the human language set, and our cognitive capacity to manage it, allows us to engage in communication encounters in sophisticated ways, with more or less mindfulness (Chomsky, 1969, 2000; Langer, 2014). Of particular note for our current purposes, communicators generally (and good communicators especially) adapt to contextual and relational features in every interaction (Pitts and Giles, 2008).

Communication adaptability is the central feature of CAT. This feature is also central to theoretical notions of competent communication (Cupach and Spitzberg, 1983). Broadly defined, communication competence requires skills, knowledge, and motivation to effectively and appropriately adapt messages to the interaction context and relationship (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984, 2002). From this perspective, “appropriate” communication abides by normative expectations and does not violate rules of interpersonal interaction. “Effective” communication means that goals are met through interaction (Cupach and Spitzberg, 1983). Competent communication also takes into consideration the socio-historical and contextual features implied in the interaction including elements of culture, time, relationship, place, and function of the event or episode (Cupach and Spitzberg, 1983; Spitzberg and Cupach, 2002). In sum, “competence is an impression resulting from the behaviors of the relational interactants, the context within which they are enacted, and the characteristics of the individuals involved” (Spitzberg, 1983, p. 326, emphasis in original). Communicatively competent people take into consideration their goals, their audience, the context, and social norms when constructing messages, and adapt their messages accordingly. As Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) noted, communication competence does not imply that an interaction is inherently satisfying or pleasurable. A message that is effective and appropriate for a particular context might be blunt or negative, depending on the interactant’s goals and the situational needs. It behooves us, then, to better understand the determinants of competent message adaptation. Given the parameters listed above, communication competence is clearly implied in CAT, but is not always clearly articulated. We propose that CAT is, at its most abstract level, a theory of communication competence—knowing when and how to accommodate and showing willingness to do so to accomplish interaction goals. We use the papers in this collection to make our case.

### 3.1. Accommodation competence in medical settings

Communication accommodation competence is evoked in each of the papers presented in this collection. Taking the medical and healthcare interactions first (e.g., Gasiorek et al., 2015; Hewett et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2015), we see that providers’ ability to accommodate to patients, their families, and other medical professionals is essential to quality care, developing rapport, and satisfaction. Medical settings, and especially the medical encounters analyzed in these papers, pose a challenging context for competent accommodation. Many obstacles may be present that constrain competent accommodation including being pressed for time, working in a high stress environment, working with multiple conversational partners with a wide range of social and physical attributes, and frequently engaging in “high stakes” communication.

Each of the three medical papers presented a unique context for accommodation competence. Gasiorek et al. (2015) addressed perceptions of competence within a multilingual environment wherein physicians sometimes did not speak the language of their patient or colleague. Physicians reported wanting to accommodate to the language of their patients, but being unable to do so. Despite being unable to language shift, Gasiorek et al. (2015) demonstrated that physicians still engaged in significant amounts of seemingly competent accommodation by tapping into external accommodative resources. For example, physicians asked for assistance from colleagues who spoke the patient’s language, they relied on the patient to accommodate (code switch) if possible, asked patients to return later with a language broker, and turned to electronic devices for help with translation. Physicians also tapped into internal accommodative resources including use of nonverbal cues and apologizing, strategies tapping into more affective dimensions of accommodation. These findings suggest that even (or perhaps especially) when language presents a barrier to effective and appropriate communication, interlocutors who desire to communicate competently are still driven to accommodate in order to achieve their goals. That is, when faced with an accommodation obstacle, interlocutors pursued alternative routes to accommodation. This study begins to answer the question – what do people do when they do not have the desired resources to accommodate?

The Hewett et al. (2015) paper presented a context in which medical professionals were given only one shot at accommodating to their audience through written medical charts. In ongoing interaction, people have opportunities to make macro and micro level adjustments in their communication as necessary to achieve optimal accommodation. They can rely on verbal and nonverbal cues to assist them in making appropriate real-time adjustments. In the Hewett et al. (2015) case, however, medical chart writers likely did not know to whom they should be accommodating, nor how they should accommodate any particular imagined audience. They received no direct feedback on their messages. Hewett et al. (2015) demonstrated that recipients of medical charts written by professionals in a different medical specialty consistently rated them as under-accommodative, and suggested that they might result in medical misunderstandings (not to mention intergroup hostility between specialties).

