

ACCOMODATION IN CROSSLANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS*

CARL JAMES

University College, Bangor

The term "linguistic accommodation" refers to the tendency we have as speakers to try to make our speech either more or less like that of our interlocutors: if we emphasise our linguistic distinctiveness from that of our interlocutor we speak of *divergence*, while attempts to approximate linguistically to the speech characteristics of our conversational partner are known as *convergence*. Thus *speech accommodation theory* (SAT) sets out to outline "...a social psychological framework ...which will allow us to specify the social conditions under which the accentuation and attenuation of ethnic speech markers may occur". (Giles, 1979:267). The two concepts receive finer definitions in Giles' later work (Beebe & Giles, 1984:7): *divergence* is there defined as "the manner by which speakers accentuate vocal differences between themselves and others", while its converse is described as "...a linguistic strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's speech by means of a wide range of linguistic factors". To put it at its simplest, "A shift in speech style toward that of another is termed convergence, whereas a shift away from the other's style of speech represents divergence". (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977).

Originally a strand of social psychology, SAT research limited itself to contacts between speakers of the same language, the independent variable being social class or dialect. Then attention spread to the study of "fully established bilinguals who code-switched from one language to another" (ibid. 16). What both of these types of encounter have in common is that the participants studied are assumed to have *roughly equal* competences in the language or languages used. A still later development of SAT turned our

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attention to encounters between individuals with command over different repertoires within one language, such as one would expect to find in most *second language* settings, that is settings where there are speakers of (usually) English as their *first* language interacting with people for whom English is a *second* language. This development marks the recognition of shared interest between the two fields of SAT and second language acquisition (SLA) research. The purposes of this paper are twofold: first, to explore in some more detail the areas of overlap between SAT and SLA: second, to put the model to the test by using it to explain in terms of accommodation some attested instances of speech behaviour that occur in second and foreign language encounters.

The first point to emphasise about an encounter between a native speaker (NS) and a learner (LNR) of a language is its *inequality*: by this I mean that the NS is at a great advantage over the LNR by virtue of his greater competence in the language. The NS enjoys what Beebe & Giles (op. cit.: 19) call "linguistic status" or "automatic status accorded an interlocutor with higher proficiency". They go on to point out that this source of status is not just open to NSs but also to an advanced LNR compared to a less advanced. The paradigm must extend of course to the teacher, part of whose status in the classroom must derive in large part from his or her nativeness (if (s) he is a NS teacher) or greater nativeness if a teacher who has learned the language herself: this nativeness will of course be reflected in the teacher's fluency and accuracy in the FL and perhaps also by her *awareness* of its systems. Any lack of fluency might be compensated for by a heightened awareness of structure and function of the FL.

A second point, arising from the *inequality* of SL encounters, whether in the host community or in the classroom, is that it is not enough for the LNR to be well-disposed to accommodate: (s)he must also be in command of the requisite linguistic skills or competence to be able to accomplish that accommodation. This "tension between limitations in *ability* to converge toward a native speaker interlocutor and *motivation* to converge" (Beebe & Giles, *ibid*: 23) raises particular problems, not only for the learner as practitioner of accommodation, but also for the theory to describe. One way in which the problem has been solved is by using two separate labels: 'psychological' accommodation, which implies being well-disposed toward someone and willing to converge, is distinct from 'linguistic' accommodation, which means having the means to do what one wants to do. Again, I hope to show presently that this dichotomy is not as simple as it appears on the surface.

The third issue is that of the directionality, in status terms, of the attempted (or succeeded) accommodation. That the accommodation can be positively orientated i.e. be aimed at convergence, or alternatively be negatively biased, i.e. aimed at divergence, is one (horizontal) dimension for variation. Another

(vertical) dimension is status-based: one can accommodate either *upward* if one is a member of the low-status language or ethnic group, or one can accommodate *downward* if one is the interlocutor from the higher-status language community. If we now combine these two sets of variables, we shall identify FOUR possible canonical types of accommodation in unequal crosslinguistic encounters.

LEARNER	NATIVE SPEAKER
UPWARD CONVERGENCE (Interlanguage)	DOWNWARD CONVERGENCE (Foreigner Talk)
DOWNWARD DIVERGENCE (Pidgin)	UPWARD DIVERGENCE (Intergroup Distinctiveness)

FIGURE 1

Let us consider these modes of accommodation in some detail, attempting at the same time to cite some familiar instances of each.

1. *Upward Convergence (U.C.)*: this is the ideal assumed for SLA by teachers as well as by conquerors and other would-be language imperialists. Learners, it is hoped, will be 'motivated' to aspire to mastery of the new language. Teachers have traditionally laid stress on the cultural and integrative advantages of learning the FL. The degree of linguistic convergence thus came to be equated with the learner's level of FL attainment. At the same time, it remains possible, at least in theory, for the convergence to be limited to its linguistics manifestations: you do not necessarily have to want to be like the French or Spanish or English as a prerequisite for speaking their languages well.

