

Patterns of Speech Accommodation and Lexical Formality in Telephone Conversations of Persian Native Speakers

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Abstract-Many people have a “telephone voice,” that is, people often adapt their speech to fit particular situations and to blend in with other speakers. The question is: Do we speak differently to different people? This possibility had been suggested by social psychologists in terms of a theory called *Accommodation Theory* (Giles, 1994). According to Holmes (1994) “... converging toward the speech of another person is usually a polite speech strategy ... and to deliberately choosing a language not used by one’s addressee is the clearest example of speech divergence” (pp.255-257). The present study aimed at investigating this common process in the course of everyday telephone conversations. In order to find contrasting varieties of Persian in different situations, a 28-year-old male subject was asked to record his everyday telephone conversations during a week using a cellphone which resulted in 50 short conversations. Using Joos’s model of formality styles in spoken English (1961), the researcher tried to explore 2 main aspects of the speaker’s lexical accommodation, namely *convergence to* or *divergence from* the addressee. The results suggest that the subject’s lexical choice, and subsequently, patterns of style vary interestingly according to his addressees in different conversations and have generalizable implications for other Persian speakers

Keywords-Speech Accommodation; Convergence Divergence; Lexical Formality

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles 1994; Gallois et al., 2005) explains some of the cognitive reasons for code-switching and other changes in speech as individuals seek to emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors. The theory argues that we accommodate linguistically towards the speech style, accent or dialect of our interlocutors, and we do this, to put it simply, to gain social approval. In later refinements of the theory, paralinguistic features (such as speech rate and fluency), and nonverbal patterns (such as eye contact, body movement, etc.) have been included in the analysis, and CAT makes a more fine-grained distinction between different types of (non)-accommodation, such as counter-accommodation and on intergroup characteristics, but it includes interpersonal features, integrates features of cultural variability, and over-

and under-accommodation and is called Social Accommodation recognizes the importance of power. The major theoretical reference for SAT/CAT is Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) which argues that individuals attempt to categorize the world into social groups (i.e. ingroups and outgroups). Sociolinguists argue that when speakers seek approval in a social situation they are likely to converge their speech to that of their interlocutor (Holmes, 1992) and this can include, but is not limited to, choice of language, accent, dialect and even paralinguistic features used in interaction. In contrast to convergence, speakers may also engage in divergent speech. In divergent speech individuals emphasize the social distance between themselves and their interlocutors by using some linguistic or even non-linguistic features characteristic of their own group. *Audience design* is the name Bell (1984) gives to his sociolinguistic model in which he proposes that linguistic style-shifting occurs in response to a speaker’s audience. He argues that speakers adjust their speech primarily towards that of their audience to express solidarity or intimacy with them, or away from their audience’s speech to express social distance. Both convergence and divergence are linguistic strategies whereby a member of a speech community minimizes or accentuates linguistic differences respectively. As we have always noticed, people may converge or adapt their speed of speech, the grammatical patterns, their intonation and the length of their utterances according to their addressees (Holmes, 1992). One important aspect of speech convergence is its dichotomous categorization. Suppose, for example, a man going for a job interview might decide to speak with a more prestigious accent in order to be better perceived by the interviewer thereby practicing *upward convergence*. On the other hand, the owner of a small firm might shift to a less prestigious accent while communicating with his laborers in order to reduce the feelings of difference in status between them, thus practicing *downward convergence*.

One important aspect in the concept of accommodation is the level of formality with which a speaker speaks in different social settings. It has been one of the most analyzed areas in the field and discusses the circumstances in which the use of language is determined by the immediate situation of the speakers. Stylistic variation results from the fact that different people may express themselves in different ways, and that the same person may express the

