

# **THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PATTERNS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL INTERACTION. AN OVERVIEW ON THE COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY**

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## *Abstract*

The technological opportunities provided by new media have entirely reconfigured the relationships between people and their representations on worldwide communication and on global interaction. In order to adjust to the unprecedented changes brought about by globalization and the intercultural exchange, individuals as well as social groups have become aware that adaptation is mandatory. My main interest is focused on the cognitive reasons for code-switching and other changes in communication as individuals seek to emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors. The starting point is Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory which discusses the causes and effects of potentiating convergence between people through the adjusting of the communication styles. The theoretical framework is also valuable as it may account for the main features of the virtual interaction between people from different corners of the world.

*Keywords:* communication accommodation, new technologies, social networks

## **Introduction**

It has become obvious that starting with the end of the last century, humanity had passed into a new period – the informational era. Thousands of studies analyze this contingency and other thousands will follow, developing new concepts and theories related to the unprecedented mutations which characterize the human society. The reality of the past centuries is defined by ubiquity, by instantaneity, by technological development in the communication field. “The former realities have been changed by the ideal of emancipation based on oscillation, on plurality and on the tendency of unification and global communication [Drăgan, Anton, Sosai-Fuiorea, 2002, p. 218].

In this perspective, it is likely to state that every act of communication in the contemporary society implies the existence of an accommodative potentiality which may come to surface at any moment. Moreover, communication is destined to be perceived as an “inherent form of

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influence”, as social actors unconditionally intend to share a meaning (of an idea, of a situation, of a phenomenon); subsequently, the conclusion is that persuasion, influence has become “consubstantial to communication” [Mucchielli, 2002, p. 270].

At this level, the background elaborations of the human environment under the pressure of the contemporary forces become a veritable object of interest if we underline its impact on individuals, on groups of people, on the local and global context. The transformations of our localities in “globalities” (in terms of “deterritorialization”), the changes in our real ambiance, the relativization of the former reference points, the influence of the distant political and economical phenomena on the existential frameworks, the penetration of media and communication technology in our natural spaces, the multiculturalism as a growing standard, the intensive mobility etc stand for more than a future promise – they stand for a *sine-quanon* condition for adjusting to the new structural and functional exigencies. In this way, the mental and actionable imperative towards modernity directly implies an active sense of affiliation to the wide world, the individual’s ability to live the experience of a “distant identity”, an identity which surpasses the immediate locality and catalyzes the awareness of the human ties, of the common risks and opportunities, of mutual responsibilities, of a global world where there is “no alterity”.

All things considered, the purpose of this paper is to underline the importance of the communication accommodation when interacting with people from other places than our country or region, with other cultural patterns and social profiles, with different backgrounds and mentalities. Therefore, I will focus on the basic elements of the Communication Accommodation Theory, on its convergence with other similar approaches and on the general perspective regarding the impact of the new technologies on social groups.

The main questions to be answered are: 1) which are the main components of the Communication Accommodation Theory which may account for the patterns of the global interaction?; 2) is communication a key factor in mediating relationships at a global scale?; 3) why are individuals liable to join virtual social networks?.

### **The theoretical framework of the Communication Accommodation Theory**

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was developed by Howard Giles, professor of communication, at the [University of California, Santa Barbara](#). CAT explains some of the cognitive reasons for [code-switching](#) and other changes in speech as individuals seek to emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors. Originally, the theory was based on speech, but it has since been expanded to

cover verbal and nonverbal behaviours as well. Depending on how we relate the other person's speech and behaviours to our own determines our own behaviours during the conversation [McLaughlin, 1987, p. 13]. Being originally conceptualized to mine more complex socio-psychological understanding of language choices than a mere recourse to people's socially normative dispositions [Giles, Powesland, 1975]. Over the years, Giles' theory has been elaborated and revised in varying directions and it has, according to many commentators, assumed the status of a major socio-psychological theory of language and social interaction [Tracy, Haspel, 2004].

