

# Accommodation and Chinese college teachers' choice between dialects and Mandarin in casual talks and service encounters

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## Abstract

Focusing on the choice between Chinese dialects and Mandarin and working on the basis of Communication Accommodation Theory, this article investigates the way Chinese college teachers accommodate their interlocutors in casual talks and in service encounters. The data, collected through a questionnaire and several observations, point to a strong convergence tendency by Chinese college teachers toward their friends in casual talks and a strong divergence tendency from strangers in service encounters if the latter are known to be able to understand their dialects.

**Keywords:** communication accommodation, Chinese dialects, Mandarin, convergence, Chinese college teachers

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาทางเลือกในการใช้ภาษาระหว่างภาษาถิ่นและภาษาจีนกลางของอาจารย์ชาวจีนในสถาบันระดับอุดมศึกษา ในการสนทนากับเพื่อนไม่ใช่อาจารย์ ในการสนทนาระหว่างการให้บริการ (service encounters) ตามแนวคิดของ Communication Accommodation Theory การเก็บข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามและการสังเกตการณ์ให้เห็นถึงแนวโน้มที่สูงมากที่อาจารย์ชาวจีนในสถาบันอุดมศึกษา จะเกิดการคล้ายตาม (convergence) เพื่อนในการสนทนากับเพื่อนไม่ใช่อาจารย์ และมีแนวโน้มที่สูงมากที่จะเกิดการขัดแย้ง (divergence) กับบุคคลแปลกหน้าในระหว่างช่วงเผชิญหน้าในการการปฏิบัติงาน หากเป็นที่รับรู้ว่าบุคคลแปลกหน้าดังกล่าวสามารถเข้าใจภาษาถิ่นได้

**คำสำคัญ:** ภาษาถิ่นในภาษาจีน, ภาษาจีนกลาง, อาจารย์ชาวจีนในสถาบันอุดมศึกษา

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## 1. Introduction

In bilingual communities, people will frequently make decisions (consciously or subconsciously) on which language to choose when communicating with different persons. Similarly, in monolingual communities, where more than one dialect is spoken, people will also frequently make decisions on which dialect to choose. In most areas in China, for example, where there are a lot of dialects of the Chinese language in addition to Mandarin, the standardized language, people would choose between different dialects, and between dialect and Mandarin<sup>1</sup> in interaction with those from different dialectal areas. While most of the dialects share common grammatical structures and lexical items, they differ from each other widely in accent, pronunciation, tone and intonation. While some of the dialects are mutually intelligible, some of them are not. But as lingua franca, Mandarin can be spoken and understood by many people from different dialectal areas. This study, working on the basis of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), addresses the issue of how and why a group of Chinese people, namely, college teachers, change their dialects in the presence of different interlocutors. As we will see below, although there have been a lot of studies on communication accommodation of people in bilingual communities and of those in bi-/multi-dialectal communities, little research has been done on communication accommodation of people in Chinese communities where both dialects and Mandarin are spoken.

## 2. Communication Accommodation Theory

CAT, originally known as “speech accommodation theory” (Giles, 1973), has been described as one of the most prominent theories in the social psychology of language and communication (Tracy & Haspel, 2004). Its key idea is that during interaction, speakers tend to change the way they speak according to the person they are talking to. This can be achieved via changes in language, dialect, accent, speech rate, politeness, diversity level, etc. (Bradac & Giles, 2005.) The change to the interlocutor’s language is one of the most observable forms of accommodation (Callahan, 2006).

There are two important concepts in this theory: *convergence* and *divergence*. “Convergence” is a strategy whereby interactants adapt to each other’s communicative

behaviors in terms of a wide range of “linguistic-prosodic- nonverbal” features (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, p. 7). Convergence strategy taken by people signals their positive attitudes towards their interlocutors, in order to increase attractiveness and approval or to show solidarity (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). On the other hand, “divergence” refers to the way interactants accentuate speech and nonverbal differences between themselves and others (Giles et al., 1991). It is believed that people experiencing convergence by their interlocutors would react favorably and form a positive attitude towards “the convergent linguistic act and its producer”, while they would take a negative attitude towards the divergent linguistic act and its producer (Bradac & Giles, 2005: 215-216).

