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### Language accommodation strategies employed by **Zambian and Chinese interactants** at work places in Zambia

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#### Abstract

This article focuses on the language accommodation strategies used during interactions between the Zambian citizens and their Chinese counterparts working and living in Zambia. Available literature shows that very few studies have been undertaken on this subject. In this regard, this study sought to find out how the Chinese immigrants and their Zambian hosts managed to communicate despite language barriers. The study was guided by Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Respondents included Zambians, between the age of 30 and 50 years, who worked and lived with Chinese migrants of the same age brackets. Conversations between the two

groups were recorded, transcribed and then analysed. The most prominent accommodation strategies discovered were: accent mobility, the use of simplified words, change of diction, reduplication, the use of the base form of the verb and foreigner talk (baby talk). The results of the study have established that the strategies used are consistent with most studies done on language accommodation strategies elsewhere. However, unlike most host communities that expect the migrants to learn the local language and do not put much effort into accommodating the migrants, Zambian citizens seemed to go out of their way to help migrants achieve communication through downward convergence.

**Keywords:** Communication Accommodation Theory, Accommodation Strategies, Convergence, Divergence and Interactants

#### Introduction

When a person migrates from his country of origin to another country, he or she is likely to face some challenges in the host society. These challenges could range from cultural adaptation to finding their niche and acceptance in the new society. The language barrier presents the most challenging problem when an individual migrates to another country. Apart from the anxiety of getting accustomed to living in a new society with a different culture from one's own, being unable to communicate in the native language causes more anxiety to the migrant. Some countries have tried to solve the language challenge by putting in place language learning programs; these programs are made available online or onsite to foreigners at language schools or centres. The programs differ according to the intensity, fees and availability. However, these programs can be said to be more accessible and convenient to foreign students, but not migrant workers. In many eastern societies, such as China and Japan, universities and colleges provide Chinese or Japanese language lessons to all foreign students at different levels. These levels teach both basic everyday Chinese or Japanese, as well as academic Chinese or Japanese for the sole purpose of preparing the students for their classes at a later stage, usually masters or PhD. Nevertheless, Migrant workers in these countries would have to find and finance language learning classes on their own and these classes are usually costly.

In Zambia, only a few universities offer English and local languages learning classes to foreigners; the most prominent being the University of Zambia that provides ten-week language courses at different levels for both workers and aspiring students. The other option would be hiring a private tutor. Migrants who do not have access to these services or cannot afford a private tutor have to survive with the little English-speaking skills they possess and eventually adapt to the Zambian society. According to Chishiba and Mvula (2018)<sup>[2]</sup>, interlocutors sometimes resort to using signs to communicate.

#### Chinese presence in Zambia

In recent years, the number of Chinese migrant workers has significantly increased in several African countries. This is because China and Africa have been partnering in the area of investments. As Maverick, (2020) observes Chinese investments have put China in a more advantageous position to benefit from continuing economic development in Africa. In fact, China's engagement with Africa has experienced great extension, not only in terms of quantity of capital and the speed of investment,

but also concerning the variety and scale of activities. For instance, in 1999, the value of bilateral trade between China and African countries was only US\$6.5bn; by 2008 the total investment had increased to fifteen times greater. By November 2009, the Chinese government announced new projects on African continent, which included a further US\$10bn of financial investments (Raine 2009). By 2012, Sino-African trade had reached a historical record high of US\$198.5bn, an average annual increase of more than 30% in the last ten years. Direct investment from the Chinese government to African countries in 2012 alone, increased by more than 20% (Xinhua, 29/08/2013) while Chinese financial loans to Latin American countries dropped from US\$17.8bn billion in 2011 to US\$ 3.5bn in 2012 (China-Latin America Finance Database).