Giles posits that when speakers seek approval in a social situation they are likely to converge their speech to that of their interlocutor [Giles, St. Clair, 1979, p. 67]. This can include, but is not limited to the language of choice, accent, dialect and paralinguistic features used in the interaction. In contrast to convergence, speakers may also engage in divergent speech. In divergent speech, individuals emphasize the social distance between themselves and their interlocutors by using linguistic features characteristic of their own group. People try to adjust their style of speech to others in order to gain approval, increase communication efficiency, and maintain positive social identity with the person to whom they are talking [Runciman, 1998, p. 24]. The two first goals can be considered *convergent* since they seek an effective communication. Both speaker and listener share a cooperative behaviour which leads them to convergence in their speech. Maintaining a positive social identity is seen as *divergent* because the speaker wants to keep an identity with a reference group. In this situation the interlocutors behave competitively diverging from each other by emphasizing the differences in their speech. To communicate effectively, speaker and listener should converge in their mutual goal to accomplish intelligibility. The speakers involved in this process are expected to work upon these adjustments according to the communicative situation in which they find themselves [McLaughlin, 1987, p. 14].

CAT intends to analyze the discursive variations, which are the results of speech adjustments or accommodations done by the speakers according to their personal characteristics, speech style, and specific linguistic usage [Jaworski, Coupland, 2006, p. 229]. Convergence is defined as "a strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic/prosodic/nonvocal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze, and so on" [Giles, Coupland, 1991, p. 35]. Divergence refers to "the way in which speakers accentuate speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others" [Giles, Coupland, 1991, p. 36]. Convergence is seen as expressing a desire for social integration; divergence, as serving the function of promoting social distance.

Still, there is a third approach to the communication accommodation – the Over Accommodation, which is where one attempts to over do efforts in regulating, modifying or responding to others. There are three ways one can over accommodate: the first is sensory where people tend to over adapt to others who are perceived as limited in their abilities. The second is dependency, where the person who is talking, speaks to others as if they're in a lower status than them. Lastly, intergroup occurs when the speakers place listeners in cultural groups without acknowledging individual uniqueness. Overall, this theory tries to ‘accommodate’ for differences within situations. In interpersonal situations, language can be used to convey information about one’s personality, temperament, social status, group belonging, and so forth. Although many of us like to think that we interact essentially the same way to virtually every person we encounter, thanks to fairness and our integrity, this simply is not true. In most instances, it is desirable, and even necessary, to adjust our language patterns to our conversational partners, be they close friends or loathed felons. Sometimes we encode this deliberately and consciously, other times it emerges automatically and may not even be decoded overtly.

There are four components in CAT which are crucial to the understanding of the general framework: the *sociohistorical context*, the *communicators' accommodative orientation*, the *immediate situation* and *evaluation and future intentions*. These components are essential to the theory and affect the course and outcome of intercultural conversations [Gudykunst, 2003, p. 172].

The sociohistorical context represents the general basis for any intercultural communication. Thereby, the relations between the two interacting groups influence the communicators' behavior. Such influencing factors are for example political or historical relations between nations or different religious or ideological views between the two groups participating in the conversation [Gudykunst, 2003, p. 172]. “The essence of the group’s life is a dynamic relationship between several elements: activities, feelings, norms, interactions and communication. The attachment between the group’s members is a result of contacts and cooperation, of similarity and identification; the interaction and the communication lead to the acquirement of common norms and to a special commitment to the group” [McQuail, 1999, p. 105].

Speaking about the accommodative orientations, there are three factors that are considered to be very important: “intrapersonal factors” (e.g. personality of the speakers), “intergroup factors” (e.g. communicators’ feelings toward outgroups), and “initial orientations” (e.g. perceived potential for conflict) [Gudykunst, 2005, p. 15]. People who have many things in common are usually part of the same groups and are characterized by the same predispositions which make them liable to closer contacts and to a more genuine communication. This is why “the behaviour is no longer

seen as a psychological structure, but as a relationship between the individual and the others from the socially and culturally contextualized community [Caune, 2000, p. 66]”. In this way, willingly or not, individuals are systematically seeking for the preservation of homogeneity in order to preserve the social identity [Yzerbyt, Schadron, 2002, p. 197].

The immediate situation, i.e. the actual communication, is shaped by five aspects which are interrelated: “sociopsychological states”, “goals and addressee focus” (e.g. motivations and goals for the encounter), “sociolinguistic strategies” (e.g. convergence or divergence), “behavior and tactics” (e.g. topic, accent) and “labeling and attributions”.

