Theories of Communication

Communication accommodation theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) is a theory of communication developed by Howard Giles. This theory concerns "(1) the behavioral changes that people make to attune their communication to their partner, (2) the extent to which people perceive their partner as appropriately attuning to them."[1] The basis of the theory lies in the idea that people adjust (or accommodate) their style of speech to one another. Doing this helps the message sender gain approval from the receiver, increases efficiency in communication between both parties, and helps the sender maintain a positive social identity. This theory is concerned with the links between language, context, and identity. [2][3] It focuses on both the intergroup and interpersonal factors that lead to accommodation, as well as the ways that power, macro and micro-context concerns affect communication behaviors.[3] Accommodation is usually considered to be between the message sender and the message receiver, but the communicator also often accommodates to a larger audience-either a group of people that are watching the interaction or society in general.

"Communication accommodation theorists focus on the patterns of convergence and divergence of communication behaviors, particularly as they relate to people's goals for social approval, communication efficiency, and identity".[4] "Convergence" refers to strategies through which individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviors to reduce these social differences.[5] Meanwhile, "divergence" refers to the instances in which individuals accentuate the speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and their interlocutors.[5] The speech accommodation theory was developed to demonstrate all of the value of social psychological concepts to understanding the dynamics of speech.[5] It sought to explain "... the motivations underlying certain shifts in people's speech styles during social encounters and some of the social consequences arising from them."[3]Particularly, it focused on the cognitive and affective processes underlying individuals' convergence and divergence through speech. The communication accommodation theory has broadened this theory to include not only speech but also the "non-verbal and discursive dimensions of social interaction".[5] CAT has also created a different perspective from other research in language and social interaction—and communication more generally—that focuses on either interpersonal or intergroup communication.[4]

Social psychology and social identity theory[edit]

Like speech accommodation theory, communication accommodation theory continues to draw from social psychology, particularly from four main socio-psychology theories: similarity-attraction, social exchange, causal attribution and intergroup distinctiveness. These theories help to explain why speakers seek to converge or diverge from the language, dialect, accent and behavior of their interlocutors. CAT also relies heavily in social identity theory. This latter theory argues that a person's self-concept comprises a personal identity and a social identity, and that this social identity is based in comparisons people make between in-groups (groups they belong to) and out-groups (groups they do not belong

to).[6] According to social identity theory, people strive to maintain a positive social identity by either joining groups where they feel more comfortable or making a more positive experience of belonging to the groups they already belong to. Since speech is a way to express group membership, people adopt convergence or divergence in communication to "signal a salient group distinctiveness, so as to reinforce a social identity".[3] Communication accommodation thus, becomes a tool to emphasize group distinctiveness in a positive way, and strengthen the individual's social identity. There are four main socio-psychological theories:

Similarity-attraction

Similarity-attraction is one of the biggest contributors to the theory of Communication Accommodation. The similarity-attraction theory posits that "The more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to those of others, the more likely it is for them to be attracted to us."[7] Convergence through verbal and non-verbal communication is one of the mechanisms that we can use to become more similar to others, increasing their attraction towards us.[7] For this reason, it can be said that one of the factors that leads individuals to use convergence is a desire to obtain social approval from their interlocutor.[8] It could hence be concluded that "the greater one's need for social approval, the greater will be one's tendency to converge".[7] Natalé (1975), for instance, has found that speakers with high needs for approval converge more to another's vocal intensity and pause length than those with low needs for approval.[8] An individual on the receiving end of high level of accommodation is likely to develop a greater sense of self-esteem and satisfaction than being a receiver of low accommodation.

Social exchange process

The social exchange process theory "... states that prior to acting, we attempt to assess the rewards and costs of alternate courses of action",[8] and that we tend to choose whatever course of action will bring greater rewards and less costs. The Social Exchange Theory is a theory that looks at how people evaluate their relationships. Throughout the process of evaluating relationships, individuals want to feel as if they are receiving more from the relationship than they are expending within the relationship. In other words, people like to be in relationships where the rewards outweigh the costs. Although most often convergence can bring forth rewards, there are some occasions when it can also bring forth costs such as "increased effort to converge, a loss of perceived integrity and personal (and sometimes group) identity".[7] Hence, when choosing whether or not to use convergence, people assess these costs and rewards.[7]

Causal attribution process

The causal attribution theory "[s]uggests that we interpret other people's behavior, and evaluate the individual themselves, in terms of the motivations and intentions that we attribute as the cause of their behavior"[8] It applies to convergence in that convergence might be viewed positively or negatively depending on the causes we attribute to it: "Although interpersonal convergence is generally favorably received, and non-convergence generally unfavorably received, the extent to which this holds true will undoubtedly be influenced by the listeners attributions of the speaker's intent."[7] Giles and Smith provide the example of an experiment that they conducted amongst French and English speaking