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same idea quite differently when addressing different people, using different modalities, or tackling different tasks. As Labove (1972) noted, "the most immediate problem to be solved in the attack on sociolinguistic structure is the quantification of the dimension of style" (p.245). This problem may be substantially simplified by focusing on just one aspect or dimension of style. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned of these aspects is *formality*. Almost everybody makes at least an intuitive distinction between formal and informal manners of expression. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1987) defines "formal speech" as follows: "The type of speech used in situations when the speaker is very careful about pronunciation and choice of word and sentence structure (p.109). This definition gives us an idea of what a formal situation is, but does not define formal speech as such; it just offers a hypothesis of what a speaker pays attention to in certain situations. A formal style will be characterized by detachment, precision, and "objectivity", but also rigidity and heaviness; an informal style will be much lighter in form, more flexible, direct, and involved, but correspondingly more subjective, less accurate and less informative. Writers, especially in language teaching, have often used the term "register/style" as a shorthand for formal/informal style (Halliday, 1978; Trudgill, 1992). Though style-shifting is not of main interest in the present study, it is to a great extent related to the purpose of this study which is to define situations where the level of formality of language varies according to the situation. As the situation and consequently the addressees vary, the speaker feels the need to speak in a different manner in order to maintain social interaction. These differences are very much worth noticing since they are part and parcel of our everyday social life. One interesting and revealing context of formality variations is a person's everyday natural "telephone conversations". Obvious as it may seem, each person has a "telephone voice", that is, he/she adapts his/her speech according to the immediate addressee(s). This is a good context for speech accommodation with special attention to formality variation with having it in mind that here the face to face interaction does not exist and speakers just hear each other. There have been several models proposed by linguists and sociolinguists for categorizing speech such as the one proposed by Quirk et al (1985) which divides language to 4 classifications namely from "formal to very informal, casual and familiar" over a spectrum. Not strangely, there is very little agreement as to how such spectrums of formality should be divided. In one prominent model, Joos (1961) describes five styles in spoken English:

- Frozen: Printed unchanging language.
- Formal: One-way participation with no interruption
- Consultative : Two-way participation with background information provided
- Casual: Used in in-group friends and acquaintances.
- Intimate: Non-public talk with private vocabulary.

Joos's model is relatively an old but efficient one and it has usually been used in investigating style-shifting patterns. Several studies have delved into the concept of linguistic

accommodation but non, so far, has been devoted to investigate this phenomenon in telephone conversations on the one hand and in Persian on the other. In the present study the researchers use Joos's criteria to investigate lexical formality of a Persian speaker's telephone conversations. This study provides further evidence of an explicit link between social situation and level of formality of the language used. Accordingly, a brief discussion of some of the recent and relevant literature on speech accommodation is in order before turning our attention to patterns of accommodation in telephone conversations

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his seminal paper, Ladegaard (2009) has investigated resistance and non-cooperation as a discursive strategy in authentic student-teacher dialogues which showed that non-cooperation and non-accommodation may be employed as the preferred discourse strategy, and that the aim of communication may be to miscommunicate rather than to communicate successfully.

In one of his studies, Bell (1984) focused on two radio stations which shared the same recording studio and some of the same individual newsreaders. One station attracted an audience from higher socioeconomic brackets and the other, a local community station, drew a broader range of listeners. His analysis of newsreaders' speech revealed that they spoke differently based on the intended radio audience. Bell concluded that the most plausible way of accounting for the variation was that the newscasters were attuning their speech to what they perceived to be the norms for the respective radio audiences.

Some linguists (e.g. Kirk, 1988; Gales, 1988; Blanche Benveniste, 1991) have tried to determine the formality level of a speech extract by considering the frequency of words and grammatical forms that are viewed as either "familiar" or "careful", such as "vous" vs. "tu" or the omission of the negative particle in sentence negation in French, and the frequency

of the auxiliary "be" in English. The underlying assumption of these approaches is that formal language is characterized by some special "attention to form" (Labove, 1972). Heylighen and Dewaele (!) have proposed an empirical measure for formality, called F-score, based on the average degree of deixis for the most important word classes. They showed that nouns, adjectives, articles and prepositions are more frequent in formal styles while pronouns, adverbs, verbs and interjections are more frequent in informal style.

A similar study was conducted by Coupland (1980, 1984, 1988) in Cardiff, in which he was eager to know whether we speak differently to different people. To this aim, he decided to find a situation in which one single speaker spoke to a wide range of interlocutors. Thus, he chose an assistant in a travel agency in the middle of Cardiff and asked her to participate in his study and she agreed to have a microphone located in front of her counter to record the conversations. The results confirmed Accommodation

Theory though Coupland was mainly interested in pronunciation aspects of the data.

In a similar vein, the present study seeks answer to the question of formality in natural conversations, but here, instead of natural face-to-face conversations, telephone conversations have been chosen since the discourse of such conversations is an unanalyzed area in the works concerning sociolinguistics. Moreover, a few studies in Persian if any at all, so far have explored such patterns in telephone conversations.