A competence orientation towards CAT provides at least two observations on this scenario. First, it draws attention to the question of imagined or intended audiences, and the challenges in accommodating to such audiences. It may be that specialists assume that their notations are primarily going to be consumed by other specialists in their area; if that is true, then their messages might indeed have been appropriately accommodated, and it is only when the messages are transposed to an unintended target that they appear inappropriately adjusted. This poses a particular challenge for analysts who are making calls about the “appropriateness” of accommodation in any given scenario. Second, this context provides an excellent

illustration of the interconnections between accommodation theory and perspective-taking: a significant part of appropriately accommodating talk is our ability to take the perspective of the recipient (see Giles and Gasiorek, 2013). In Hewett et al.'s (2015) situation, if chart writers took the perspective of multiple potential readers, they might have accommodated more effectively and appropriately, perhaps resulting in a positive outcome for patient care. Training in perspective-taking for people who write in medical records might be an effective way to improve medical communication. Like perceptions of competence, perceptions of over- and underaccommodation are based on the recipient's impression of a behavior, not on objective qualities of the behavior (Giles and Gasiorek, 2013; Spitzberg and Cupach, 2002). Competence and accommodation, it seems, are both in the eye of the beholder. However, the more the message producer can adopt the beholder's perspective, the more likely it is that accommodatively competent messages will be produced (Giles and Gasiorek, 2013).

Finally, communication effectiveness is the central concern in the Watson et al. (2015) paper regarding open disclosure conversations between physician and patients. But, effectiveness does not stand alone. They also refer to the need to ensure appropriate communication and to train clinicians to be highly skilled communicators who foster rapport and are sensitive to patients' cultural and linguistic diversity. As demonstrated through a close analysis of the conversations, competent accommodation in the open disclosure context is built up utterance by utterance throughout an interaction and often requires a significant amount of verbal reassurance and repetition. Physicians who were able to take the perspective of their patient and repeat and engage in topics brought up by the patient demonstrated effective and appropriate communication within the open disclosure context. As this paper suggests, *accommodation competence* is a skill that can be acquired through training and experience; the emergent enactment of accommodation competence in any given communicative situation can be called *competent accommodation*. This paper and others (e.g., Chakrani) emphasize the necessity of looking at the evolving nature of accommodation over time within and across communication episodes. A closer look at the internal shifts and conversational repairs in ongoing discourse reveals a lot about the nature of accommodation competence in action.

### 3.2. *Accommodation competence in everyday talk*

Communication accommodation competence is no less important in more mundane encounters and those involving implicit and explicit negotiation of identity like those examined in the Nilsson (2015), Chakrani (2015), and Van Hofwegen (2015) papers, and elicited in the Hajek paper. Even everyday conversation frequently involves complex interactions requiring constant negotiation, including strategic revealing and concealing of multiple social and cultural identities. Increased intergroup encounters and technological advancement as a result of globalization have given rise to more occasions for managing multiple group identities in any single context. Add to this multiple conversational partners and accommodation needs and processes become even more complex. Competent accommodation among interactants with different social identities requires social and communication competence that will vary from group to group, individual to individual, and involve a complicated system of cultural and linguistic code switching. CAT may be applied to better understand what happens when there are competing identity needs at the individual and dyadic or group level in a single interaction.

One small but telling example is found in Nilsson's Extract 3, in which the adolescent peers accommodated by converging toward the standard dialect spoken by one member. In their conversation, peers verbally agreed (convergence) that the group does "speak dialect" compared to others their age, but they reached verbal *agreement* through linguistic *divergence* away from "dialect" and convergence toward the standard dialect. In the same interactive moment, the peers also created positive group distinctiveness by verbally diverging from other social groups, in this case "compared to other teenagers" and "the old geezers back home."