CAT has been applied to a wide variety of nations, cultures and languages; to communication between different social groups; to different social and institutional contexts; and so on (Giles, et al., 2006). In what follows, the paper will zoom in on studies examining people’s choice of language or dialect when accommodating their interlocutors.

### **3. Previous Studies on Language and Dialect Choice**

There have been a lot of studies on people’s choice of languages in order to accommodate their interlocutors. For example, Bernsten (1994) investigated the use of English and Shona in Zimbabwe; Torras and Gafaranga (2002) examined language choice in Barcelona involving Catalan, Spanish and English; Gardner-Chloros (1997) reported on the use of French and Alsatian in Strasbourg; Heller (1982) reported how French or English was selected at a hospital in Quebec; Weyers (1999) examined language choice among bilingual workers (Spanish and English) in El Paso, Texas; Callahan (2006) investigated language choice between English and Spanish in New York city. What all these studies had in common was the fact that they focused on the social context of service encounters and the finding that that people would more or less accommodate their interlocutors by changing their language out of various motives.

There are also studies on people’s choice of dialects to accommodate their interlocutors. Childs and Mallinson (2004), for example, reported that an earlier version of African American speech accommodated local dialect norms in Texana,

North Carolina, a small African American community. Similarly, Mallinson and Wolfram (2002) investigated a small, long-term, isolated bi-ethnic enclave community in the mountains of western North Carolina and concluded that earlier African American English largely accommodated local dialects while maintaining a subtle, distinctive ethnolinguistic divide. Azuma (1997) reported on the late Japanese Emperor Hirohito's convergence of his speech style to that of listeners who were lower in social status.

With regard to the choice between Chinese dialects and Mandarin, Pan (2000), using data from audio-recorded verbal interactions, studied the possible effects of Hong Kong's return to China on the choice between Mandarin and Cantonese in service encounters in Hong Kong, and the effects of economic reform and increased development on the choice between Mandarin and Cantonese in Guangzhou province, China. However, Pan addressed these issues in terms of code-switching instead of communication accommodation. Thus far, no other studies on the choice between Chinese dialects and Mandarin have been found.

Though dealing with the similar topic, the present study takes a different approach to it and has different focuses and purposes. Instead of examining the effects of social, economic and political change on the choice between Cantonese and Mandarin, this study uses a questionnaire-based survey to investigate Chinese college teachers' general *perceptions* on their choice between Chinese dialects (not limited to Cantonese) and Mandarin in casual talks with friends and in service encounters, their motives underlying their choice, and their attitudes towards their interactants' accommodation to them. Then the study uses several verbal-behavior observations to confirm the findings of the questionnaire-based survey. The result of the study will reveal whether CAT can be applied to the Chinese communities where both dialects and Mandarin are spoken. The data collected in this study are used to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Will Chinese college teachers converge their dialect or Mandarin to that of their interlocutors in casual talks and service encounters? And how?
- (2) Why do they converge their dialect or Mandarin to that of their interlocutors?
- (3) How will they view their interlocutors' convergence to them?

#### 4. Methodology

Two methods are used to collect data. One is by a questionnaire-based survey, and the other is by observations.

##### 4.1 Participants

As has been mentioned, the questionnaire-based survey of this study is designed to investigate Chinese college teachers' general perceptions on their choice between Chinese dialects and Mandarin, their motives underlying their choice, and their attitudes towards their interactants' accommodation to them. The survey involves 26 college teachers from the People's Republic of China who were attending an ELT training program at a university in Singapore. They are all EFL teachers, with age ranging from 25 to 36. Five of them are male, and 21 are female. They are all fluent Mandarin speakers; they could not possibly be allowed to teach if they could not speak Mandarin well. Meanwhile, 25 of them each can speak one Chinese dialect, and one of them can speak two. All of them now speak the dialect that they were born with except one. Table 1 shows the distribution of dialects among the participants, from which we can see that the study represents 12 dialects that are distributed in 7 areas of China.