III. DATA

In order to gather the relevant data, a 28-year-old male subject was asked to record his telephone conversation during a week using his cell phone recording apparatus. He was chosen because his job as a mechanics engineer required him to have several calls with a range of different people during a day. He was allowed to exclude any conversation he thought too personal to be included in the data. Through this data gathering procedure, we came to about 50 natural conversations he had had with different people during that week. Not strangely, in the process of opening the audio files, some of the files didn't open whatever device were used; also, a number of conversations were too short to have any informative data to our purpose and some others, though of a reasonable length, did not include any revealing information. Thus, there remained 22 conversations which were long enough and included the relevant features. After transcribing the conversations, the parts which contained specific information, namely formal/informal lexicon as well as some other interesting segments related to the topic of the study, were translated into English. It should be mentioned that some aspects of the conversations were not translatable into English. For example, in the conversations the subject has with his wife or his close friends, he has a noticeable Isfahani accent which could not be conveyed through translation.

IV. DISCUSSION

The article provides, first, a brief discussion of Gricean cooperation hypothesis (1973), since any discussion of cooperation in pragmatics will have to consider Grice, and we will discuss briefly how the concept of cooperation is perceived and interpreted in the pragmatic literature. Secondly, we will present and analyze some examples of authentic communication, in this case, telephone conversations where the subject talks to a range of different addressees, sometimes cooperating and other times avoiding to do so. We will discuss how the subject of this very study shows his oftentimes resistance or counter-accommodation, to use CAT's terminology, and the potential underlying motivation behind them, by using some contextual clues such as minimal responses, silence and lack of speech convergence.

Conversations are not a "succession of disconnected remarks", but cooperative efforts where the participants recognize a common purpose, "or at least a mutually accepted direction" (Grice, 1975, p.43). As an efficient model

for analysing communication, Grice developed his famous maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner (1975). In her discussion of Grice's theory, Thomas (1998b, p.176) points out that surprisingly few of those who have drawn heavily on Grice in their own work have noticed the many ambiguities in his theory, and bothered to define how they themselves use and understand the concept of conversational cooperation. One important issue in pragmatics literature on cooperation is the question of universality of Grice's theory. Grice never explicitly claimed that his theory was universally true, but it is often assumed in the literature that the cooperative principle and the maxims have universal application. Levinson (1997), for example, mentions a number of specific, non-linguistic examples of (non)-cooperation and argues that when a behaviour falls short of some natural notion of cooperation, then it is because it violates one of the non-verbal analogues of the conversational maxims. He says that "this suggests that the maxims do indeed derive from general considerations of rationality applicable to all kinds of cooperative exchanges, and if so they ought in addition to have universal application" (p.103). This study is simply trying to categorize natural speech on the basis of Joos's model (1961) and provides some evidence for divergence or non-accommodation on the basis of Gricean maxims.

V. PRESENTATION OF DATA

We will now turn to some examples of real-life discourse, more specifically telephone conversations recorded during a whole week. The true aim of this study is not to examine Gricean cooperation. Rather, the main objective is to study patterns of accommodation or cooperation, to use Grice's term, and comparing the formality of utterances in relation to different speakers on the phone. The context under which the recordings were made are authentic. The study was conducted with one Persian speaker as the main subject of the study and some other addressees who trigger variations in the subject's speech in terms of the formality level he exploits in his conversations. Some examples from the recorded data have been selected and will be analyzed in relation to the concept of speech accommodation. However, these examples are by no means unique; in fact, it would be more accurate to see them as examples of a preferred discourse strategy which in this particular context and situation seems to be the norm rather than exception. Notice that in all the examples presented here, one party, namely the subject (A), is kept constant and the addressees vary. All the examples will be presented in succession without comments and analyzed thematically in the following section. The following excerpts are some parts of the conversations (my translation) between the subject and his wife (see Appendix A for transcription conventions).

Example 1 (subject (A) and wife(B))

- A: Hey!
 B: How are you?
 A: Fine!
 B: What's up?
 B: How's everything?
 A: I'm in the office.