Likewise, across three extracts of naturally-occurring dinner conversation among speakers of varied Arabic dialects, Chakrani revealed participants' micro-linguistic shifts in dialect toward and away from different speakers at different times depending on the social identity evoked and the goals of the micro-interaction. Chakrani provided evidence that localized accommodation competence develops over time (utterance-by-utterance) within a communication episode and also across multiple encounters. For example, extracts in this paper showed that over the course of ten weeks, interactants simultaneously worked to increase comprehension (interpretability) while at the same time maintaining their social identity within the context of enjoying a meal together. However, at any single point in time the extracts illustrated some rather intense moments of divergence and maintenance in the discourse. Conversations were a continuous and cyclic process of aligning and distancing different sets of speakers as the conversation and the linguistic variations shifted across the episode.

Chakrani's and Nilsson's work demonstrated how convergence with one speaker may lead to divergence with another or several others. In light of this, CAT may be applied in future research to offer insight into how successful communicators negotiate and manage multiple (often competing) social identities in one interaction. That is, to which identity or identities do I converge? Gendered identity? A same age peer? A person of same ethnicity or social class? Sexual orientation? Language? Dialect? These types of questions were evoked in Van Hofwegen's study which revealed that African American adolescents were able to language shift strategically and competently depending on factors such as the social context, density of African American network, and the relative familiarity with the interaction partner. Interaction experience, gender norms/expectations, and the broader socio-linguistic network available to interactants contributed to the accommodative resources that adolescents were able to tap into in any given encounter.

Some of the papers in the Special Issue drew subtle connections to competence-related elements in accommodation. Van Hofwegen called upon Hymes' (1974) notion of sociolinguistic competence, and the broader body of research from which hers originated, to suggest that as African American children move into adolescence their capacity (effectiveness) and knowledge

about when (appropriateness) to style shift increases. She further suggested that increased communication competence could enhance their willingness and ability to accommodate appropriately (converge, diverge, or maintain) depending on the interlocutor and context. Interestingly, these findings seemed to vary depending on sex of the interlocutor with females appearing to be more sensitive to contextual cues and more willing style shift than African American adolescent males. Similarly, Nilsson suggested people's willingness and ability to temporarily adapt their linguistic behavior to a conversational partner denoted "interactional competence" wherein individuals could tap into their linguistic repertoire to accommodate partner and contextual needs. Indeed, in different ways, all of the papers in the Special Issue focused on the potential for optimal levels of accommodation, interpretability, and approximation strategies of convergence to enhance communication effectiveness and positive communication outcomes.

### 3.3. Accommodation competence as a lifespan phenomenon

Despite its frequent application to the study of aging and intergenerational communication, CAT itself has rarely been considered from a lifespan perspective (Harwood, 2014; Nussbaum, 2013). This is strange, because an important feature of CAT is the assumption that communication is adaptive. One implication of the adaptive nature of communication is that as we accumulate positive and negative communication experiences across the lifespan we learn to apply skills differently to solve different problems (Pitts and Hummert, 2014; Pecchioni et al., 2005). This, in turn, leads to the accumulation of accommodative resources over time. Perhaps it is worth speculating a little on what "accommodative" resources are, and what specifically might be present in situations featuring (in)effective accommodation.

We suggest that accommodative resources might fall into two primary categories, which then intersect to define the field of accommodation competence. First, they would include communication repertoires. Such repertoires would include language skills at multiple levels – the ability to speak different languages, the level of skill and knowledge within any language, the ability to quickly retrieve the "right" word or phrase in any given situation, and so forth. Advanced repertoires would also include a breadth of nonverbal behaviors and an ability to engage such behaviors when called on. Second, accommodative resources would require flexibility, mindfulness, and perspective-taking skills. This would include the ability to understand others' social and personal identities, goals, and at times to recognize multiple receivers' perspectives simultaneously. It is also likely that individuals can tap into both internal (personal communication repertoires) and external accommodation resources. External accommodation resources may be locally drawn from the environment, technology, or from other interactants (see Gasiorek et al., 2015).

We propose that accommodative resources and repertoires are built across the lifespan. Specifically, frequent engagement in diverse interactions across contexts and across the lifespan, (1) offers opportunities to build, use, and refine accommodative resources, (2) helps individuals to develop an increasingly complex and versatile communication repertoire, and (3) increases chances that a person will internalize an accommodative interaction repertoire making it more readily accessible when needed. Below, we discuss the implications of a lifespan perspective for our competence take on CAT, focusing especially on the distinction between productive and receptive accommodation competence, and on suggestions in the Special Issue papers concerning developmental dimensions in accommodation competence.