*Table 1* Dialects the participants speak

No. of Participants	Dialect	Area
5	Hubei	Central China
1	Fujian	East China
1	Jiangsu	
2	Henan	North China
1	Liaoning	Northeast China
3	Shaanxi	Northwest China
1	Shanxi	
3	Hainan	South China
1	Hunan	
4	Sichuan	Southwest China
4	Chongqing	
1	Guizhou	
-	12	Total No. of Dialects

Different social groups, because of their differences in social status, power, wealth, education, sense of solidarity, and so on, may behave differently in communication accommodation. This group of teachers chosen as the participants of the study belong to the middle class in China, and are all well-educated in terms of the degrees they have received: 71% of them have Master's degree, and 29% have Bachelor's degree. Besides, they are all language teachers, who may be extremely sensitive to the way they choose languages in interaction. Therefore, it is anticipated that the social group represented by the participants in this study behave differently from other social groups when accommodating their interlocutors in communication.

The observations are conducted in order to record China college teachers' actual verbal behavior to see whether their perceptions are consistent with their behavior. The participants involved have similar educational, dialectal and work background: they are also language teachers, working for three different universities in Chongqing City, Southwest China; they are from different dialectal areas – Southwest China, North China, Northwest China, East China, etc.; they are all well-educated (2% doctors, 80% masters and 18% bachelors).

## **4.2 Data collection and analysis**

### **4.2.1 Questionnaire-based survey**

Since the survey is designed to investigate how the participants *perceive* the way they choose between dialects and Mandarin, the motives of doing so and their attitude toward the interlocutor's accommodation to them, a questionnaire was developed to elicit their perceptions. The questionnaire consists of 4 parts. Part 1 elicits biodata and background information as summarized in 4.1 above. Part 2 investigates whether and how generally the participants would accommodate their interlocutors by alternating between their Chinese dialects and Mandarin in two different contexts: casual talks with friends and service encounters. Questions in this part center on whether and how people accommodate their interlocutors who speak the same dialect, or speak Mandarin. Since in different social contexts people may accommodate their interlocutors in different ways because of different motives (see previous studies on accommodation in different social contexts: Linell, 1991; Street, 1991; Hamilton, 1991; etc.), the investigation specifies and focuses on two contexts: casual talks and service encounters. In this part, 5 statements are given, and the

participants are asked to identify their degree of agreement on them by ticking one of the 4 choices: always, sometimes, seldom and never.

Part 3 of the questionnaire examines the motives underlying Chinese college teachers' communication accommodation in the two contexts. Under each context, the same list of motives are given. The participants are required to tick as many items in the list as they fit them, and provide any motives that they think they hold but do not appear in the list. The composition of the list is based on previous studies on CAT, according to which the basic motives people hold for convergence in communication include: the sender's need for social integration or identification with the receiver, that is, the desire to be similar to the receiver so as to gain approval from him/her (Giles et al., 1991); the sender's need to be better understood by the receiver (Giles & Powesland, 1997); the sender's need to converge due to certain external pressures (Giles & Powesland, 1997); and the sender's need to facilitate communication<sup>2</sup> (Ota, Giles, & Somera, 2007). To make these motives more straightforward for the participants and avoid any confusion or misunderstanding, the list of motives in the questionnaire are presented as follows:

- (1) I want to be well understood by him/her.
- (2) I want him/her to know that I'm friendly to him/her.
- (3) I want him/her to know that I'm respectful to him/her.
- (4) I want to reduce the social distance between me and him/her.
- (5) I am forced to do so by some external pressures.

Part 4 of the questionnaire investigates Chinese college teachers' attitudes toward their interlocutors' accommodation to them, that is, how they would think of their interlocutors if the latter converge their dialect/Mandarin to that of their own. The participants are required to identify whether their attitude would be positive, neutral or negative.

To guarantee the validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted before it was administered to all the participants.

The questionnaire was administered when all the participants met to attend a class. The researcher was present to answer any questions that the participants might raise. Then the sheets of questionnaire were collected and the percentages were

computed. To ensure the accuracy of the results, a friend of the researcher's who did not attend this study was invited to do the computing again.