B: In the office?
 A: Yeah!
 B: What do you have for lunch?
 A: (3.0).....I don't know!
 A: What have you cooked?
 B: I've cooked potatoes.
 A: Wow! Thank you very much
 Example 2
 B: Do you wanna go to your mom's house or you 'll stay in the office?
 A: Office (3.0) Today's Thursday.
 B: Do you wanna go there if you won't stay at the office?
 A: What time are you gonna go out?
 B: In half an hour.
 A: You're gonna go at 2 o'clock?
 A: I can't come there; I'm down in the mouth.
 A: I have an idea! I go to my mom's house.
 A: Excuse me!
 B: Welcome!
 A: I remembered something else. Will you bring me the book "J. mat"?
 B: My bag is already full!
 A: Bring it ! Is it Sedighi's book or someone else's? The large one!
 A: Thank you so much !
 Example 3
 B: Are you awake?
 A: Yeah. Already, I am.
 B: I'm coming//
 A: // Shake a leg!

The following excerpts are taken from conversations the subject had with his colleagues and other addressees.

Example 4 (Subject (A) and addressee (B))

B: Mr.?
 A: Hello?
 B: Good morning! This is from MWIT institute.
 A: Yes, welcome.
 B: Mr... .., we had your company at our computer exhibition.
 A: Yes, right!
 B: You are well informed that you had registered for a seminar.
 A: OK!
 B: I shall inform you that our seminar will be held on Monday at 4:30.
 A: Let me just have a look at my schedule; On the level, we go out of the city 3 days a week and when we return it's about 4 or 5 pm. If I can manage, I'll enjoy your company

Example 5

B: Good morning!
 A: Thanks.
 B: It's about Emam khomeini's boiler room in.....
 A: Yes.
 B: I've talked toAbout it and we're gonna use a 189000 Pars torch.
 A: Yes, thanks.
 B: I'll tell you what to do tomorrow.

A: I see. Isn't the problem solved?
 B: Not yet.
 A: Alright. I'll be at your service tomorrow.
 Example 6
 A: Hi. How are you?
 B: Fine. And you?
 A: The students' parents complain that their children have been feeling cold during these days
 B: Ahhha.
 A: And I called Mr. Rahmati and talked to him

VI. ANALYSIS OF DATA

We will now turn to an analysis of the excerpts. We will focus on the two types of linguistic strategies the subject has used and their potential underlying motivations. It is quite clear that while talking to an intimate relative or friend, we normally use informal and even intimate phrases, to use Joose's terms, and that this intentional informality creates a sense of in-group membership between the participants. In Ex 1, the way the subject starts greeting with his wife is a clear example of informal choice of lexicon which would certainly differ in case the addressee was one of the out-group members. One important issue to be mentioned here is the strong Isfahani accent the subject has when talking to his wife which could not be translated into English. We see the same thing in Ex 2, where the subject's speech is full of contractions, colloquial phrases and highly informal wording as in "I'm down in the mouth" or "the large one" in the last line which when compared to its Persian source text loses its informality to a great extent. The word the subject uses for "large" in Persian is definitely categorized under intimate style according to what Joose has suggested. This conversational cooperation shows that the subject feels free to ask his wife to do him a favor and his "untranslatable" accent is again salient in this excerpt. What is interesting here is the way the subject thanks his wife for bringing him the book; he uses almost formal, if not highly formal, words to show his gratitude which may be a case of abrupt speech divergence. The conversation has a normal smooth flow up to the point he thanks his wife in the last line when he says "Thank you very much" which is in sharp contrast to his previous utterances in terms of formality level. The reason behind this may be the fact that the subject feels that they are not in the same position now and that his wife should be respected for what she is going to do, that is, A sees B more powerful in this situation and this makes him choose a formal way of appreciating her. Likewise, in Ex 3, which is a short conversation between A and his wife (B), the last line, the sentence "shake a leg!", is another example of conversational accommodation, in this case convergence, towards the addressee. As it can be inferred from the data, in this short talk, A is waiting for B to pick him up and he is in a hurry to go somewhere; that's why he pays almost no attention to the form he chooses to express his hurry. We also see a case of turn-taking violation in Ex 2 in the same last line, where A does not wait until B finishes her talk and hence, again due to being in a hurry, interrupts her. The next

set of features we will look at is minimal responses (such as, for example, yes, Okay, right, etc.). The function of minimal response is to keep the conversation going; minimal response is supposed to encourage the speaker to continue his/her speech to provide more information. There are some examples in almost all the excerpts, especially in Ex 4, where a lady calls A and invites him to take part in a seminar. In this conversation, the lady who is calling our subject is almost unfamiliar to him and the subject answers just by short phrases and simple sentences. The woman speaks quite formally. According to Joos's model (1961), this is consultative style because there is a lot of back-channeling. Here, the subject converges towards the way the woman speaks, first of all, because his addressee is a woman and after that, because she uses formal words. By the way, defining "formal" is not as easy as it may seem. But interestingly, in some parts you