Krauss and Glucksberg (1969) demonstrated that communication competence and effectiveness varied as a function of age. That is, communication competence, and in particular one's ability to communicatively accommodate a partner in interaction, is a developmental phenomenon. Krauss and Glucksberg (1969) also posited that *speaker* communication competence appears to develop later than *listener* competence. Thus, people develop skills for interpreting/receiving accommodation (receptive accommodation) earlier than their ability to produce competent accommodative messages (productive accommodation). Receptive accommodation competence might include, for example, a high threshold for forgiveness or tolerance of accommodative blunders, which should also correspond to a comparatively strong ability to infer interlocutors' goals and intentions.

Productive accommodation refers to message encoding, whereas receptive accommodation refers to message decoding. From the perspective of CAT, productive accommodation typically refers to the degree to which a person produces a message that converges toward or diverges from the communication patterns of the recipient, but could also include the messages that are strategically intended to be perceived as over- or underaccommodative. Receptive accommodation refers to the degree to which recipients perceive (and evaluate) that a speaker has converged toward or diverged from their own speaking style, as well as their perceptions of messages as over- or underaccommodative (see Gallois et al., 2005). Absent from CAT are a full understanding of (1) the acquisition, accessibility, and flexibility of productive accommodation repertoires and skills, and (2) individual features affecting accommodation reception including skills development, acquisition, tolerance, and flexibility. If, like listener competence, receptive accommodation competence develops earlier than productive accommodation competence, then we should expect to see that people have a broad repertoire for interpreting and evaluating accommodating messages and perhaps a wide range of acceptance for accommodation variance at earlier ages than they are able to *produce* similarly sophisticated messages.

In many cases, receptive and productive accommodation work together. For example, if a receiver perceives their interlocutor as producing a message that threatens identity, and that threat pushes beyond the receiver's threshold of forgiveness or tolerance, then s/he may engage in productive accommodation in order to protect self or group identity. One strategy for this might be selective assertiveness (see Ryan et al., 2005). Selective assertiveness is a goal-based response to inappropriate communication that serves to break a cycle of negative communication, redirect an interaction toward a person-to-person

orientation, and manage self-impression while correcting partner behavior (Ryan et al., 2005). Selective assertiveness requires that listeners take into consideration the goals, speaker, and situation before formulating an appropriately assertive response (Ryan et al., 2006), and as such it conforms nicely with multiple goals theories of communication (e.g., Caughlin, 2010), most of which acknowledge that overall human development includes development in our ability to produce sophisticated messages.

Hence, in the broader scope of the lifespan, we can tie CAT processes to theory and research suggesting that older adults have productive and receptive competence advantages over younger adults. Nussbaum (2013) describes this as the development of *communication wisdom*, a notion that certainly encompasses productive and receptive accommodation competence. In this Special Issue, Hajek's examples of accommodation through preemptive and reactive defense fall primarily under the *productive* competence category, as participants in his study described managing their own face while also attempting to maintain positive relationships with communicative partners (productive competence). Productive accommodation competence allows for effective and appropriate communication shifting including awareness and sensitivity to internal and external cues and flexibility in message planning, all of which assist in the development of generalized communication competence.

On the *receptive* side, this complements existing research showing that older adults more effectively manage (or ignore) negative emotions, and are better at dealing with (or deflecting) interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Charles and Carstensen, 2010; Holley et al., 2013). Receptive accommodation competence requires a level of mindfulness and situational awareness, ability to perspective-take, and tolerance for a range of (non)accommodative behaviors. To the extent that receptive accommodation competence involves perspective-taking, it probably also varies as a function of what the receiver believes the speaker is capable of.

Clearly, scholars have not entirely ignored the developmental nature of communication accommodation competence. Indeed several papers in this collection already point toward the lifespan and developmental nature of accommodation competence and we summarize those below. Our goal here is to bring the developmental nature of accommodation competence to the foreground.