Zambia is one of the African countries which have had the longest-standing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. China has been referred to in Zambia as "an all-weather friend". As a matter of fact, on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1967, Zambia signed with China an agreement to construct Zambia Tanzania Railways (TAZARA). According to the Tazara official website, the construction of Tazara started in October 1970 and was completed in 1976. To this day, it remains the symbol of 'Sino-African friendship' (Yu 1971; Raine 2009). Indeed, this symbol makes Zambia a well-known and popular African country at the grassroots level in China and attracts more migrants because of the image of Zambia, promoted by the Chinese government, as a 'safe, politically stable and friendly' country.

Recently, the Chinese government has set up more companies and businesses ventures in Zambia, including a Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia to provide Chinese language studies for students who would like to major in Chinese linguistics and later go to China for a master's degree. Most of the Chinese teachers at the University of Zambia speak little to no English and sometimes rely on their Zambian drivers to help them communicate in situations where there is a communication breakdown. Some of the teachers have enrolled to learn English as a Foreign Language at the University of Zambia. Zambia being an English-speaking country, a language barrier exists between Zambian citizens and Chinese migrant workers in both the workplace and in ordinary everyday situations. Language accommodation has been the only option available.

### **Language accommodation theory**

The Language accommodation theory stresses the need for individuals to make adjustments while communicating (Giles, 1973) <sup>[8]</sup>. As an example, let us think of a situation where a zambian woman meets in a hotel restaurant four other interlocutors; one from west Africa, another from France, a third one from England and the fourth from Scotland. Various social dimensions would have to be considered during their conversation. These will include, inter alia, cultural background, the speakers' accents, their socioeconomic status, their educational background, the variety and level of English being spoken. In order for these interactants to communicate successfully, each interlocutor would have to adjust their speech one way or the other to accommodate the other interlocutors – this is the simplest way to describe language accommodation.

In linguistics, language accommodation which is also known as linguistic accommodation, speech accommodation, and communication accommodation, is the process by which participants in a conversation adjust their accent, diction, or other aspects of language according to the speech style of the other participant. The basis for what was to be called as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) or Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) first appeared in "Accent Mobility: A Model and Some Data" by Howard Giles (Anthropological Linguists, 1973) <sup>[8]</sup>. According to Giles (1973, 1977) <sup>[8]</sup>; Giles & Couland (1991) <sup>[3]</sup>, accommodation theory, speakers may modify their speech to sound more like their interactant to achieve greater social integration with them. This theory presents a broad framework to predict and explain many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease the social distance in interaction. In other words, speakers manipulate language "to maintain integrity, distance or identity" (Giles and Coupland, 1991:66) <sup>[3]</sup>. The theory, therefore, explores the different ways in which interlocutors accommodate each other during during the communication process. Giles' (1991) <sup>[3]</sup> approach suggests that language accommodation is a two-direction system through the introduction of the concepts of convergence and divergence. The two terms refer to two basic linguistic accommodation strategies frequently used by interactants.

Convergence refers to the process whereby interlocutors alter or shift their speech adjust to the other interactant. They adjust in things such as speech rate, accents, pauses, utterance length, body language, in such a way that they conform to their interlocutor's compotment. Most studies that have been done have focused on convergence. It can be considered the historical core of the Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973) <sup>[8]</sup>. A foreign language instructor for instance would accommodate the accent and diction of his language style to that of his students to make sure that the learners understand him well and relate better to him. A study examining accommodation in communication through email carried out by Thomson, Murachver, and Green (2001) showed that, even in this context, women and men converged to the language style (more female- or male-like) of their internet friends.

On the other hand, divergence can be described as the ways interactants accentuate their linguistic differences in order to distinguish themselves from the other. In other words, divergence leads to an accentuation of speech and nonverbal differences between self and the other speaker (Bourhis & Giles, 1977). Most studies on language use between the host country and migrants have shown that the natives of the country employ divergent accommodation strategies asserting their identity and expecting the migrants to learn their language and work hard to communicate adequately. In the current study, however, Zambians notably used convergent accommodation strategies when communicating with Chinese migrant workers.

