COURSE:  Interpersonal Communication 20001-001-201310

INSTRUCTOR:  Roxanne Hall-Basel

COURSE COMPLETED:  Spring 2013

ASSIGNMENT TITLE:  Individual Theory Paper – Communication Accommodation

ASSIGNMENT PROJECT DESCRIPTION:  For this assignment, I was required to write a 5-7 page paper about a Communication theory of my choosing. The purpose of this paper was to review at least 3 research studies about the theory.

REFLECTION:  I chose to include this paper because I still find Communication Accommodation to be extremely fascinating. I feel that the effort I put into this assignment shows my passion for further knowledge in this theory as well as similar concepts. Being aware of how, why, and when for understanding accommodation is important for individual’s personal and professional life.

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.” -Tony Robbins
Individual Theory Paper: Communication Accommodation

Lauren Vassallo

Kent State University

May, 1 2013
Have you ever wondered about why you naturally talk a certain way to one person and then completely change the way you talk to a different person? In communication studies, there are many different theories that help us understand why we act the way we do in situations. Communication Accommodation Theory can directly relate and provide an explanation when assessing the simple, yet common scenario above. The theory can also help us understand how effectively we chose to speak with one another. I chose Communication Accommodation Theory because I find it to be one of the more fascinating communication theories and I’ve been very intrigued with the topic since I was first introduced to it in Communication Theory.

According to our textbook, Interpersonal Communication, Accommodation Theory or is shorten as CAT is to make behavioral adjustments during conversation. (Trenhom and Jensen, pg. 93.) The textbook didn’t go into grave detail but did however, mention the term that goes hand-in-hand with CAT; convergence. Convergence is generally defined as when people begin to speak in similar ways during a conversation, specifically with each individual’s speech rate, utterance length, vocal intensity, self-disclosure, and jokes. Another way of thinking about this theory is to think about the way we use language for communication, and how we’re also influenced and affected by the way others speak.

Communication Accommodation is a theory of communication developed by Howard Giles. Another more in depth definition of CAT argues when people interact they adjust their speech, their vocal patterns and their gestures, to accommodate to others”. (Turner & West, 2010) The theory also explores why people emphasize or minimalize the social differences between themselves through verbal and nonverbal communication. (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles,
An example of social differences would be individuals in different social classes, and how status may affect how we choose to speak to someone else. For example, you may naturally speak down to someone who is younger than you or doesn’t seem to have a college background. In the same respect, you may feel intimidated or shy around someone who you feel is above you. According to this theory, we will change our communication style with different people in our lives: Strangers, acquaintances, friends, co-workers, family members, etc. Essentially you may adjust and change the way you talk to each of them.

There are a several main assumptions of CAT and the first one is: Speech and behavioral similarities and dissimilarities exist in all conversations. The second: The manner in which we perceive the speech and behaviors of another person will determine how we evaluate a conversation. The third: Language and behaviors impart information about social status and group belonging. And lastly: Accommodation varies in its degree of appropriateness, and norms guide the accommodation process. (louisville.edu) All these assumptions explain why and how we interpret messages, react and respond to them, as well as adapt our communication (or fail to adapt) to others within our culture and other cultures.

Some predictions of CAT include: Accommodation occurs over time and predicts that when status differences exist, they are reflected in the asymmetry of accommodation; the lower status person accommodate to the person of high status. (Giles et al., 1987) Essentially, we can predict that individuals will change the way talk to someone they consider to be above them, such as a manager, physician, authority of law, etc. I can also predict that if an individual fails to accommodate to a person of higher status, their credibility is lost and they most likely are not an effective communicator. Another prediction of CAT is noted in several different articles and researchers mention how individual’s non-verbals will play a part in accommodation and how it
can be predicted based on the Similarity-Attraction Theory. This theory posits that people like and are attracted to others who are similar, rather than dissimilar, to themselves; "birds of a feather," the adage goes, "flock together." (what-when-how.com) Therefore, it can be predicted that individuals who are similar or are attracted to one another, will mimic each other with hand gestures, body language, and behavior.

The first article I found was “A Nonverbal Signal in Voices of Interview Partners Effectively Predicts Communication Accommodation and Social Status Perceptions”. This study was done to provide findings of how people accommodate their communication style, specifically when it comes to social status. The study that was done by Stanford W. Gregory, Jr. and Stephen Webster, shows how analysis from a data set taken from recordings of 25 dyadic (two people) interviews between talk show host Larry King and his guests (on the CNN Larry King Live talk show) can produce accurate discriminations between higher and lower status guests based on how they accommodation their speech to one another.

One of the hypothesis that is the most important to mention in relation to CAT, is that researchers predicted Larry King would accommodate is speech interview partners of high status (such as political candidates, well-known entertainers, etc.) The results of the study did conclude that people of high status are more capable than others of exerting their will, and others must accommodate to these individuals so as to create and maintain convergence and an optimal communication environment. (Gregory & Webster, 1996) They found that Mr. Larry King did indeed accommodate to high-status guests and that lower status guests tend to accommodate to him but with less gusto or enthusiasm. Yes, even Larry King, accommodates is communication style!
The second article I found was The Effects of Speech Rate Similarity on Compliance: Application of Communication Theory. The researchers, David Buller and R. Kelly Aune tested the effects of speaker speech rate on compliance for a request for help. They observed nine different speech rates (ranging from excessively slow speech rate to unacceptably fast), and four of them would be used to request helps. They predicted that a communicator’s speech rate and to another individuals, increased attraction level, thus created more obligation to comply with someone who asked for help. The researchers reasoned in their second hypothesis that when a speaker adopted a speech rate similar to the listener’s speech rate, higher intimacy and immediacy interpretations would result than when the speaker adopted a dissimilar speech rate. (Buller & Aune, 1989) As predicted, there was a correlation with speech rate and social attraction, but did not directly affect preferences. Results from the speech-rate-preference test showed that actual speech-rate similarity did not directly affect rate preferences. Instead, perceived similarity appeared to be the mediating variable. In addition, perceived similarity was strongly associated with more favorable relational interpretations of the compliance message. (Buller et, an., 1989)

The third article I found on CAT is called: When I Call You Up and You’re Not There: Application of Communication Accommodation Theory to Telephone Answering Messages. Interesting enough, these researchers wanted to explore when a person leaves a message on an answering machine, if they chose talk in script (structured) or relational (intimacy cues). They recruited one hundred twenty-nine participants from two upper level communication courses from a small university in the South. This was somewhat of a longitudinal study spanning about one year and involved a pretesting survey (asked about their attitudes towards new technology) and following the pretest, they recorded each participant while leaving a messages to different
people in their lives. The results are as follows: “After comparing recorded answering machine messages a caller messages, we found that callers exhibited greater convergence to relational than structural aspects. Both female and male callers converged with levels of immediacy.” (Buzzanell, Burrell, Stafford, Berkowitz, 1996) What I took from this finding is that people will accommodate their speech to more sound less scripted while leaving voicemails, because we notice we are more likely to receive a call back.
References


comm.louisville.edu/~al/comm520/notes/accommodation.ppt