



# Communication accommodation in a divided society: Interaction patterns between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of religious affiliation on dyadic interactions between university students in Northern Ireland. Despite over 30 years of concerted internecine strife and acute civil violence, few attempts have been made to study the patterns of face-to-face communication between those from the Catholic and Protestant communities when politico-religious identity is made salient. Significant differences were found in strategies of accommodation employed by students during communication with those from the in-group as compared to interactions with out-group members. Dyadic interaction with the in-group was marked by cues identifying group identity, more instances of verbal agreement, protracted topic discussion and convergence. Communication with members of the out-group tended to be characterized by accommodation through discourse management, especially in relation to topic selection appropriate to the religious background of the interactive partner. However, measures of interpersonal attraction failed to demonstrate any significant differences across religion. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the utility of Communication Accommodation Theory as an explanatory framework for interaction patterns between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

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Attempts to understand and make sense of the complex process that is human interaction have led to a proliferation of explanatory theoretical accounts. This paper examines one of these theories, Communication Accommodation Theory, in the context of the divided society that is Northern Ireland (N.I.). Accommodation is a complex topic, and situations of internecine community conflict introduce an added layer of complexity to the interactive process, since ‘the combatants permanently inhabit the same battlefield’ (Cairns & Darby, 1998, p. 754). Such is the case in N.I. Before examining CAT per se it is therefore necessary to set the study in this context.

## 1. The Northern Ireland context

In terms of inter-group communication, N.I. represents a fascinating laboratory for the study of the effects of conflict upon communication, not least because the problems that have spawned violence are multi-layered and multi-faceted. One instance of

this is what has been termed the ‘minority–majority conundrum’ (Stevenson, Condor, & Abell, 2007). For example, in N.I. the population is relatively equally divided, with Protestants comprising some 53% of the population and Catholics 44%. However, in the neighboring Republic of Ireland (RoI) there is a small Protestant minority, of around 2% of the population. Thus, on the island of Ireland Protestants are a sizable minority (representing about 20% of the total island population), but they are a tiny minority in the RoI. At the same time, Catholics are a large majority on the island of Ireland, a significant minority in Northern Ireland, and a small minority in the United Kingdom as a whole. These imbalances, coupled with the injustices endured by minorities in both parts of Ireland, have contributed to a situation of mistrust and a lack of shared identity between the two religious groupings (for a full analysis see Hargie & Dickson, 2004).

Not least of the problems has been that of diametrically conflicting political aspirations. Support for a political settlement is divided along mainly religious lines. The Protestant/Unionist community wishes to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the Catholic/Nationalist community seeks unification with the Republic of Ireland. The entrenched divisions emanating from these politico-religious differences have led to overt physical combat. The ongoing conflict, or ‘Troubles’, has culminated in a mortality toll of over 3700 people (Smyth & Hamilton, 2004) – the pro rata

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equivalent of some 600,000 deaths in the USA. The number of people seriously injured is, of course, much higher. Not surprisingly, this violence has impacted upon almost every aspect of the lives of the population. Despite ceasefires by the main paramilitary groups, and the formation of a power sharing government, deep divisions remain. So-called 'dissident' republican terrorist groups continue to perpetrate bomb attacks and shootings, some of which have resulted in fatalities, and the separation of the two communities is entrenched (Cochrane, 2013).

Most Protestants (P) and Catholics (C) are segregated at birth through area of residence, have mainly in-group friends and romantic partners, and attend segregated schools. In relation to the former, over 90% of public sector housing in N.I. is separated along religious lines (Housing Executive, 2011), and in the city of Belfast public housing is almost completely segregated. In parts of Belfast, physical barriers, or 'peace walls', have been erected to offer these homogenous communities protection from the threat posed by the other side (Hargie, O'Donnell, & McMullan, 2011). Not surprisingly therefore, when it comes to relationships, adult friendships are mainly in-group as are over 90% of marriages (O'Donnell & Hargie, 2011). In terms of education, elementary and high schools are segregated into maintained (C) and state controlled (mainly P) schools. Over 90% of pupils are educated with co-religionists, with only some 6% of pupils attending desegregated or 'integrated' schools, which are designed to cater for children from both religious denominations (Borooah & Knox, 2013). As a result, for many young people the first real experience of interacting with those from the other religion comes at the stage of tertiary education (Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison, 2011).