Both Van Hofwegen and Nilsson suggested interlocutors develop communication accommodation resources (e.g., "interaction resources") over time that they are able to tap into when it is relationally and contextually relevant. That is, it appears that people are capable of developing an accommodation repertoire that they can draw from depending on the context. Although both authors demonstrated this process concerning the use of social and regional dialects, we imagine it is also the case for other types of communication accommodation. These papers open avenues for scholars to consider the development of competence for how and when to style shift. For example, Van Hofwegen pointed to the larger body of research among African American speakers that shows AAE use varies by age and context where adolescents (and females in particular) were adept at style shifting across formal and informal settings, but younger children did not show same ability to language shift in different contexts. Some of this may be the result of the accumulation of accommodative resources and competence over time. But, individual features also likely influence the outcome. For example, Nilsson pointed out that there are some speakers who converge extensively across varied contexts while others do not. We expand upon this last point later in the paper.

In his grounded theory on midlife gay male identity, Hajek also broached the idea that accommodative resources are built across the lifespan. His work showed that there are periods of time in the lifespan in which communication accommodation is an important part of identity management. Midlife, for gay males, seems to be a time when individuals struggle with identity conflict associated with a shifting sense of social and personal identity. For some gay males, part of the process of resolving this conflict involved strategic use of accommodation including attempts to reclaim a positive social identity at times through divergence from the youth-centered gay male culture and other times through maintenance in the face of adversarial encounters with younger gay males. In particular, the Hajek piece pointed to the lifetime accumulation of accommodation strategies to rebut negative interactions (through divergence or maintenance) and select a functionally competent accommodation choice. Indirectly, his work demonstrated that experiences of identity challenge are also periods when accommodation resources may grow most rapidly, in much the same way that a cultural immersion or relocation might result in various forms of personal growth or development.

What we tried to demonstrate in the preceding section is that accommodation competence is a lifespan developmental phenomenon. At the core of accommodation competence are individuals' ability to (1) adopt a recipient's (or multiple recipients') perspective(s) and (2) actively engage the most relevant communication repertoire. Such engagement, of course, needs to be effectively integrated with one's personal goals: an accommodator who is solely focused on the partner is obviously not going to achieve effective communication. To elaborate on this last issue, we next consider various constraints on people's ability to produce competent accommodation.

#### 4. Uncontrollable aspects of the accommodation process

The preceding parts of this paper have made the case that accommodation is a skill, and that the careful use of accommodation strategies can improve the outcomes of social interaction. The paper has emphasized the ways in which people develop their accommodative competencies and resources, and the positive effects that engaging those competencies and resources can have. However, this suggests a level of controllability in the development and use of accommodative competencies that may not always be present. In this section, we discuss ways in which accommodation skills may develop (or not) in an uncontrollable manner. At times, some people (and *most* people on some occasions) are seriously challenged to

engage in what would typically be considered “competent” accommodation, while others in other situations might possess inherent accommodative advantages. In all of the following cases, we would not suggest that accommodation is impossible; simply that in some circumstances an accommodation repertoire is not accessible, resources are stretched, or other considerations are primary, and so accommodation becomes a more challenging proposition.

#### 4.1. Individual differences/personality

The accommodation literature has paid relatively little attention to individual differences or personality characteristics influencing accommodation. Anecdotally, though, we are familiar with individuals who subjectively experience themselves as *chronic convergers*: they hear themselves moving towards others’ speech style rapidly and apparently uncontrollably during conversation. Inherently, a chronic tendency to converge (or not) is probably neither a good thing nor a bad thing. However, in particular contexts it will result in specific outcomes. For the chronic converger, the “multiple partner” situations described earlier might result in particularly difficult exchanges as a person uncontrollably switches between different convergence forms when addressing different partners, resulting in a perhaps rather strange sounding mix to the audience. Individuals seen to be engaging in this kind of switching might easily be evaluated as inauthentic—particularly, as we noted at the outset, in cultural contexts where a single “true” self is seen as a thing to be valued. Even with a single partner, chronic convergers might be at risk of going too far (hyperconverging), resulting in a partner feeling mocked. For the chronic *non-converger*, difficulties are likely to arise in situations where convergence is appropriate or required—situations in which the actor is lower status than the partner, or in intercultural interactions with a host partner, for instance.

