Perceptions of Accommodation Patterns in Interactions Between Native and Non-Native Speakers

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Abstract

In this paper, I first discuss the origins and evolution of Speech/Communication Accommodation Theory. Then, I examine features of convergence and divergence and the most typical patterns of accommodation, convergence and divergence, and the variety of ways these communication strategies may be perceived by audiences. Lastly, in the interest of informing pedagogical practice regarding communication with ELLs, I propose a study that would examine whether these perceptions show any tendency regarding country of origin or age.

Keywords: accommodation, convergence, divergence, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), foreigner talk
No speaker of any language has just one set of linguistic patterns in his/her speech repertoire (Gumperz, 1964). However, what makes a speaker choose one variety of language over another? Hymes (1972, as cited in Giles & Powesland, 1975) asserts that the “hallmark of sociolinguistics” is the idea that speakers vary their language according to the topic of the discourse, the setting in which the conversation takes place, and their interlocutor. The role that the variable of interlocutor plays in the diversity of speech is often explained using the notion of accommodation.

In the realm of sociolinguistics, accommodation is said to occur when speakers alter their communicative style, either deliberately or unconsciously, in response to “their assessments of their conversational partners’ communicative characteristics” and as a function of their wish to “maintain a positive personal and social identity” (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012, p. 310). As Le Page (1997, p. 28, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2012) asserts, we as speakers do not necessarily accommodate so as to adapt to the style of the interlocutor, but rather to adapt to “the image we have of ourselves in relation to our interlocutor” (p. 113).

The first publicized studies of accommodation in sociolinguistics began in 1973 when Howard Giles was reviewing the data from William Labov’s 1966 study of the role of context and formality in accent choice. Though Labov attributed the differences in accent among his participants to the relative formality of the settings (i.e. situational variation), Giles noted that perhaps the participants’ interlocutor, the interviewer, had shifted variations according to the perceived formality of the context, thereby influencing the pronunciation choices of the
interviewees. He thereby theorized that Labov’s results may have been more representative of the participants’ desire to be evaluated positively by the interviewer (in this case, by attempting to be more like the pronunciation of the interviewer) than of the situational context.

Since its inception, the theory of accommodation has undergone several changes. Giles’s initial Accent Mobility Model (1973) later evolved into the Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) model, which aimed to explore both the motivations for and the consequences of accommodative patterns. It was later renamed the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) so as to encompass non-verbal features of accommodative attributes as well.

**Features of Certain Accommodation Strategies**

Accommodative patterns typically fall into one of two categories: either convergence or divergence. Several important distinctions exist in the studies of these two phenomena. First, convergence may be either partial or full; for example, a speaker with a speech rate of 50 words a minute may fully accommodate his/her faster-speaking interlocutor with a speech rate of 100 words a minute by adopting the addressee’s speech rate completely (100 wpm), or may partially accommodate by only increasing his/her words per minute to 75 (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 68). Giles and Coupland (1991) also note that convergence may be uni-modal or multimodal; that is, convergence of one variable does not preclude convergence of all variables. Both convergence and divergence can be “upward,” where a speaker shifts toward a language style generally regarded as prestigious, or “downward,” in which a speaker shifts away from a prestigious style. Because the motives and perceptions of accommodative strategies in NS-NNS interactions is similar to that of NS-NS interactions, the research of the phenomena presented here is considered relevant.
Convergence

Convergent behavior can be seen when a speaker attempts to assimilate his/her communicative patterns to be more like those of their addressee. Convergence can be manifested in verbal features such as pronunciation (e.g. accent), vocal intensity (e.g. loudness), speech rate, use of pauses, and utterance length, in nonverbal behaviors (e.g. smiling, gaze), and in topic choice (e.g. intimate self-disclosures) (Giles & Smith, 1979, p. 46).