#### **4.2.2 Observations**

The observations were conducted after the data had been collected from the above mentioned survey. Five casual talks and five service encounters have been observed and taken note of. Three of the casual talks occurred in teachers' lounges, one in the canteen, and one in a party. Two of the service encounters occurred in department stores, one in a restaurant, one in the airport, and one in the post office. The researcher was present at all the occurrences, jotting down each conversation immediately or shortly after it was over, with the speakers' use of dialects and/or Mandarin overtly marked. The observation results were compared with those of the questionnaire-based survey to see whether they are consistent with each other.

### **5. Results and discussion**

Since this study involves no sophisticated statistical analysis, and the discussion of the results will frequently quote the figures and other findings in the results, in order to save space, an unconventional way is adopted, that is, combining the results and discussion sections together, with each of the results followed by discussion.

#### **5.1 Accommodation in casual talks**

The survey shows that 65.38% of the participants *always* speak their own dialect to people who speak the same dialect but who can also speak Mandarin, and 30.77% *sometimes* do so. That is to say, the majority of them would not change their dialect to Mandarin in the presence of people from the same speech community. But to those from other communities who are speaking Mandarin and can understand their dialect, things become a little bit complicated: 30.77% always speak Mandarin, 34.62% sometimes, 20.08% seldom and 11.54% never. But we can still see a majority of the participants (65.39%) would always or sometimes speak the variety of language their interlocutors speak.

At this point, we can argue that CAT is confirmed: in casual talks with friends, Chinese college teachers would usually choose a variety of Chinese that their

interlocutors are using when interacting. Speaking to people in the same speech community, they use the dialect of their own even though they can speak Mandarin. Speaking to people from another community who are speaking Mandarin, the lingua franca, and who, at the same time can understand their dialect, most of them would speak Mandarin instead of dialect. But the tendency of convergence in this situation is not as strong as in the other. This may be attributed to the fact that some of the Chinese dialects are close to Mandarin phonologically and grammatically so that the interactants find it not quite necessary to change especially when the other party is a friend. Besides, this also shows the different degree of accommodation to friends in the same speech community and to those from other speech communities.

This tendency of convergence has been confirmed by the observations. It is not uncommon that a teacher frequently changes his dialect into Mandarin or Mandarin into dialect when speaking to people from different dialectal areas. The following, which is taken from the observation notes, is a typical example:

Teachers A, B and C are colleagues in a university in Chongqing City, Southwest China. They had a casual talk in the Teachers' Lounge during a break between classes. Teachers A and B are both native Chongqingese, while teacher C is from Xinjiang Province, Northwest China, who speaks Mandarin. He cannot speak Chongqing dialect but has no problem in understanding it. Here is part of their conversation which has been translated from Chinese into English, where the italics indicate Chongqing dialect, and the non-italics indicate Mandarin:

A: (to B) *I overheard that you didn't like your students in this class?*  
B: *Not at all. They can only make me angry.*  
C: Students are sometimes really annoying. One of my students played with his mobile phone for the whole class!  
A: You mean just now, the previous class?  
C: Yes. I was so angry that I asked him to leave the classroom.  
A: Did he leave? He must be very reluctant to leave...  
C: He didn't. He apologized and I let him stay.  
A: (to B) *Now you see? Not only your students who don't behave themselves...*

It can be seen that A spoke Chongqing dialect to converge to B, who is from the same dialectal area, and changed to Mandarin when speaking to C, and switched back to Chongqing dialect when addressing B again.

Then what are the motives underlying this kind of convergence in casual talks? Table 2 reveals the percentage of the participants who chose each of the items.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 Motives underlying convergence in casual talks

Motives	Percentage (%)
to reduce the social distance	84.62
to be well understood	76.92
to be friendly	69.23
to be respectful	61.54
to be forced by external pressures	3.85

The majority of the participants agreed that they would converge in order to reduce the social distance with the interlocutors, to be well understood by them, to be friendly and respectful to them. But very few would take “to be force by external pressures” as their motive of convergence.