In addition, both convergence and divergence can either adopt an upward or downward direction. When the speaker adjusts his speech by simplifying it to meet the needs of the listener of a lower status, or lower language ability, this is referred to by scholars as downward convergence; and it occurs usually in the situation of a high-class individual altering their speech to that of a lower-class person as will be seen later in this paper, on a study of the speeches of the

Japanese emperor. In contrast, when the speaker from a lower-socioeconomic background raises the main features of their speech to match those from a higher socioeconomic status, this is considered to be upward convergence. In terms of divergence, upward divergence happens when the speaker emphasises the main features of their speech to assert superiority whilst downward divergence would be when the speaker of the lower-class emphasises the non-standard parts of their speech.

According to Giles (1979), interlocutors often navigate between divergence and convergence, especially after a re-evaluation of the person being spoken to. It all depends on whether they want to feel accepted or respected. For instance, when a new manager wants the employees to accept him or create a relationship with the workers, he would use convergence strategies to be accepted. On the other hand, in the same vein, if he wants to assert his position and earn the respect of, or instil fear in the employees, he would resort to divergence strategies.

A phenomenon similar to divergence is maintenance whereby a person persists in his or her original style, regardless of the communication behaviour of the interlocutor (Bourhis, 1979).

There are many reasons why language accommodation strategies are employed. In the case of convergence, the strategies used seem to be universal because the goals are similar: - for social approval and mutual understanding, which is the underlying assumption proposed by the similarity-attraction theory. The theory states, "The more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to certain others, the more likely it is we will be attracted to them" (Byrne, 1969, cited in Giles & Clair, 1979: 47). On the other hand, the reasons for employing language accommodation strategies through divergence are to show distinctiveness, assert authority and keep out the out-group. Caution must be used when using these strategies, especially with convergence as over-convergence may offend the listener.

### Study objectives

The study set three objectives as indicated below:

- To establish what accommodation strategies are used by Zambian citizens to overcome communication barriers encountered when speaking to Chinese migrant workers.
- To find out what direction of accommodation Zambians employed between convergence and divergence.
- To determine whether Zambians were aware of the fact that they were adopting these strategies.

### Research questions

- What language accommodation strategies do Zambians use when speaking to Chinese migrant workers?
- Which direction of accommodation is more commonly used by Zambians between convergence and divergence?
- Are Zambians aware that they are employing these accommodation strategies?

### Literature review

Available literature point to the fact that Language accommodation can occur in different settings; – within a community where a language has different dialects, within a community with people of varying social positions, between the younger generation and older generation of a

community, in classrooms, workplaces and like in the present study, between migrants and the host society. Most studies done on language accommodation have been focused on convergence, foreign language education, specifically, accommodation strategies used by foreign language instructors when teaching beginner students or special needs students. Other studies focus on strategies used in workplaces and bilingual communities. These studies aimed to understand what strategies are used, why they are used, how often they are used and finally whether the users of the strategies use them consciously or unconsciously.

One such study by Giles *et al.* (1973) <sup>[8]</sup> was carried out to investigate the process of speech accommodation between bilinguals from two ethnolinguistic groups. The hypothesis was that the greater the amount of effort in accommodation that a bilingual speaker of one group was perceived to put into his message, the more favourably he would be perceived by listeners from another ethnic group, and also the more effort they, in turn, would put into accommodating him. The subjects in this study included eighty bilingual English-Canadians who were divided into four groups and individually tested using a listening and descriptive test. Each group heard the same speaker describe a picture which they were required to draw. However, each group heard a different guise of the same speaker: (1) French, (2) Mix-mix, (3) Fluent English and (4) Nonfluent English. The results from the experiment confirmed the hypotheses and different types of accommodation noted.

