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



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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 Gasiorok, 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

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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"

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