Canadians to illustrate this. In this experiment, when individuals believed that the person from the different group used language convergence to reduce cultural barriers, they evaluated it more positively than when they attributed it to the pressures of the situation. "When French Canadian listeners attributed an English Canadian's convergence to French as due to his desire to break down cultural barriers, the shift was viewed favorably. However, when this same behavior was attributed to pressures in the situation forcing the other to converge, positive feelings were not so strongly evoked."[8]

Intergroup distinctiveness

The process of intergroup distinctiveness, as theorized by Tajfel argues, "... when members of different groups are in contact, they compare themselves on dimensions that are important to them, such as personal attributes, abilities, material possessions and so forth."[8] In these "intergroup social comparisons" individuals seek to find ways to make themselves positively distinct from the out-group to enhance their social identity.[7] Because speech style and language is an important factor in defining social groups, divergence in speech style or language is often used to maintain intergroup distinctiveness and differentiate from the out-group, especially when group membership is a salient issue or the individual's identity and group membership is being threatened.[8]

Components

Further research conducted by Gallois et al. in 1995 has expanded the theory to include 17 propositions that influence these processes of convergence and divergence. They are categorized into four main components: the *sociohistorical context*, *the communicators' accommodative orientation*, the *immediate situation* and *evaluation and future intentions*.[14] These components are essential to Communication accommodation Theory and affect the course and outcome of intercultural conversations.

Accommodative orientation

Accommodative orientation refers to the communicator's "... tendencies to perceive encounters with out group members in interpersonal terms, intergroup terms, or a combination of the two".[14] There are three factors that are crucial to accommodative orientations: (1) "intrapersonal factors" (e.g. personality of the speakers), (2) "intergroup factors" (e.g. communicators' feelings toward outgroups), and (3) "initial orientations" (e.g., perceived potential for conflict).[14] Issues that influence this last factor include: collectivistic culture context or whether the culture is collectivistic or individualistic; distressing history of interaction, the possible tensions that exist between groups due to past interactions; stereotypes; norms for treatment of groups; and high group solidarity/ high group dependence, how dependent the person's self-worth is in the group.[15]

Immediate situation

The immediate situation refers to the moment when the actual communication takes place. It is shaped by five interrelated aspects: (1) *sociopsychological states*, (2) *goals and addressee focus* (e.g., motivations and goals for the encounter), (3) *sociolinguistic strategies* (e.g., convergence or divergence), (4) *behavior and tactics* (e.g., topic, accent) and (5) *labeling and attributions*.[14]

Evaluation and future intentions

This aspect 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.[14]

In action

In 1991, Giles, Coupland, and Coupland expressed the belief that a "more qualitative perspective" would be necessary to get more diverse and clarifying explanations of the behaviors presented within varying contexts. They referred to this as "the applied perspective" that showed accommodation theory as a vital part of day-to-day activity as opposed to solely being a theoretical construct. They sought to "demonstrate how the core concepts and relationships invoked by accommodation theory are available for addressing altogether pragmatic concerns".[5] For Giles, Coupland, and Coupland, these "pragmatic concerns" were extremely varied in nature.

Criticisms

The Communication Accommodation Theory has obtained scholarly criticism by the three scholars Judee Burgon, Leesa Dillman, and Lesa Stern. These scholars question the "convergence-divergence frame... [and] they believe that conversations are too complex to be reduced simply to the processes of the Communication Accommodation theory. They also challenge the notion that people's accommodation can be explained by just the practice of [convergence-divergence]".[16] Questions asked by the scholars were: "what occurs if people both converge and diverge in conversations, are there consequences to the speaker, the listener, is there an influence if race or ethnicity is played in the process?".[16] It causes conflicts between communicators because the theory relies too heavily on a rational way of communicating. Sometimes we as people do not have a rational way of thinking and this becomes a problem when communicating.

Application

The Communication Accommodation theory focuses "on the role of conversations in our lives".[16] It has been incorporated into "the mass media (Bell, 1991), with families (Fox, 1999), with Chinese students (Hornsey and Gallois, 1998), with elderly (Harwood, 2002), on the job (McCroskey and Richmond, 2000), in interviews (Willemyns, Gallois, Callan, and Pittam, 1997), and even with messages left on telephone answering machines (Buzzanell, Burrell, Stafford, and Berkowitz, 1996)".[16] The theory tends to be heuristic because it is "expansive enough to be complete, and has been supported by research from diverse authors". "The theory's core processes of convergence and divergence make it relatively easy to understand, underscoring the simplicity of the theory".[16]