2. *Downward Divergence (D.D.)*: Giles (1979: 274) has D.D. in mind when he refers to "the subordinate group's use of ethnic speech markers in the outgroup tongue *with which it is fluent*". The italicised part of this statement indicates that Giles has linguistically equally competent groups in mind, whereas we are focussing on unequal encounters of course. D.D. on the part of the second or foreign language learner could mean two things:

a) The kind of backsliding to a relatively pidginised version of the Interlanguage that many low-status immigrants exhibit. A case in point is Zoila, an immigrant Guatemalan house-cleaner in New York, whose English is highly pidginised, as the following extract from her spontaneous speech shows:

"I'M ...hear and put more attention the big words. You know and ...something 'house' is the "casa" for me. And esses and little words is no too important for me"

b) Allowing the intrusion of many features associated with native-language interference, emphasising thus one's native-language accentedness (on all levels of language, not just the phonological). This case could be interpreted in terms of Krashen's (1981) Monitor Model: the kind of learner he labels as the 'Monitor underuser', someone who seems to be nonchalant about the amount of NL interference in his IL, someone who uses what Krashen calls the 'LI plus Monitor mode' of SL production without bothering to edit out traces of NL interference.

3. *Downward Convergence (D.C.)*: Where the NS, the knower or the teacher adjusts the complexity of her speech so as to render it more easily processable by the LNR we can speak of *Foreigner Talk* or of *Teacher Talk*, both of these being examples of a whole range of 'reducer codes' which have been reasonably well described by applied linguists. (Ferguson, 1975; Henzl, 1979). It is noteworthy that in the applied linguistics literature the use of these codes has been interpreted in terms of cognitive classification: the NS has been seen as providing input that is in tune with the learner's own interlanguage grammar. In SAT accounts on the other hand, the emphasis has been on affective and attitudinal explanations: according to this view. NSs are out to demonstrate to the LNR that his interlanguage is a system worthy of respect even of emulation: and as if to prove this last point the NS proceeds to incorporate some of the features of the LNR's language into his own.

4. *Upward Divergence (U.D.)*: This is the reaction, according to Beebe & Giles (1984: 14), when the 'outgroup', or in other terms the NS group, feels that the LNR is making such headway as to present a threat to the distinctiveness of the NS group's identity. The reaction on the part of the NS group is to accentuate its difference from the aspiring LNR group. Of course this is not a situation which would be a cause for concern with many foreign language teachers! But there are certainly expatriate communities that cultivate conservative and eccentric forms of their 'home' language in order to underline their distinctiveness. Giles & Byrne (1982: 22) also draw attention to such a form of divergence on the part of outgroup speakers wishing to set themselves off from foreign learners. One way in which this might be accomplished is for the NS group to refuse to converge through the use of foreigner talk and instead to resort to a local accent or to a low redundancy speech style full of in-group allusions which they assume to be beyond the LNR's repertoire. Trudgill has suggested that even in monolingual communities, speakers of prestige dialects attempt at times to emphasise their dialect exclusivity: evidence for this exist in the form of their occasionally overemphasising and overextending one of its key features. The result is *hyperdialectism*, an example of this being the 'intrusive' phonetic /r/ used in rhotic dialect areas such as Shropshire, where systematically

erroneous pronunciations such as (la:rst/ for 'last' can be heard. (Trudgill, 1986: 75).

The rather elegant four-cell scheme we have so far developed raises two important questions about accommodation in FL/SL unequal encounters with native speakers. The two questions are:

i) Whether the full story of accommodation is told by the four-cell model we have developed, and ii) Whether participants in FL/SL encounters always achieve what they think they are aiming to achieve, or whether, like native speakers who produce hyperdialectism, they can commit errors of accommodation.

Extending the four-cell model: Note that of these four options, two (1 and 2) appear to be open to LNRs while the other two (3 and 4) are options for NSs. Indeed we have indicated this apparent restriction in Figure 1. However, we need to ask whether it is possible for NSs to practise Upward Convergence and Downward Divergence (NSUC and NSDD), and conversely whether the scope for LNRs to indulge in Downward Convergence and Upward Divergence (LDC and LUD). If these options do exist, we shall be able to expand our model to the eight-cell matrix shown in Figure 2:

LEARNER		NATIVE SPEAKER	
TYPE	Example	TYPE	Example
L.U.C.	Interlanguage	N.S.U.C.	Native talking posh (xenophilia?)
L.D.C.	Feigned incompetence	N.S.D.C.	Foreigner talk.
L.U.D.	Babu	N.S.U.D.	Exclusivity
L.D.D.	Pidgin	N.S.D.D.	Derogatory hyper-pidgin.

