



Arabic interdialectal encounters: Investigating the influence of attitudes on language accommodation



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates patterns of interdialectal language accommodation among Arabic speakers in the U.S. It contributes to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by demonstrating that speakers' motivation to accommodate is predicated on their attitudes toward the different Arabic varieties. Using data from natural conversations, personal interviews, and ethnographic observations, this study shows that language attitudes affect the degree of a speaker's convergence or divergence toward their interlocutors. The theoretical undertaking of this study is to examine the relationship between micro-level accommodative strategies and macro-societal relationships that arrange the asymmetries between these varieties and their speakers.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the adjustments that speakers make at any given moment of interaction are closely associated with their attitudes toward their conversationalist's language variety. It builds on Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which describes how individuals adjust their verbal and nonverbal behaviors within an interaction by linking that specific interaction to a larger contextual framework of intergroup encounters (Giles and Ogay, 2006). Since accommodation can be the discursive instantiation of attitudes (Garrett, 2010), the use of micro-level accommodative strategies in interactions is indicative of macro-interdialectal group relations that shape and are shaped by language attitudes.

The findings contribute to CAT by showing that the motivation to accommodate reflects attitudinal dispositions toward the different Arabic varieties in light of the power relationship that characterizes intergroup stratification among Arabic speakers. Attitudes play an important role in shaping human behavior (Edwards, 2011). More specifically, attitudes toward a particular language or dialect are, in fact, attitudes toward its speakers (Fasold, 1984; Garrett, 2010).

The Arabic diasporic context in the U.S. provides an excellent site for examining the interplay of language attitudes and accommodation in intergroup encounters. This study investigates interdialectal communication among first-generation Arab immigrants to the U.S. It shows that speakers' choices to accentuate or attenuate linguistic differences depend on their and their interactants' attitudes toward the linguistic varieties. The social capital allocated to interactants' varieties establishes interdialectal norms of accommodation, and observing or challenging those standards is socially rewarded or sanctioned, respectively. In this study, I unravel the role attitudes play in shaping interdialectal communication and reveal the power relations that sustain the use of different accommodative strategies.

Abbreviations: EA, Egyptian Arabic; JA, Jordanian Arabic; MA, Moroccan Arabic; SA, Standard Arabic; SAA, Saudi Arabic; SUA, Sudani Arabic.
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2. Literature review

Communication Accommodation theorists investigate the “motivation, communication strategies, and reactions to the behavior of others that characterize communication across all kinds of intergroup encounters” (Gallois et al., 1995, p. 116). Formerly known as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), it examines a speaker’s motivation to adjust their speech styles to match that of their interlocutors (Coupland and Giles, 1988; Giles, 1973). Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has generated research about many contexts of social interaction, including the media (Bell, 1991, 1997), interdialectal (Abu Melhim, 1992; Coupland, 1984; Holes, 1986; S’hiri, 2002) and interethnic contexts (Gallois and Callan, 1991; Giles and Ogay, 2006), and within the medical (Atkinson and Coupland, 1988; Hewett et al., 2009), law enforcement (Giles et al., 2007), and educational communities (Gasiorek and Giles, 2012), as well as about communication in gendered (Al-Khatib, 1995) and service (Callahan, 2006) encounters.

Speakers can deploy at least two strategies of accommodation: convergence and divergence. Convergence occurs when “individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in terms of the wide range of linguistic (e.g., speech rate, accents), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, utterance length), and nonverbal features (e.g., smiling, gazing) in such a way as to become more similar to their interlocutor’s behavior” (Giles and Ogay, 2006, pp. 294–295). The motivation for a speaker’s convergence to his/her interlocutor can be an attempt to seek social approval and/or communicative efficacy (Coupland, 2007) through reducing interpersonal differences (Giles et al., 1991). On the other hand, divergence (a nonaccommodative move) is a strategy through which speakers emphasize verbal and/or nonverbal communicative differences from their interlocutors (Coupland, 2010), typically motivated by the desire to assert distinctiveness or identity (Gallois et al., 1995). In one interethnic context, Welsh respondents rated a Welsh-speaking suspect who diverged from a standard British English-speaking policeman as socially attractive, nationalistic, and as deserving an attenuated penalty (Bourhis, 1977). These respondents reacted unfavorably, however, to suspects who converged to British English, interpreting the convergence as taxing to social identity, despite the supposed rewards entailed in such an encounter.

