



Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

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What is it?

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was designed to explain how and why people reduce and magnify communicative differences among themselves as well as the social consequences of so doing. Over the years, it has been elaborated and refined many times. Major accommodative strategies include converging toward or diverging away from another. These can be achieved by a host of verbal and nonverbal means, including language, syntactic and word choices and modifying one's speech rate, pitch, gestures and accent. Generally (as many cognitive and affective functions are involved), people converge towards those whom they like, respect or have power, while they nonaccommodate, and even diverge, to underscore the importance of their personal or social identities to others. Indeed, it is possible to converge on some communicative features while, simultaneously, diverging on others. Other accommodative moves include attuning to others' conversational needs and knowledge, under- and over-accommodating. CAT claims people will accommodate to where they *believe* others to be rather than to where are objectively.

Who uses the concept?

Originating out of social psychology, CAT-inspired studies now appear in an array of disciplines with a wide variety of methodologies in many applied contexts. It has been invoked in numerous cultures and languages, with respect to speaking, writing, signing and via electronic forms of communication. A diverse set of satellite theories has been spawned to understand, for example, intergenerational contact, ethnic relations, bilingualism, and tourism.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Accommodative processes are fundamental to unpacking the dynamics of intercultural competence and dialogue. CAT does so with due attention to the perceived histories and group structures in which intercultural dialogue is embedded and emphasizes that being the recipient of nonaccommodativeness might not have anything to do with individuals, but is rather a statement about group membership.

What work remains?

Much, as ever, remains to be done. For example, can we predict more precisely what communicative features will be converged to, and when? How do patterns of accommodation/nonaccommodation play out sequentially in intercultural dialogue? How do conversationalists accommodate when they each have multiple cultural identities? What are optimal rates and magnitudes of accommodation?

Resources

- Giles, H., Linz, D., Bonilla, D., & Gomez, M. L. (2012). Police stops of and interactions with Latino and White (Non-Latino) drivers: Extensive policing and communication accommodation. *Communication Monographs*, 79, 407-427.
- Soliz, J., & Giles, H. (2014). Relational and identity processes in communication: A contextual and meta-analytical review of Communication Accommodation Theory. In E. Cohen (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* 38, 106-143. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.