

Sample Student

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Comm Theory

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Essay 2: Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory can be succinctly defined as: “Communication Accommodation Theory rests on the premise that when speakers interact, they modify their speech, their vocal patterns, and their gestures to accommodate others,” (West and Turner, 2014, p. 493). This theory, created by Howard Giles, focuses on how people interact with each other and how we try to effectively communicate with others. This theory, when played out, is usually an unconscious process that can be perceived as accommodating, rude, or even differentiating. This theory can play out in a number of ways and can be applied to every conversation from talking to parents, strangers, or even groups. It is a process that everyone takes part in, whether they are aware of it or not, and it is important to acknowledge it to better understand ourselves and others around us.

When performing Communication Accommodation Theory, usually one of three routes are taken: the convergence route, the divergence route, or the overaccommodation route. In the convergence route, adaptation to each other in the conversation is the norm. People will agree with each other, gloss over things that could cause problems, and try to match the other party’s style of speech in order to accommodate the other party and develop identity and status. In the divergence route, the complete opposite takes place. Instead of accommodating the other party, the fact that there are differences between the two people will be highlighted. It can be defined as, “When people diverge, they have simply chosen to dissociate themselves from the

communicator and the conversation,” (West and Turner, 2014, p. 503); this is not always a negative thing, however. For example, these differences can simply be used to highlight cultural, or other, differences, which can be respected by the other party. And, finally, in the overaccommodation route, people intend to be accommodating, but it is instead seen as being rude or inappropriate. For example, someone attempting to speak very slowly to a foreigner who knows some English or might have lived in America their whole life might be offended at being underestimated or stereotyped.

It is thought that the reason people do this is connected to their identity. This can be both how one sees themselves, and how they perceive how others see them. For example, in the accommodation route, when speaking to one’s parents, people are probably unlikely to say or do things that might seem disrespectful. The reason why goes back to identity: they do not want to be perceived as disrespectful or as a trouble maker by their parents. In other cases, communication accommodation might happen because someone wishes to be associated, or disassociated, with someone else or with a group of people. An example of this would be if someone goes to a card game tournament, and wishes to be perceived as a serious player, they will copy what others are doing in various ways. They may stand with a certain group of people, dress a certain way, and use lingo that only players of the game would know. Or, if they wish to disassociate with that group, they may seem annoyed by the events taking place, dress on the opposite spectrum, and when talking to others they will voice their displeasure at the event or show that they do not understand the event. This also portrays a person’s in-groups and out-groups; in-groups are groups that people feel they fit in at, while out-groups are groups in which people feel like they do not belong in. Based on our perception of what might be an in-group or out-group, the way we interact and decide to disassociate or associate through our communication with others might

change. With identity at stake, people will behave in ways that will affect how they are perceived, and this is why communication accommodation happens in every day conversations.

It is important to know that there are basic assumptions that come along with communication accommodation theory. Some of the basic assumptions would be that every conversation has a mixture of both accommodating and disassociating communication tactics, our perception of the other party helps to determine how we will react to them, things such as language and gestures helps us to establish social status and group belonging in a conversation, and that accommodating another party does not have a set guideline but rather flows along social norms (West and Turner, 2014, p. 496). Communication accommodation theory is simply a way to acknowledge how people change their communication tactics when talking from person to person or group, and as has been discussed, there are different ways that this happens. When talking to others, we judge them based on how they act and look or dress, decide whether we want to associate with them or not, and act based off of those assumptions to further our own identity.

An example of communication accommodation theory that I can attest to myself has to do with eating out at a restaurant. When it comes to speaker to host/hostesses and waiters/waitresses, I would say that I can be overaccommodating at times. For example, there is a restaurant simply called Tokyo and it serves Japanese dishes: everything from sashimi and sushi to bento boxes and fried rice. Naturally, Asian people work at this restaurant, and I have perceived them to not have the best skills in English. Not only that, but it can be rather loud in the restaurant, making hearing and understanding more difficult than it needs to be. Once when I walked inside to the restaurant, the hostess asked me how many people were in my group that needed to be seated. Immediately I began to judge her based off of how she carried herself and

how she spoke. Her English was not the best, and she seemed to talk with a little trouble when pronouncing words. Not only that, but I had heard her speaking in a foreign language before she acknowledged me and my company. I acted based off of these perceptions, and I ended up overaccommodating for the short-comings in communications I saw before me.