Few studies analyze accommodative practices among Arabic speech communities, which is important to understand the effect that language attitudes have on communication strategies among the diaspora in the U.S. Among these studies, Holes (1986) and Miller (2005) investigate how divergence and convergence in interdialectal encounters are affected by the stigmatization or prestige of a particular variety. Holes analyzed the variation between two phonological features within three speech communities in Bahrain and found that these groups are socially motivated to move away from their stigmatized local dialects and to converge to Modern Standard Arabic and local variants more prestigious than their own. Driven by the stigmatization of their dialect, speakers of Upper Egyptian Arabic (UPA) accommodate to speakers of Cairene Arabic, as the latter variety has gained prestige through media and education (Miller, 2005). Given the complex linguistic context in Egypt, UPA speakers converge to their Cairene Arabic counterparts in certain linguistic features, while they maintain the morphological, syntactic, and phonological variants that they perceive to be closer to Standard Arabic (SA). Hachimi (2013) investigates language ideologies between Maghrebi (Western Arabic) and Mashriqi (Eastern Arabic) speakers in mediated encounters, showing how Mashriqi Arabic speakers engage in the ideological practice of style junking Maghrebi Arabic varieties. This is done to cast doubt on the authenticity and intelligibility of Maghrebi Arabic varieties and portray Mashriqi Arabic varieties as the norm, thus maintaining asymmetrical hierarchies between these groups.

Outside of the Arab world, the first wave of Arab immigration to the U.S., who came primarily from Greater Syria, began at the end of the 19th century (Kayyali, 2006). A second wave of immigrants, this time mainly from Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, occurred after WWII, and a third wave, made up of educated Arabs from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. The fourth wave, in the 1970s, consisted of Palestinians and Lebanese, and the fifth wave, in the 1990s, was of Palestinians, Lebanese, Egyptians, and Iraqis (Rouchdy, 2002). Rouchdy argues that for Arabs in the U.S., SA strengthens Arab unity and reinforces language identity, which in turn assists in dialectal maintenance. However, this contact situation also highlights group differences reflected in the diversity of Arabic dialects.

Whereas earlier studies focus on accommodative practices among Arabs in the Arab world, Abu Melhim (1992) examines intergroup accommodative practices within the diasporic context. Results show that diglossic and bilingual codeswitching characterize accommodative speech, with women using more colloquial Arabic than do men and men using more standard Arabic than do women. All choose to use English and colloquial Arabic more than SA.

Similar to interdialectal group encounters in the Arab world, the contestation of Arabness and native-speakerness are also central themes in the diaspora. In this regard, S’hiri (2002) investigates the ideological reasons behind the extensive style shifting by Maghrebi (Western Arabic) speakers toward Mashriqi (Eastern Arabic) speakers within radio stations in the U.K. The ideology of native-speakerness triggers accommodative practices by Tunisian Arabic speakers toward their Egyptian and Levantine Arabic-speaking coworkers, which helps maintain the asymmetrical power relationship between these groups (S’hiri, 2002).

In their study of inferred motives in language accommodation, Gasiorek and Giles (2012) investigate the role that intentions and motives play in the construction of linguistic and non-linguistic communicative moves. One of the ways in which interactants decide whether to accommodate is by inferring the underlying motives that are imparted by their co-conversationalists. Attitudes play an important role in shaping communicative exchanges. As Garrett (2010) argues, language accommodation is the discursive manifestation of attitudes: “Attitudes and motivations feature not only in our perceptions, evaluations and attributions as we encounter such adjustments and attunements; they are also components of our own communicative competence that underpin, consciously or unconsciously, our moment-to-moment deployment of

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