Given this backdrop, division and difference are readily assimilated and learned as part of the developmental process. As a result, methods for deciphering the religious background of the other person have been well developed and refined. For example, a common method for discerning the religious affiliation of new acquaintances is by categorization of name. Thus, one study showed how names such as 'Bernadette O'Flaherty' and 'Therese O'Reilly' were categorized by N.I. university students as definitely Catholic, while others such as 'Elizabeth Bamford' and 'Jane Richardson' were viewed as exclusively Protestant (Hargie, Dickson, & Hargie, 1995). Therefore, at initial introduction pivotal decisions begin to be made about the religion of the interactive other, and these in turn are likely to influence attitudes, dialog and behavior. This facility for religious categorization has been shown to begin at the age of three, by which stage children have begun to differentiate between the two religious groups, are able to identify signs and symbols associated with each, and attribute negative characteristics to out-group members (Connolly, 2009).

## 2. Communication with out-group members

So what actually happens, in terms of behavior, when individuals from the two communities interface? Surprisingly little research has addressed this fascinating question. A common method for dealing with such situations has been the adoption of an entrenched silence: a consensual unwillingness to discuss the Troubles with those from the other side (Dickson & Hargie, 2006; Hargie, Dickson, & Nelson, 2003). This mechanism of polite avoidance permeates both friendship and work relations, and is adopted to 'manage' interaction (Brown, 2010). The echoes of this silence permeate every echelon of society. One drawback is that the tactic of avoidance of contentious topics may work in the short-term, but at the long-term cost of forestalling cross-community relational development (Hargie & Dickson, 2007).

Despite considerable interest by researchers in the N.I. conflict, there remains an over-reliance on a limited range of theories

to account for those findings that have emerged. Of these, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) has dominated attempts to conceptualize the nature of inter-group behavior in N.I. (Hargie, Dickson, Mallett, & Stringer, 2008; Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004). However, empirical support for Social Identity Theory (SIT) from research conducted in the N.I. setting has been equivocal, and its limitations as an explanatory framework for interpreting inter-group conflict in N.I. have been highlighted (Bloomer & Weinreich, 2004).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is an alternative explanation for group-influenced behavior applicable at the interpersonal level. It has been described as "a theory of language use that seeks to examine the attitudes, motivation, intentions, and identities that mediate between objective social and contextual variables and an individual's language use" (Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999, p. 123). CAT purports that during social encounters participants convey their feelings toward one other by converging or diverging their linguistic and nonverbal behaviors (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2006). Convergence through adapting accent, language or behavior to increase similarity to the other, is considered to be facilitative in reducing difference, increasing communicative efficiency, and fostering shared identity. Divergence, or the emphasis of group identity-based difference, may signal dislike for or disapproval of another's culture. Maintenance of existing interactive style is also considered to represent a form of divergence (Coupland, 2010; Tong, Lee, & Chiu, 1999). More recently, the strategies of convergence and divergence have been incorporated within a single process label 'approximation', which has been defined as 'adjustment of communicative features . . . used by individuals in order to be more similar or dissimilar to their interaction partner' (Lee & Giles, 2008, p. 8).

Discourse management, interpretability and interpersonal control are core strategies that are used during communication accommodation (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006; Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001). Discourse management strategies occur when the speaker shapes the conversation to make it compatible with the other person's interests, beliefs, values and intellectual capacity. Interpretability refers to one person's accommodation to the other's ability to comprehend what is being said. This is based upon perceptions of the other's interpretive abilities. Interpersonal control strategies relate to the speaker's attempts to manage and direct the interaction through tactics such as interruptions or direct power claims. In their workplace study of communication between United Arab Emirates (UAE) Nationals and Western expatriate employees, Willemyns, Hosie, and Lehane (2011) used the presence or absence of these strategies, as perceived by UAE nationals, to measure communication accommodation between the two groups.

As previously mentioned, communication with out-group members in N.I. is reported to be heavily managed, with an avoidance of topics that might be contentious (Brown, 2010; Nelson, Dickson, & Hargie, 2003; Stringer & Irwing, 1998). Given the cue-laden nature of interaction, and the subsequent management of dialog, it is perhaps surprising that the present study represents the first application of CAT to understanding interpersonal processes in the N.I. context.

Both CAT and SIT suggest that during intercultural or inter-group interaction, communication is perceived to be either inter-personal or inter-group, with the latter in particular occasioning judgments of others in terms of 'similar to', or 'different from' me/us. This means that at times we may communicate purely on personal terms - as an individual, while on other occasions we speak as someone representing a particular group and so display the attitudes, beliefs, etc. of that group (Gallois & Callan, 1988; Giles, Willemyns, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). Convergence is less likely to occur when group identity is salient. In this case, interaction is more likely to be guided

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