The motivation behind convergent behavior is often attributed to the socio-psychological similarity-attraction theory, which asserts that people are more likely to be attracted to others whose attitudes and beliefs resemble their own (Giles & Smith, 1979). In alignment with this theory, speakers may hope to be evaluated highly by choosing speech patterns that they believe match those of their addressee(s). Through convergence, a speaker’s “attractiveness, perceived supportiveness, intelligibility,…interpersonal involvement…perceived warmth, and co-operativeness” may also be increased in the mind of the recipient, resulting in heightened perceived effectiveness of the interaction (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 72). Data from Buller and Aune (1988, as cited in Giles & Coupland, 1991) supports this theory, as fast- and slow-speaking participants in their study who were addressed with their own rates of speaking rated their interlocutor as both more “immediate” and more intimate; furthermore, the addressees showed an increased likeliness to comply with his requests for volunteered assistance than with speakers who did not accommodate (p. 72).

According to the key principles of accommodation (Giles et al., 2007, as cited in Gasiorek & Giles, 2012), speakers may converge for a variety of additional reasons: they may wish to “elicit or signal positive face [or] feelings” (p. 310). They may desire to feel that they
share a common identity with their interlocutor, and may believe that use of a certain speech pattern that is typically associated with a certain “race, ethnicity, gender, religion, occupation, physical location, social class, [or] kinship,” (Wardhaugh, 2012, p. 7) may be the best way to do this. A speaker employing convergent speech patterns may also wish to increase the addressee’s self-esteem, or may be attempting to elicit positive associations with a social group to which the speaker belongs in the mind of the addressee (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012, p. 310).

The notion of prototypicality (Turner, 1987, as cited in Giles & Coupland, 1991) is also significant in convergence. In a study of immigrants’ adoption of non-verbal norms of Anglo-Australian communication, prototypicality indices were very accurate predictors of raters’ social evaluations of their interlocutors. The speakers who successfully converged toward this prototype were evaluated more positively regarding solidarity (e.g. not aggressive, good, kind, and friendly) while those who did not were “down-graded” (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 72).

**Overaccommodation.** While convergence is generally seen to be productive, overaccommodation, or hyperconvergence, is not. According to Gasiorek and Giles (2012), overaccommodative communication refers to convergence that “is perceived to overshoot the level of adjustment felt to be appropriate in a given situation” (p. 311). “Elderspeak” (Giles & Gasiorek, 2011, as cited in Gasiorek & Giles, 2012), or the way in which younger speakers tend to slow their speech rate and increase the volume of their utterances when communicating with older speakers, is one example of overaccommodation between NSs.

**Divergence**

Though convergence is the most typical pattern of accommodation, some speakers choose to employ divergent behavior in certain situations instead. Divergence occurs when
speakers “accentuate speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and others” (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 63).

Divergence can be manifested in several different ways. For example, even though they are bilingual, Paraguays typically speak Guarani rather than Spanish when abroad in order to emphasize the distinctiveness of their Paraguayan identity. “Content-differentiation” divergence, in which speakers purposely include a topic dissimilar to the conversation, is also possible. For example, when Welsh speakers perceived that their Welsh identity was being attacked by their interlocutor, they were more likely to emphasize their membership to Welsh groups in their responses by stressing their accents and mentioning their heritage (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 65). Speakers can also disassociate from their interlocutor symbolically by using the stereotypical pronunciation associated with their social group. Additional ways of diverging consist of using “explicit propositional non-alignment,” (e.g. expressing disagreement or hostility outright), and by physically distancing oneself from the conversation and the interlocutor by ending or avoiding interactions altogether (Giles & Coupland, 1991, p. 65).

**Underaccommodation and nonaccommodation/maintenance.** Underaccommodation is defined by Gasiorek and Giles (2012) as communication that is “not adjusted sufficiently for a recipient’s needs in a given situation” (p. 311). This can be seen in the use of jargon or acronyms that are unfamiliar to the listener without further clarification (p. 311). Nonaccommodation is defined as the maintenance of one’s speech style; in other words, no accommodative adjustments are made.