FIGURE 2

Let us consider possible realisations of the four conditions so far unaccounted for. I shall presently pay greater attention to the two outstanding Learner behaviours, but shall first briefly suggest examples of the remaining two NS types:

1. *Native Speaker Upward Convergence*: This comes about when a non-standard dialect NS comes into contact with a LNR who speaks the prestige dialect of the former's language. The NS talks 'posh' to a NNS whom he assumes to be of high status by virtue of his command of the prestige dialect.

2. *Native Speaker Downward Divergence*: Here the NS sets out to exaggerate features of the NNS's interlanguage (which may be a pidgin) in order to signal his derision and contempt. We might call the style thus created a *hyper-pidgin*.

3. *Learner Upward Divergence*: realisations of this condition or 'strategy' would be those cases where learners would appear to outperform NSs. Perhaps Agatha Christie had such alienating overperfection in mind when she wrote:

"Nobody, I thought, could be more English ...I suddenly wondered if, in fact, she was or indeed could be, as English as she looked. Does the real thing ever have the perfection of a stage performance?"

A.Christie: *Crooked House*, Ch.I.

Such overperfection can manifest itself as *babu* also. Babu has been described by Widdowson (1979) as a form of overelaborate, ostentatious English that was spoken by the Anglo-Indian petty clerk at the time of the Raj. It was resorted to in order to underline his distinctiveness from the rank and file of SL speaking Indians, to symbolise his affiliations with the colonial masters, the English. The outcome is absurd, of course, as the babu speaker outdoes the English NS in elaborateness: it is a caricature of the assumed real object (authentic NS English).

Notice now that an added complication has crept into the picture: in the cases of accommodation we have dealt with so far, the interaction has been neatly bilateral, involving LNR and NS. Babu, as we have diagnosed it, implies a triilateral situation: indigenous populace, Anglo-Indian clerk and English NS. The clerk's speech style is simultaneously alienating him from the populace (U.D.), and, he believes, categorising him up with the English NSs (U.C.). There is in all of this however a strong element of self-deception, because the NS is not likely to be impressed by babu. He will easily spot its features of gross exaggeration, and the speech style will become an ethnic marker. What the clerk therefore interprets as Upward Convergence is in objective reality Divergent, since the clerk is unwittingly cultivating a psycholinguistic distinctness between himself and the NS group.

This brings us to our second concern: whether in their accommodative speech behaviour errors of judgement are committed. We have referred to babu as self-deception, which is clearly one sort of error. In similar vein Platt & Weber (1984) exemplify some further miscarriages of attempted accom-

modation. They cite the case of Singaporean hotel staff attempting to be courteous to guests by adopting the conventional courtesy speech formulas of Standard International English. However, these attempts at courtesy resulted in pragmalinguistic failure because the formulae were used in the wrong contexts and with the wrong intonations. What was meant to be integrating was received as abrasive, leading Platt & Weber to claim as a generalisation that "Genuine attempts at convergence are at times mistaken for coolness and standoffishness" (ibid.:135). We might add that such forms of babu or *overaccommodation* are not limited to speech performance in face-to-face encounters. Shaughnessy (1977) in a classic study of the problems encountered by people learning to write, observed a widespread tendency to resort to an excessively formal and verbose style for the *written* medium, a "...self-conscious emulation of the formal style, heavy with long words and stiff with the set expressions and elaborations of that style". (Shaughnessy, op. cit.: 194) Individuals, it seems, can be in awe not only of other individuals, but of some codes of language themselves: in both cases a common error is to over-upwardly converge, the result of this excess being the opposite of that desired, namely upward divergence.

Notice that, following Austin (1962), I have referred to such errors of language use as 'miscarriages'. A more general label would be *Infelicities*, in line with Austin's suggestion that we should "...call the doctrine of the things that be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of *Infelicities*", (Austin, 1962:14). It would be interesting to see whether accommodative infelicities fall into the subcategories of misexecutions, insincerities and so on suggested by Austin.

4. *Learner Downward Convergence* is the natural mirror-image of babu overaccommodation, which we have just been considering. While downward convergence *by the NS*, in the form of foreigner talk of one of its congeners is easily conceived, it might appear paradoxical at first sight to talk of 'downward convergence' on the part of the *learner*. What we have in mind when we think of L.D.C. is a learner regressing toward his NL, allowing all sorts of NL interference forms and other markers of his limited competence to manifest themselves in his foreign language performance and all this with the purpose of signalling to his NS interlocutor a willingness to converge. How can this apparent paradox be resolved?