Similar to the latter, a study was done to investigate patterns of interdialectal language accommodation among Arabic speakers in the United States of America. This study contributes to the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by showing that speakers' motivation to accommodate is predicated on their attitudes toward the different Arabic varieties. Using data from natural conversations, personal interviews, and ethnographic observations, this study shows that language attitudes affect the degree of a speaker's convergence or divergence toward their interlocutors. The theoretical undertaking of this study was to examine the relationship between micro-level accommodative strategies and macro-societal relationships that arrange the asymmetries between these varieties and their speakers (Chakrani, 2015). This study is important to the current study as a guide to discovering what makes interlocutors converge or diverge during language accommodation as in this study Zambians uniquely converged more than is common by natives.

Another study focusing on convergence examined the speech style of the late Japanese Emperor Hirohito during his visits to the countryside which were conducted to encourage war-defeated Japanese during 1946-54. This study was based on the claim that speakers will attempt to converge linguistically toward the speech patterns of the addressee when they wish for social approval from the addressee. Analysed speeches by the emperor consistently show that he converged his speech style to that of listeners who were lower in social status. The analysis of the emperor's speech style supports the claim of the speech accommodation theory and further suggests that the attribution of the meaning of the message is determined by the listener's evaluation of its appropriateness. (Azuma, 1997) <sup>[1]</sup>. This study is similar to the current case study in that convergence was used and interestingly, in a society where it is rarely used. Both the Japanese and Zambian

societies have complex honorific structures and you would expect divergence to be more commonly used than convergence.

Lastly, an example of a study carried out in a classroom situation is one that focused on Accommodation Strategies Employed by Non-native English-Mediated Instruction (EMI) Teachers. This particular study aimed at exploring English instructors' application of accommodation strategies under English-Mediated Instruction (EMI) in English as a lingua franca context of higher education in Taiwan. The English instructors' verbal discourses concerning different types of strategies during instruction were recorded and analysed. The data was collected from a university in southern Taiwan, which included approximately 627 minutes of audio-recordings of five courses by five non-native teachers in its IMBA program. Six effective accommodation strategies were identified through quantitative analysis, including introducing, defining, listing, eliciting, giving examples, and emphasizing. The selection of the accommodation strategies was influenced by the following situations: (1) level of content difficulty, (2) students' language proficiency, (3) student feedback, and (4) finding appropriate language (Tsai *et al.*, 2015) [9]. The strategies found in this study mirror some of those discovered in the current.

### Research methodology

The subjects in this study included both Zambian citizens and Chinese migrant workers in construction companies, Chinese retail outlets, market places and at the University of Zambia. The subjects' age range was between 30 and 50 years. The Chinese migrant workers were of a relatively low level of spoken English.

The data collection process included videos obtained from social media news pages such as "Mwebantu Media" and recordings of conversations between Zambian citizens and Chinese migrant workers at construction sites, market places and at the University of Zambia. The conversations recorded were everyday conversations and the subjects were made aware that they were being recorded for research purposes. The discourse in these recordings was then transcribed and analysed.

### Findings and discussion

The results showed the direction of accommodation as convergence which is rare in host countries as most host countries expect the migrants to learn their language and do not put in much effort in accommodating the migrants. What was surprising about this is that from observation, Zambians always accommodate foreigners especially non-Africans in the direction of convergence but use divergence among themselves; different tribes use divergence to assert themselves and discriminate other tribes especially in the workplace.

Zambian citizens used a mixture of linguistic devices to accommodate the Chinese migrants to make communication easier and get work done faster. Five main strategies reoccurred in almost all the conversations: accent mobility, use of simplified terms, reduplication, use of the base form of verbs and foreigner talk.

- Accent mobility - The term accent mobility was coined by Howard Giles (1973) [8] as "the ability of an individual to modify his accent or pronunciation".

Accent mobility happens both consciously and unconsciously. It is one of the commonest accommodation strategies used. In the recordings, all Zambians were heard changing their accents to sound more like that of the Chinese migrants with the hope of being understood better.