The literature on nonverbal mimicry suggests some personality characteristics that might be associated with a chronic tendency to converge. That literature demonstrates that people who are high in perspective-taking (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999), interdependent self-construal (van Baaren et al., 2003), and concern for others (Lakin and Chartrand, 2003) are more likely to mirror other peoples nonverbal behavior—a phenomenon at least conceptually similar to accommodative convergence. Of course, in a complementary manner, people scoring lower on those personality traits might be expected to converge less across contexts. More broadly, and speculatively, other personality traits (and even disorders) could be seen as phenomenologically likely to be associated with accommodation. Within the “big five” model of personality, *agreeableness*, which includes compliance, is a reasonable candidate for a broad personality type that might predispose people towards convergence (Furnham and Crump, 2005). On the pathological extreme, dependent personality disorders are associated with extreme eagerness to please other individuals, and a fear of loss of support or loss of other people’s approval. Similar characteristics are found in the “dutiful” personality described in the Hogan (2007) development survey. Individuals with these characteristics appear more likely to converge, perhaps compulsively and indiscriminately, within social interactions.

#### 4.2. Group identification

An important area of personal characteristics that might incline individuals towards or away from particular accommodation behaviors derives directly from the CAT-related literature. Ethnolinguistic identity theory (ELIT), for instance, describes various factors that might determine whether someone defines a situation in terms of particular identities, and hence whether their communication behavior is defined by those identities within the interaction (Giles and Johnson, 1987). ELIT therefore makes predictions about whether someone is hence inclined to converge or diverge based on those particular identities. One broad conclusion that could be drawn from ELIT is that individuals who identify more strongly with particular groups are more likely to define situations in intergroup terms, and hence more likely to converge in intragroup contexts and diverge in intergroup contexts. Individuals with weaker levels of group identity are more likely to treat situations as interpersonal encounters, and probably default (*ceteris paribus*) to convergence. An added tweak here is that identification with regard to one group is at best a weak predictor of identification with regard to another group; as such, this suggests individual differences in rather specific forms of accommodation, rather than general approaches to all situations – some people might be inclined to gender-based convergence/divergence, while others will orient to age differences or similarities. One further implication of this point that perhaps has not been fully elaborated in the literature is that two individuals in an interaction might *both* be defining that interaction in intergroup terms, but with regard to different group memberships (e.g., one person focused on the interethnic aspects of the interaction, while another is heavily invested in the interprofessional dynamics). The accommodative implications of such different definitions of the situation merit attention.

#### 4.3. Linguistic background

As evidenced in the Gasiorek et al.’s (2015) article in this Special Issue, the presence or absence of language skills can have profound effects on accommodation. If two interlocutors lack a common language, certain avenues for accommodation will be blocked. As indicated earlier in the paper, however, even in cases where individuals do not share a language, other internal and external accommodative resources are available to interlocutors. Therefore, as with the other elements of this section, it is not the case that absence of shared language renders accommodation impossible. Individuals who do not share a language can tap internal resources and accommodate nonverbally, attempt to communicate via some lingua franca, or speak slowly (which in this case is not overaccommodation), or seek help from external resources.



Some work suggests that being raised bilingual or being exposed to multiple languages in childhood might influence peoples' phonological abilities (Burns et al., 2007). More broadly, any form of individual difference in linguistic interest or linguistic skill (e.g., vocabulary size, number of languages spoken) might provide individuals with internal resources that would increase or decrease their accommodative repertoire. Given the role of intonation in most languages, and particularly in tonal languages, it would not be surprising that people with musical training or specific musical abilities (e.g., perfect pitch) are better equipped to accommodate in certain ways—and those lacking such experiences would be at some degree of accommodative disadvantage.

#### 4.4. Disability

Other constraints on accommodative abilities stem from communication disabilities. Any disability that impacts the communication system is also likely to impact accommodative abilities. Clearly, aphasia stemming from stroke or other factors may severely impair an individual's ability to accommodate others, as they impact a wide variety of other communication competencies. On the other hand, some disabilities may impact accommodation much more specifically. Autism, for instance, is associated with difficulties in perspective-taking and social interaction. McIntosh et al. (2006) show that autistic children engage in substantially less automatic mimicry in social interaction although they are able to engage in mimicry when instructed to do so. Therefore, some deficits in autism might manifest in awkward or particularly high-effort accommodation behaviors, even where other aspects of communication appear relatively unaffected.