Though divergent speech technically may be considered underaccommodating, I believe the two phenomena should be regarded as separate; while divergence is almost always discussed
as intentional, underaccommodation and/or nonaccommodation may simply be the result of the speaker’s lack of awareness of an interlocutor’s needs; therefore, it could be considered unintentional.

**General Perceptions of Accommodation Patterns**

Regardless of the true motivations that guide the speech patterns of the speaker, the degree to which the speaker achieves their communicative goals by employing certain patterns of accommodation is dependent upon the motive the addressee attributes to the speaker’s accommodative choices. As Gasiorek and Giles (2012) state, it is the listener’s “perception of a behavior—not any objective quality of the behavior itself—that determines whether or not it is considered over- or –underaccommodative” (p. 311). Furthermore, although research seems to suggest that listeners generally evaluate accommodative behaviors more positively than those that are nonaccommodative, the motive which the listener attributes for such behaviors may moderate these judgments, and may alter the listener’s perception of the speaker his/herself (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012, p. 313). Heider (1958, as cited in Giles & Powesland, 1979) provides three elements of a speaker’s behavior that can be considered in the process of evaluating the speaker: the speaker’s ability to accommodate, his/her effort in accommodating, and the external pressures causing the speaker to choose certain accommodation patterns.

The 1973 accommodation model proposed by Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis suggests that listeners will assess speakers who do not accommodate differently in accordance with the perceived reason for such behavior. For example, listeners who perceive accommodation as a result of external pressure(s) will reciprocate accommodation, but their evaluation of such speakers will not be as favorable as it would be for speakers whose motives for accommodation
were perceived as internal. Those free from external pressure but who accommodate anyway were seen as exerting the most effort, and therefore, were more positively evaluated. Similarly, if the listener perceives that the speaker failed to accommodate due to a lack of ability and is therefore incapable of accommodating, his/her nonaccommodation may be seen as justified; in return, the listener will most likely respond with accommodated speech due to a perceived inability of the first speaker to decode nonaccommodative speech (Giles et al., 1973, as cited in Giles & Powesland, 1975). In other words, nonaccommodative behaviors evaluated as unintentional will be perceived less negatively than those seen as intentional (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012, p. 314).

To illustrate how these factors may be analyzed by addressees, one could examine the study of English and French bilingual accommodation in Canada (Giles et al., 1973, as cited in Giles & Powesland, 1975). In this study, a bilingual French-Canadian speaker was asked to tape-record a message using either only French, a mixture of French and English, or only English to bilingual English-Canadian speakers. Giles et al. found that the English-Canadian speakers evaluated the sample, and therefore the speaker, that employed the most accommodation (i.e. all English) the most positively; they were perceived as exerting the greatest amount of effort. Contrastingly, the addressees attributed a negative motivation to the speakers who did not use all English in their samples, as they knew the speakers had the ability to speak fluently in English and were not restricted by any external pressures to pick one language over another.

**Proposed Study**

Much research (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Platt & Weber, 1984, Giles & Coupland, 1991; Garrett, 1992) has been done on how non-native speakers either converge or diverge when
communicating with native speakers. However, research regarding how native speakers either accommodate to or don’t accommodate to non-native speakers, their reasons for this choice, and the consequences for each is not as rich.

Ideally, a native speaker of the language will be able to satisfactorily accommodate to the needs of his/her non-native interlocutor. Unfortunately, however, the speaker often does not or cannot adequately measure what these linguistic needs are. When this occurs, how do the NNSs perceive the NS? How do they respond? Do non-native speakers prefer underaccommodation to overaccommodation, or vice versa?

My proposed study will examine not only how native speakers of English typically accommodate to non-native English speakers, their motives for doing so, and how non-native speakers generally perceive these patterns of accommodation, but will also focus on NNSs’ perceptions of the actual native speakers who employ certain accommodative patterns. Then, the data will be analyzed according to the factors of age and L1, in an attempt to identify correlations between these factors and the NNS’s perceptions of certain speakers.