The evaluation and future intentions deals with how communicators perceive their conversational partners’ behavior and its effects on future encounters between the two groups. Positively rated conversations will most likely lead to further communication between the interlocutors and other members of their respective groups [Gudykunst, 2005, p. 16]. When speaking about a mature social structure, the social identity is a fact of life, acting as a model, but even in this situation, it has a dynamic character given by the continuous minor adjustments. From this point of view, the identity of the group becomes a symbolic bond, a motivating factor which reinforces the cultural patterns. This is why the main challenge of a growing group is the establishment of several general coordinates which exclude the aleatory and stimulate the integrated action. The production of a common imaginary involves, nevertheless, a negotiation over the meaning, over the cultural and symbolic context where the meaning may emerge. In this register, it is obvious that through the symbiosis of the cultural elements which define a certain social group, the identity of the self can be interpreted through the identity of the group as a form of “identity reconstruction [Pailliart, 2002, p. 161]”.

### **Accommodation as a common experience**

Giles’ convergence may be placed in the same analytical sphere as Kenneth Burke’s conception, a researcher focused on the language study as a means to persuade people to act in a certain direction. So he defined persuasion as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols [cited in Larson, 2003, p. 155]”. The active cooperation is encouraged by the identification, associated concept to the Aristotelian concept of “common experience”. The evolution of the identification is sustained by the linguistic sharing of the substances or of the raw material inherent to the main concepts. Sharing substances makes us consubstantial with others. There are various possible substantial connections among and between interactants. Our symbolic ways for marking consubstantiality are identifications, upon which rhetorical action is based: “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his

language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his [cited in Larson, 2003, p. 155]". Here, identification is a supplement to accommodation.

The identification with others evolves in such a way that we seem to possess the same symbolic realities – "my sense about myself is increasing by imitating you while my sense about yourself is increasing in direct ratio with my sense about myself [Markova, 2004, p. 152]". In other words, we identify ourselves with persons who share the same conceptions about life, who enjoy the same hobbies, who have the same interests, the same life style. If we identify ourselves with the persuasive agents, it is very likely to be influenced by what they say or recommend us to do. Therefore, the implicit objective of the human agent is to attach the proper importance to the common substances.

On the other hand, the receiver's mission is to examine critically the existence of common substances in order to observe whether there is any actual compatibility between different convictions and values or the persuasive agent simply tries to induce the idea of compatibility. We identify ourselves with others because we share the same main experiences. Through identification ("they are like me" becomes "I'm like them"); the individuals feel or think they feel like the others, marking the first steps towards alterity.

In Burke's conception, the sharing of "substances" or the "identification" is an equivalent for persuasion. To him, the majority of the persuasive actions refer to our "essential parts", to concepts which define our common backgrounds. All the words have an emotional essence and uncover the individual's feelings, attitudes, values and judgments. The examination of the persuasive language underlines multiple aspects about us and about the persuasive agents who ask for our interest, support or commitment. In order to catalyze the process of identification (a similar concept to the Aristotelian "common experiences"), Burke considers that the most important factor is the ability of the persuasive agent to induce similarity, to relate his way of expressing to the language of his receiver [cited in Larson, 2003, p. 165].

In conclusion, communication accommodation becomes a mutual feeling of identification between the source and the receiver, as a result of the usage of symbols and images, the emphasis being simultaneously laid on the source, receiver and the message. All of these elements collaborate to generate a persuasive process and, progressively, the accommodation becomes self-accommodation. "Starting with the creation of social relations, the social appreciation has been deeply valued – the human essence has changed and we need to see this fact naturally: the human being as a social being is concentrated on the exterior; in substance, he acquires the vital feeling only by the way he perceives what others think about him" [Neumann, 2004, p. 109].

At this level, the ego-defensive function is potentiated, the function which refers to "individuals' tendency to preserve an acceptable self-image, according to the other's opinion [McQuail, 1999, p. 158]". The self-

definition is produced in relation with the others and often determines confrontations and mutations generated by the acute necessity of the human being to measure with alterity. Gradually, alterity becomes a witness, a mirror to the self who aspires to the social reality. The comparison to others is rooted in a brotherly instinct, in that origin co-existence feeling defined by Husserl as the measure of the others' conscience in the process of understanding our own identity, our self [cited in Caune, 2000, p. 66]. The human being is shaping himself according to alterity, even though it's not a question of imitation or of relation of superiority or inferiority; everyone defines himself looking into the others, and this inherent act of identification becomes the individual's truth.