#### 4.5. Arousal

Finally, individual contexts might render accommodation more or less possible. In particular, while certain forms of convergence may occur automatically, more complex attuning to another individual on discourse management dimensions, for instance, requires significant cognitive effort. To the extent that cognitive resources are taxed, accommodation will become more difficult. In particular, situations involving active conflict, high levels of anxiety, or the simultaneous management of a high number of goals might render accommodation more challenging for most individuals due to the impact of arousal on cognitive capacity. Ironically, of course, these are some of the contexts in which skilled accommodation might be most useful whether on a purely interpersonal or intergroup level.

In summary, there are a wide variety of people and situations in which accommodative resources vary based on issues largely out of the person's immediate or permanent control. Adjusting for some of these issues is obviously possible: people can learn second languages, achieve remarkable rehabilitation from strokes, learn to control their emotions (or simply wait to calm down and readdress the situation), and become more aware of their identification levels with particular groups (and thus develop more sensitivity to when their communication might be “too” group-driven). That said, other circumstances (personality, innate abilities, some disabilities) are likely to remain largely uncontrollable, and the main adjustment might simply be mindfulness, and even something as simple as conveying the limitations to a conversation partner. As noted earlier in the paper, these are also situations that draw attention to the role that various forms of training focused on both accommodation skills specifically or in predictors of accommodation (mindfulness, perspective-taking, emotion management) might be particularly useful.

### 5. Conclusions

Recent research on mirror neurons (Corballis, 2010), automatic imitation (Heyes, 2011), and mimicry (Lakin and Chartrand, 2003) suggests that (1) adjusting our behaviors with regard to social targets is a fundamental human behavior, difficult to control, and fairly deeply wired into our psyches, and that (2) such behaviors are of fundamental importance to understanding who we are as human beings, and how we come to function in our social worlds. Communication accommodation theory has been making this point in sophisticated ways for more than 40 years. Just as there is evidence to suggest that humans are hardwired for language (Chomsky, 1969, 2000), mindfulness (Langer, 2014), and empathy (Beckes et al., 2013), communication accommodation also seems to be an innate human drive. Examining this potential, CAT has developed into a complex framework of the ways in which we not only unconsciously adjust to become more similar to others, but multiple more complex ways in which we shift our communication relative to our social targets. In some ways, recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive psychology seem to be merely “catching up” with phenomena developed in the CAT literature quite a while ago. However, those recent developments may point to fundamental neural and cognitive determinants of CAT phenomena that might be a part of next decade's Special Issue on CAT (see Giles and Soliz, 2014).

In the meantime, the current Special Issue has gone a long way towards establishing fertile ground for the next decade. As noted in our Epilogue, we believe that longitudinal data, consideration of multiple (and competing) identities, examination of real language data, and application of CAT to real world, life-and-death situations will keep CAT vibrant and active for the foreseeable future. We also see a dynamic area for development in considering the links between accommodation and communication competence, with a particular emphasis here on the ways in which people develop accommodative resources over the lifespan, and what they do when those resources are challenged.

It is clear from the many years of excellent CAT scholarship, and from the papers selected as part of this Special Issue, that competent accommodation is necessary for optimal performance in all areas of life – from the management of identity and

relationships to the conveyance and management of vital information. We wish to leave the readers of this Special Issue with a final thought – the development of accommodation competencies across the lifespan may yield positive communication benefits beyond outcomes. Merely *engaging* in competent accommodation allows for the practice of positive communication behaviors such as interpersonal and intercultural synchrony (Kim, 2012), aesthetic communication (Baxter et al., 2012), and the enactment of wisdom through communication (Nussbaum, 2013), and perhaps even enhance social and physiological health (Giles and Soliz, 2014). CAT is often applied to draw out, better understand, and sometimes solve the problematics and complexities of human interaction. But, CAT also holds great potential for a better understanding of the complete expression of human interaction including positive and productive communication. As seen in this Special Issue, competent accommodation can indeed save lives, but on a much more intimate level, accommodation competence can also enhance the quality of our daily interactions.

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