**Literature Review**

**NS typical accommodative patterns when interacting with NNSs.** Though the patterns of NS-NNS accommodation generally follow those of convergence and divergence as listed above, they may be employed slightly differently in different contexts, and additional factors must be considered.

**Foreigner talk.** When native speakers attempt to assimilate their patterns of speaking to those of their non-native addresssee, they may be employing what Ferguson (1975) has named “foreigner talk” (FT). Ferguson attempted to characterize the ways in which NSs typically talk to
beginning-level language learners. His results suggest that NSs most likely make similar phonological, grammatical, and lexical adjustments to their speech when talking to NNSs. As these adjustments often attempt to mirror NNSs’ mistakes, FT may be ungrammatical. Due to this ungrammaticality, FT is typically seen in NS interactions with learners of a perceived low proficiency (Giles, 1991, p. 238).

Phonologically, NSs may add a vowel to the end of words ending in a consonant, perhaps in order to mimic a pattern frequently seen in NNS speech. Ferguson’s participants also advocated for “slow, distinct, or exaggerated pronunciation” and believed that reduplicated forms (e.g. *bang bang*, *boom boom*) could facilitate comprehension. NSs may especially stress the word *not* before negated items (Ferguson, 1975, p. 4).

Grammatical adjustments were defined by Ferguson as changes made to the material that is “ordinarily present in normal language,” either through omissions, additions, or replacements, (p. 4). In his study, the omissions most frequently seen were deletion of the word *the* and of the *be* copula. Omission of morphemes indicating the grammatical categories of case, person, tense, and number in nouns and verbs (specifically, omission of the plural and possessive markers of nouns, the third person singular present suffix of verbs, past tense markers, the progressive marker –*ing*, the future *will*, and the marker of the perfect –*ed/-en*, was particularly salient). Finally, all conjunctions, both coordinating and subordinating, tended to be deleted from FT (p. 5). However, NSs also made expansions to normal speech through the insertion of tag questions as a means of checking comprehension (e.g. *Yes? OK*?), through the addition of *you* to imperatives, and through multiple negations (p. 6). With regards to replacements, NSs typically employed uncontracted forms (e.g. *do not* rather than *don’t*), used subject pronouns in place of
possessive pronouns (e.g. *I* instead of *me*; *you brother* instead of *your brother*), and replaced many nominative pronouns with accusative pronouns (e.g. *me go* instead of *I go*).

Finally, lexical substitutions were often made in the participants’ samples. Most commonly, vocabulary was restricted to high-frequency words, and paraphrases or “special expression[s] used only or primarily in foreigner talk” were employed (p. 8).

**NSs’ motives in selecting accommodation strategies in NNS interaction.**

**Convergence.** Although the aforementioned motivations of convergence may also apply to NS- NNS interactions, mutual comprehensibility becomes perhaps the most important interactional goal in this context. According to the CAT model proposed by Coupland *et al.* (1988, as cited in Giles, 1991), NSs may choose to accommodate so as to ensure that their message has been communicated effectively and comprehensibly (p. 235). As Bell (1984) explains,

“The sharper the linguistic difference between codes, the larger the issue of intelligibility looms, [and] the stronger are the pressures to accommodate the audience…Use of a language which is unintelligible to any interlocutor defines that person out of the audience. It is the ultimate in dissociative behavior…” (p. 176).

This preoccupation with comprehensibility is increased when the interaction is spontaneous rather than planned (Long, 1983, as cited in Giles *et al.*, 1991) and when the topic of conversation is abstract or complex (Snow *et al.*, 1983, as cited in Giles *et al.*, 1991).

NSs may also choose to use FT in an attempt to gain the NNS’s social approval (Giles *et al.*, 1991, p. 235). An NS who perceives a great social and/or cultural distance between him/herself and the NNS could use FT as a way to downplay this difference and “increase social
liking and approval instead” (Giles et al., 1991, p. 235). In using such speech, the NS can also signal to the NNS that he/she “identifies with the NNS and supports the NNS’s language efforts” (p. 235).