- Use of simplified terms - Depending on the audience of the speaker, the diction is modified. This is seen in conversations between a doctor and a patient, a lawyer and a client. A doctor will not use medical jargon when speaking to his patient, he will, however, try to use the simplest terms possible. This phenomenon was witnessed in most of the recordings as Zambians tended to look for simpler synonyms to words that were not understood by the Chinese migrants. It should be noted that when a simplified term isn't understood, the speaker would instead try to describe the word.
- Reduplication - In linguistics, reduplication is a morphological process in which the root or stem of a word (or part of it) or even the whole word is repeated exactly or with a slight change. Chinese migrants tended to use reduplication and Zambians, in turn, followed suit assuming they would be understood better if they used it. Below is an excerpt from one conversation that demonstrates the use of reduplication:

Zambian: *Where is your boss?*

Chinese: *No understand - 'I do not understand'*

Zambian: *Oh. English no understands? - 'Oh, You do not understand English?'*

Chinese: *English, small small. - 'I only understand a little bit of English'*

Zambian: *Okay. I speak small small. - Okay then, I will speak simple English.*

- Use of the base form of verbs - In English grammar, the base form of a verb is its simplest form. According to Richard Norquist (2019), "these exist without a special ending or suffix on their own but can be changed and added onto to fit different uses and tenses. A verb's base form is what appears in dictionary entries". The English language has several irregular verbs such as go, buy, speak etc. of which the past tense form deviates from the simple -ed form. For example, talk – talked, go – went. In this case, during accommodation, the speaker tends to use the infinitive of such verbs. In the conversations, Zambians were heard simplifying verbs to their base form commonly for irregular verbs. For example, as opposed to saying "Yesterday, I spoke to your boss" the speaker would say, "Yesterday, I speak to your boss".
- Foreigner talk - The term foreigner talk was coined in 1971 by Stanford University professor Charles A. Ferguson, one of the founders of Sociolinguistics. When addressing a listener not skilled in the speaker's language, people may simplify their spoken language in an attempt to improve understanding. This is sometimes likened to baby talk - as the speaker uses a baby talk-like language to communicate, skipping out small words and possibly using demonstratives instead of pronouns. For example, "do not cross the road" would be "no cross road". Some of the above strategies like the use of the base form of the verb can fall under foreigner talk. It is worth noting that sometimes



foreigners take offence when foreign talk is used especially when they feel that they have put in a lot of effort to learn and understand the host country's language. Below is an excerpt from one conversation depicting foreigner talk:

Zambian: *Where is your boss?*

Chinese: *No understand 'I do not understand'*

Zambian: *Oh. English no understands? 'Oh, you do not understand English?'*

There was a variation of how the above accommodation devices were employed or which ones were used but the commonest strategies used were accent mobility and foreigner talk. Most Zambians tended to use all of the above in long conversations.

### Conclusion

The present study has shown us the accommodation strategies used by Zambians working with Chinese migrant workers. Five main strategies were used: (1) accent mobility, (2) use of simplified terms, (3) Reduplication, (4) Use of the base form of the verb and (5) foreigner talk. These strategies all pointed towards downward convergence as Zambians were seen adjusting their speech to a simpler form to accommodate the Chinese migrants. There are various reasons for using language accommodation strategies and in this study, the main reasons why these strategies were used by Zambians was to communicate effectively and make working with the Chinese migrants easier hence saving time. Where these strategies failed, the interlocutors resorted to using gestures. When asked whether they were aware of their use of these strategies a few Zambians said yes whilst most said it came naturally. An unexpected result in this study was that some Chinese migrant workers showed signs of upward convergence, particularly the teachers from the University of Zambia. The Chinese teachers tried to imitate the accent used by their colleagues and students and asked the students not to use 'broken English' when speaking to them. Accent mobility and foreigner talk were the most commonly used strategies and further research could be done in the future based on the foreigner talk hypothesis. The foreigner talk (FT) hypothesis argues that a pidgin or creole language forms when native speakers attempt to simplify their language to address speakers who do not know their language at all (Ferguson, 1971). With this in mind, is it possible that as a permanent result of language accommodation between Zambians and Chinese migrants a pidgin might eventually form?

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