can obviously see the shift of style and a sudden change in the lexicon used. For example, notice the sentence "On the level.....If I can manage, I'll enjoy your company. In Ex 4. As opposed to other phrases the speaker uses earlier in this conversation, it seems as if the subject forgets the immediate situation and mixes his formal and informal lexicon. Throughout the whole conversation, the subject answers with one-word phrases to confirm the addressee but suddenly at the end of the conversation he starts explaining and as I mentioned, uses informal phrases. This can be related to another concept which is called *style shifting* during a conversation. The initial style of speaking at the time of starting this conversation and the sudden shift that we see at the end of it, is another interesting aspect of conversation analytical research which can not be covered in the present study. Ex 5, is conversation between A and a colleague and is an example of formal talk. In this relatively short conversation, again we see examples of minimal responses uttered by A and a final formal sentence which shows the distance between A and the immediate addressee. As we can see, the person who starts the conversation uses specific phrases and contractions which are usually associated with an informal style of speaking. However, these utterances are answered just by A's minimal responses and finally by a highly formal sentence to accentuate the difference between them. If we consider the motivations for speech divergence in SAT/CAT, A's behaviors in the related seem to fit perfectly. He clearly defines the encounter in intergroup terms and desires a positive in-group identity. Finally, In Ex 6, A is the initiator of the conversation and we can see a case of downward convergence here, which I explained in the introduction section. What was generally observed in all the conversations is that when A calls someone, that is, when he starts a conversation, he talks freely, in terms of quality, and more in terms of quantity. This is the case in Ex 6 where A telephones one of his co-workers whom he considers in a lower position and hence aspect of speech accommodation. As we saw, in this study there were several cases of accent accommodation without paying due attention to them. Another area which requires

he talks with more authority and freedom. He does not pay attention to his choice of word and does not try to hide his accent, though it is not evident in the English translation. Central to the issue we are analyzing in this article is first, the fact that SAT/CAT was devised to explain the motivations underlying shifts in people's communication style, and second, "the idea that communication is not only a matter of exchanging referential information, but that interpersonal as well as intergroup relationships are managed by means of communication." (Gallois et al., 2005, p.123). Another issue which is not limited to a single conversation is the phenomenon of relexicalization which is defined as the repetition and rewording of the same ideas. All the conversations, even those which are not included in this study, are abundant with somehow redundant statements which are reworded by the speakers. To give an example, notice the conversation between A and his wife when they talk about A's going to his mother's house. This may be a violation of the maxim of quantity which requires speech to be as long as needed, not more or less than that. In the same conversation, there is a sentence, "....Today is Thursday." which seems totally irrelevant in relation to Grice's relation maxim. The justification of such authentic violations is not within the reach of this study, but taking the immediate oral discourse into consideration may assist answering these questions

VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the aim of this study was to find patterns of accommodation authentic conversations and explain the underlying motivations which result in these utterances. Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois et al., 2005) and Social Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973; Beebe and Giles, 1984) would seem to come along way towards explaining how 'meaning' in communication only makes sense if we consider the social and, we might add, the psychological positioning of the communicators, either in face-to-face communications or in telephone conversations, and if we consider carefully how macro-level social structures of our society have bearings on micro-level situational contexts, such as authentic conversations

VIII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Delving into conversation analytical works leaves always leaves open the scene for future research to go on with the various unanalyzed aspects which may have been ignored due to some limitations in time and scope or may just have been neglected, unintentionally. This study is not an exception. There are some orientations which were not investigated in the data collected. First, style-shifting patterns are worth paying closer attention in future research. Also, researchers may focus on the shift of accent as an

more research is the use of general extenders in the course of our everyday conversations and the present data abound in such elements. Another contextualization cue which was ignored in this analysis is voice modification which is a paralinguistic feature in

natural utterances. And last but not least, as Richards (2008) suggests, in producing a style suitable for a specific situation, lexical, phonological and grammatical changes may be involved. This study tried to investigate formality at the level of lexicon and leaves open other aspects of variation in style for further research

Appendix A

Transcription conventions

- A comma (,) indicates a short pause (half a second or less).
- Numbers in parentheses (2.3) show longer pauses in speech.
- Bold face is used for loud speech.
- Underline is used for simultaneous speech.
- // indicates an interruption

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