**Overaccommodation.** Accurately evaluating the exact linguistic ability of a NNS is a detailed and complex process. NSs can attempt to gauge their NNS interlocutor’s communicative competence by carefully studying his/her behavior in real time (Giles et al., 1991, p. 237); however, this is not always a possibility for short interactions or those in which the NNS does not provide an elongated sample the NS can evaluate. To compensate, some NSs may base their perceptions of their NNS interlocutor on stereotypes (Giles et al., 1991, p. 237). Often, speech based on these stereotypes is misguided, and NSs can run the risk of overaccommodating their listener.

**Nonaccommodation.** NSs may desire to distinguish themselves from a NNS by not adjusting their personal speech style at all (Giles et al., 1991, p. 238). Through my personal experience, I believe that some NSs who consider accommodation to be a misrepresentation of native-like speech may choose to not make any adjustments; they may see accommodation of any sort as a hindrance to the second language acquisition process.

**Divergence.** However, some NSs may not perceive a great distance between their speech and that of their NNS interlocutor; in cases such as these, simple speech maintenance (i.e. nonaccommodation) would not be sufficiently distinctive. To ensure that a distinction is apparent, the NS can turn to divergent behavior. This may include shifting away from standard English into a regional dialect unintelligible to the listener, using a special register with which the NNS is unfamiliar, or using jargon without explaining its meaning. Such divergent behavior
is often an indication ethnocentric attitudes (Giles et al., 1991, p. 236).

**NNS perceptions of NS accommodative strategies.** NNSs use the same guidelines in evaluating NSs and their accommodative strategies as NSs do in NS-NS interactions (see “General Perceptions of Accommodation” above). Once again, then, it is not the NS’s true intention that may be evaluated and judged, but the perceived intention behind his/her behavior. Similarly, what one individual may see as underaccommodative, another may see as overaccommodative, and vice-versa.

Despite the intentions of many NSs to facilitate communication when accommodating ELLs, Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) believe that these intentions may instead be evaluated by the NNS beyond a basic language proficiency level as undermining communication (p. 239). NNSs may interpret overaccommodative behavior as the speaker’s desire to be controlling or condescending (Coupland et al., 1988, p. 32, as cited in Giles et al., 1991, p. 239). In regards to overaccommodation in NS-NNS interactions, there are three types (Ryan et al., 1986, as cited in Giles et al., 1991, p. 239). Sensory overaccommodation occurs when the speaker perceives the addressee to be linguistically handicapped and consequently may overproduce features of FT to increase comprehensibility. NNSs may interpret this behavior as the NS “talking down” or placing the NNS “in a childlike position” (p. 239). Dependency overaccommodation is said to occur when the addressee perceives that he/she has been placed in a lower status role so that the NS forces the NNS to be dependent on the speaker and controls the interaction; often, FT adjustments are perceived by NNSs as a means for the NS to control the conversation, and are seen as an indication that they have been placed in this lesser position (p. 240). Lastly, intergroup overaccommodation may occur when the NNS believes the NS considers
him/her merely a member of a group rather than an individual, and thinks he/she is being labeled as a “foreigner” or “language learner” (Giles et al., 1991, p. 240).

However, most research has found that despite the negative qualities attributed to native speakers who overaccommodate, non-native speakers still seem to prefer overaccommodation to underaccommodation (Gasiorek & Giles, 2012, p. 313). NNSs may interpret speakers’ underaccommodation or maintenance of speech as their belief that their own culture is superior to that of the NNS, or that the NS wishes to exclude the NNS from his/her speech community. Giles and Coupland (1991) believe that recipients of divergent behavior may evaluate the speaker as “insulting, impolite, or downright hostile” (p. 80).