After she asked me how many people I had in my party, I said “Four” loud and clear, while also holding my hand up in the “4” formation and nodded my head. I had no bad intentions in doing this, I simply wanted to make her job easier on her by making sure she understood what I was saying the first time I said it. Looking back, however, I realize this could have been me being overaccommodating in the situation. The reasoning behind this is that, while she speaks another language, she obviously knows how to speak some English as well. Not only that, but she also works in a restaurant as a hostess, and at the very least knows how to speak and understand the English numbering system. At the time though, I did not think of these things, and made somewhat of a fool of myself by being overly loud and holding my hand up to show a physical representation of the number four. The hostess, however, did not seem to care much as she just said “ok”, nodded her head, and took us to our seat to be served. That is not the end of the story, though.

As our waiter came up to me and my party, he asked what we would like to drink. He asked my friend, and my friend replied, but it was clear the waiter did not understand what he was saying. After looking up from the menu, my friend tried to explain the soda to the waiter using large, probably unnecessary, hand gestures. The situation was uncomfortable, and probably would have been either way, but the fact that my friend was overaccommodating the waiter’s lack of understanding made it a little more awkward than it had to be. While overaccommodating someone has pure intentions of making things easier on the other party, the hostess and waiter in

the story were probably annoyed at me and my party's underestimation of their verbal skills and understanding and stereotyping them as foreign workers. As this happens unconsciously, it is not like me and my party intended to be rude or belittle the waiter and hostess. It was simply us trying to accommodate for the language and cultural barrier between us. Even if the overaccommodation did help in the end, the way that it was executed was in an over the top, rude manner.

In a different example, it is shown that overaccommodation can be a hindrance to the conversation. At a different Japanese restaurant, I wanted to order a number 2. When ordering, I once again put my hand up showing I wanted a number two, and I said what I wanted at the same time. This overcompensation ended up causing more confusion than clarity. The lady behind the register began to think I wanted two number twos, which was not the case. I began to clarify I only wanted one number two, "for myself, if that makes sense?" I added. The lady and I went back and forth for about thirty seconds before we both understood what the other person was trying to say. Once the conclusion was reached, the lady behind the register did a big sigh and stared off into the distance for a moment before continuing the conversation. Feeling rude and embarrassed, I apologized and we continued the exchange for the order and drink and so on. In both this case and the case beforehand, I had no ill intentions in doing this, but you'd think I would have learned from my first mistake.

The fact that I have done this more than once shows even more how unconscious of a process this is, as it simply happens and before you know it, you are in a pickle of your own making. I believe this stems from American culture, too. Most people want to be polite to others, so much so that we make a fool of ourselves and we seem to belittle the other party. Not only that, but being a foreigner or even looking or sounding like a foreigner in the United States has

seemed to have a negative connotation attached to it as well. Making quick judgements that fall into taught stereotypes ends up in unnecessary overaccommodations. While I may not have been purposely trying to be rude to those people, I was purposely trying to be polite and make the situation easier, rather than just letting it happen on its own.

These interactions that I have had show how important communication accommodation theory is in our everyday lives. In being aware of how we act interconnects with our identity, and how our perceptions and wants to be associated or disassociated with a group or person can effect our behavior, we can better ourselves. Or, at the very least, it helps us to understand why we do what we do, or why someone else might do what they do. In understanding others, we can become better communicators over all, and it might make life a little easier in thinking about the reasons behind someone's actions and not take them so personally. In understanding this theory, we understand more about each other and how we communicate to get a message across and why we send the messages the way we do.

A really good choice of topic, and excellent examples that help critique the theory. Generally well-written: some issues with phrasing, punctuation, word choice and use, and grammar.