### **The virtual environment – an accommodation at a global scale**

In the process of deciphering the facades of the new patterns of interaction, the interpretation key may be the re-configuration of the social and cultural patterns by the virtual space (seen as a facilitator of interaction). Consequently, the emergence of certain social networks which surpass the political boundaries and defy the border constraints seems a veritable object of interest when discussing the relevance and importance of the new technologies and of the social influence models. At this level, by admitting the crucial status of new media in the architecture of the modern society, one of the prime notions to focus on is represented by the global communities, designed by the technological effluvium.

Moreover, the emphasis lays on the new technologies which hold a special potential to deterritorialize, culturally and morally speaking – they are liable to sustain the perception that our localities are tied, in joy and in sorrow, to faraway corners of the world, they are liable to determine us to see the world through its common causes and effects for the entire humanity. The internet has become a platform, and information stands for the main “driving force”; “the participatory architecture” has a direct impact on the social networks, stimulating individuals to aggregate in different virtual communities by overbidding the similarity between people and the communication between identities. Gradually, the transformative action of individuals (technologically speaking) brings about the emergence of a specific cultural disposition, of “an effusion towards the world” which substantially changes people's representations on the world and on the social reality.

In other words, the desire of being a significant part of a worldwide social network becomes progressively an incentive for communication accommodation. This is why in order to adjust to the unprecedented changes brought about by globalization and the intercultural exchange, individuals as well as social groups have become aware that adaptation is mandatory. Accepting your interlocutor, trying to know him better, to discover and

understand his needs, his aspirations, his goals, to build bridges in your social and cultural interaction stands for an usual practice nowadays.

It has become evidence that more and more people are interested in the facilities provided by the Internet, especially with a view to feel like an organic part of a virtual community. Lots of Internet users have contacted or participated in social networks and the growth in membership and usage is expected to continue. The popularity of these communities reflects an interesting reality taking into account its multidimensional implications - individuals are using new technologies, such as the Internet, to fulfill social economic, political, religious and cultural goals etc. Moreover, individuals use virtual communities to discuss shared interests (communities of interest), to develop social relations (communities of relationships) and to explore new identities (communities of fantasy) [Rheingold, 2000]. „The combination of identification and individualism is at the source of the culture of networked individualism found by sociologists to be the pattern of sociability in the network society. In the age of the Internet, individuals do not withdraw into the isolation of virtual reality. On the contrary, they expand their sociability by using the wealth of communication networks at their disposal, but they do so selectively, constructing their cultural world in terms of their preferences and projects, and modifying it according to the evolution of their personal interests and values.” [Castells, 2009, p. 120].

The culture of networked individualism finds its platform of choice in the diverse universe of mass self-communication: the Internet, wireless communication, online games, and digital networks of cultural production, remixing and distribution. The Internet is a communication network, and as such hit is also an instrument for the diffusion of consumerism and global entertainment, of cosmopolitanism, and of multiculturalism. But the culture of networked individualism can find its best form of expression in a communication system characterized by autonomy, horizontal networking, interactivity, and the recombination of content under the initiative of the individual and his/her networks.” [Castells, 2009, p.125].

## Conclusion

All things considered, the symbolic reality developed by the online social networks has reconfigured the interpretative perspectives on space and human interaction. Moreover, the new technological opportunities have gradually relativized the cultural and national frames of understanding and approaching alterity – the relationship between *I* and the *others* is no longer seen as an antinomy, but as a symbiosis of organic components. At this level, one of the main catalysts is represented by convergence in the sense of self-accommodation.

The virtual space has become the uncensored domain where different identities interact and share similar opinions, thoughts, feelings, independent

of the social, cultural, political, religious constraints imposed by the real world. The virtual groups offers them the unique possibility to explore their inner world and the boundless wide world simultaneously, offers them the unprecedented chance of defying the limitations of the given social and cultural ground through the infinite range of possibilities provided by the potentiality of the communication accommodation.

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