Hypothesis

Based on this literature, I hypothesize that the participants in my study would also follow the trend of preferring overaccommodation to underaccommodation or nonaccommodation. I also believe the data from this study would indicate that speakers may favor different accommodation patterns according to their age and their L1. Yum (1998, as cited in Giles & Coupland, 1991) notes that, opposed to the sender-oriented West, communication in Eastern Asia communication is more receiver-centered (p. 64). This could indicate that accommodative patterns and evaluations of these patterns could vary according to L1 or culture. Furthermore, Giles and Coupland (1991) mention that though younger speakers may evaluate “elderspeak” as overaccommodative and insulting, some older speakers perceive it as “nurturing” and evaluate it positively (p. 162). This implies that younger speakers may evaluate certain accommodation strategies differently than older speakers. Though research to support these generalizations does exist, they warrant reevaluation and further validation if they are to be used as a basis for
teacher/student communication in ESL. My proposed study would hope to either refute or confirm such conceptions.

**Methodology**

In order to collect the data necessary for the proposed study, the matched guise test used to evaluate English-Canadian perceptions of French-Canadian accommodative choices (Lambert, 1967) could be used as a guide. This test asked the participants to evaluate the speaker according to his/her perceived personality in terms of how they assessed his/her personal integrity, social attractiveness, and competence.

This questionnaire (adapted from Garrett, 1992, p. 301) containing some or all of the following questions could be administered to NNS participants in my study after listening to NSs who converge, diverge, overaccommodate, and underaccommodate:

1. How pleasant does this person sound?
2. How comfortable would you feel in conversation with this person?
3. How irritating does this person sound?
4. How sincere does this person sound?
5. How likeable does this person sound?
6. How much status would you associate with this person?
7. How intelligent does this person sound?

The participants in this study could also be asked to respond to the spoken sample, and their response could be analyzed according to its degree of accommodation or nonaccommodation.

However, because the spoken sample given to each participant would be the same and not
based on the individual speech patterns of each NNS participant, difficulties could arise in defining which behavior is convergent, which is divergent, etc. Alternatively, then, NNS participants could take part in various conversational tasks with NSs who have been trained how to analyze a NNS’s communicative patterns and converge, diverge, overaccommodate, and underaccommodate to elicit analyzable data regarding NNS’ perceptions of the speaker. The NNS’s responses to each pattern could then be analyzed; additionally, participants could be given the same questionnaire as above after they complete their tasks.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The data gathered from the proposed study could greatly inform ESL/EFL teaching practices. As Giles and Coupland (1991) state, accommodative processes can either “facilitate or impede language learners’ proficiency in a second language… as well as immigrants’ acceptance into certain host communities” (p. 60). Similarly, Zuengler (1982, as cited in Giles et al., 1991) found that NNS may choose to either converge or diverge according to the degree to which they perceive “ethnic threat” (p. 228). Likewise, Berkowitz’s study (1986, as cited in Giles et al., 1991) suggests that NNSs would converge “toward an interlocutor they liked and with whom they wanted to promote social attractiveness.” Research on this topic indicates ELLs will adopt the linguistic styles of the NSs they felt had cultural empathy (Giles et al., 1991, p. 228).

It is therefore important that teachers be aware of how to employ the right accommodative strategies so as to come across as culturally empathetic and non-threatening. Repeated experience with NSs using the wrong accommodation patterns may cause the NNs to “lose motivation for further language acquisition, avoid interactions with NSs, and develop negative attitudes toward them, their society, and their language”; “social and psychological
distance would increase” (Giles et al., 1991, p. 239). Additionally, an “overcareful style of speaking” and/or an “overconcern with correctness,” (i.e. a lack of FT) could present the ELL with an “impossible model of perfection” (Cook, 1979, as cited in Garrett, 1992, p. 296) which could also cause a decrease in a language learner motivation.

Because the use of certain accommodative patterns could potentially have powerful negative or beneficial effects on their students, ESL/EFL teachers should be aware of the various perceptions that are attributed to speakers who employ certain accommodative patterns. It would also be helpful to know to what extent certain cultures and age groups value certain accommodative strategies, particularly for teachers of homogeneous groups of students. In being aware of these paradigms, teachers can select the patterns which will most effectively contribute to their students’ success.
References