Anecdotally, I can cite two examples of my own indulgence in this form of voluntary backsliding. The first was when I spent some months living in Portugal. At one time my residence visa had expired and I was consequently an illegal resident. I should not have crossed the frontier into Spain without first renewing the visa: but I did, and I was duly apprehended on my crossing and

asked to explain myself. Although I spoke Portuguese reasonably well, and although it was clear to the immigration officials that I was an alien (they had my passport in their hand!) I made a subconscious decision to emphasise my non-Portugueseness and to emphasise my Englishness. I in fact forced myself to speak Portuguese with the most grotesque British English accent I could muster and must have sounded not unlike the former Prime Minister Mr Edward Heath speaking French at the time of Britain's accession to the E.E.C. The second instance was more recent and in a way more mysterious: invited to the home of a Brazilian family, it was (wrongly) assumed that I spoke no Portuguese, and the English-speaking members of the family had been recruited to make me feel as comfortable as possible in this alien environment. They had obviously invested a lot of face in agreeing to use English with me and I didn't wish to shatter their image or self image: I regressed and pretended to speak only very minimal Portuguese.

Let me attempt now to interpret my behaviour on these two occasions in terms of SAT. First, in each case I was clearly performing in the FL 'below par', or at a level falling short of my real competence. It was a level of competence I had presumably passed through some years earlier, when I was a less 'advanced' learner: it would be true to say therefore that these were cases of *resimplification* Hymes (1985), in a general discussion of the notion of linguistic competence and an update on his well-known work on *communicative competence*, refers to M. Saville-Troike's *The Ethnography of Communication* (1982) especially her use of the term "communicative incompetence". He comments particularly on the aptness of this notion "...with regard to cases in which it is appropriate or advantageous to appear not fully competent" (Hymes, op. cit.: 17). Assuming that I was in neither situation not being altruistic but seeking to win approval, why should I have resorted to this show of incompetence?

In terms of accommodation, we must first decide whether these were cases of divergence or of convergence: was I aiming to emphasise the differences or the similarities between myself and the native speakers of Portuguese? A number of explanations come to mind. One such is that my feigned incompetence, my insertion of linguistic incompetence signals, ran parallel to a visibly strenuous *attempt* to speak their language: perhaps I would get full marks for trying, even better marks than for having succeeded. In other words, apparently attempted convergence is a sign of willing cooperation, and might be more persuasive than achieved convergence. This account becomes even more plausible if we remind ourselves that I had been living for some months in Portugal prior to this frontier crisis: it would have been contradictory to have achieved fluent Portuguese and

at the same time not to have worked out how to get a visa. On the other hand, not knowing the language (the impression I wanted to convey) is wholly compatible with not knowing about the need to have a visa.

Not only should we speak here of feigned incompetence, but also of *feigned divergence* for this is what I was indeed indulging in. *Real* divergence would have involved switching into my native English, the usual recourse for most English people: but such a move would have been disadvantageous to me, given that I was in the border incident the guilty party. True, the switch to L1 would have placed me at a communicative advantage over the immigration official had an explanation in English been seen by myself to be a viable escape route. But the case was clear-cut: I was culpable: and had to throw myself on the mercy of the official. That is why I subconsciously opted for an altogether different strategy: that of presenting myself in as favourable a light as possible, as an individual who was eminently well-intentioned as far as the Portuguese was concerned. Consequently, I presented myself as a would-be, albeit struggling, *converger*.

We have already referred to cases of failed convergence reported by Platt & Weber (1984). In the course of their discussion of miscarried convergence attempts they make a brief reference to *attribution*, that is to the causes for such failures as perceived by the addressee: attribution is 'internal' if the failure is judged to be due to lack of effort. The reason why I feigned to be a struggling near-beginner was clearly to preempt the possibility of such internal attribution by the official concerned of my failure to speak good Portuguese. I must on no account be thought to be not even trying.

The final point to be made is about the positive status I enjoy as a speaker of English and through being perceived as such. There are long historical ties between Portugal and England, dating back to The Treaty of Windsor of 1386. Making it clear that I am British would be an additional way of securing a sympathetic hearing, but has nothing to do with accommodation.

The conclusions should be apparent. We have managed to elaborate and to exemplify with a fair degree of confidence eight types of accommodation involving native speakers and learners of a foreign language. We have also shown that it is necessary to look below the surface of appearances to explain some rather complex cases, in particular the case of *feigned downward divergence*, which we have dwelt upon. The main conclusion however is one for educators and for those teachers concerned with Language Awareness work in the classroom. The facets of accommodative behaviour as outlined in this paper would provide the framework for materials aimed at heightening pupils' awareness of the complexities of language in use.

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