As has been found in other speech communities by previous studies, Chinese college teachers may accommodate their interlocutors out of the needs to be socially approved (Giles et al., 1991) and to facilitate communication (Ota et al., 2007). The former covers the desire to reduce the social distance, to be friendly and to be respectful, while the latter includes the desire to be well understood. However, Chinese college teachers do not accommodate because of external pressures. This is due to the context where the interaction occurs: in casual talks with friends, people are free to choose any variety of language at their will, although they are strictly required to speak Mandarin in work places (in the classroom and office) by the authorities.

## 5.2 Accommodation in service encounters

Due to a campaign to promote Mandarin speaking in work places in China, all the service workers in Chinese speaking areas are required to speak Mandarin to

their customers. So this study only investigates the teachers' accommodation to the service workers who speak Mandarin rather than dialects. The results show that only 19.23% of the participants would *always* speak Mandarin instead of their dialects, 26.92% *sometimes*, 42.31% *seldom* and 11.54% *never*, on condition that they know the service worker can understand their dialects. The percentage becomes 96.15% if they know their dialect cannot be understood by the service worker.

In service encounters, Chinese college teachers have to accommodate their interlocutors who cannot understand their dialect by speaking Mandarin because otherwise they cannot keep their interaction going. But as long as they know their dialect can be understood, more than half of them may choose to diverge instead of converge: going on with their own dialect instead of switching to Mandarin. This is remarkable compared with their behavior in casual talks with friends (19.23% vs 65.38% for those who *always* converge). With friends, they want to keep their relationship going, so they converge by being supportive and facilitative; with strangers like the service workers, there seems to be no relationship to be maintained, so they diverge as long as the interaction can go smoothly. This kind of difference can be interpreted in terms of "intergroup distinctiveness" (Giles et al., 1991). College teachers and their friends belong to the same social group, while they and the service workers belong to two different groups. "By diverging and by emphasizing one's own social (and sometimes idiosyncratic) communicative style, members of an ingroup accentuate the differences between themselves and the outgroup members present... on a salient and valued dimension of their group identity" (Giles et al., 1991: 28).

Again, this is consistent with the observations. The teachers were frequently observed to stick to their own dialect when interacting with a service worker. Teacher D, for example, a native Chongqingese, spoke Chongqing dialect to the clerk in the post office who was speaking Mandarin (the italics indicate Chongqing dialect, and the non-italics indicate Mandarin):

D: *I'd like to have this card mailed. How much postage should I pay?*  
Clerk: Let me see... 3 yuan.  
D: *Here's 10 yuan, thank you.*

...

During the whole conversation, D did not change her dialect to converge to the clerk.

In another case, teacher E, from Hubei Province, Central China, spoke Hubei dialect initially to the waitress in a restaurant, and shifted to Mandarin when she found that the waitress could not understand her dialect quite well (The Hubei dialect is italicized):

E: *I'd like double cooked pork slices, and rice of course.*

Waitress: You like... what?

E: *Double cooked pork slices.*

Waitress: Sorry, but...

E: Double cooked pork slices.

Waitress: Oh, I see! Double cooked pork slices.

E wanted to stick to her own dialect, but later found that would not work, so she had to give it up and spoke the lingua franca instead. E had a strong intention to keep her “intergroup distinctiveness” initially, but this had to give way to intelligibility.

What is also noteworthy concerning the survey results is that quite a few people (26.92%) *sometimes* speak Mandarin instead of their dialects to the service workers. This may be due to the speakers’ strong desire to get the service concerned in some cases, especially when they are put in a relatively disadvantaged position – they speak their interlocutors’ language (dialect) to show their respect and narrow down the social distance so that they can be served as they have wished. Teacher F’s verbal behavior in her encounter with the salesgirl may be a good illustration for this. She went to the department store and found herself attracted by a beautiful coat, so she had a conversation with the salesgirl:

F: *How much is this coat?*

Salesgirl: 1,200 yuan.

F: *Oh, that's too much. Do you offer any discount?*

Salesgirl: Sorry, we don’t.

F: Come on, 500 yuan, and I’ll take it.

Salesgirl: Sorry, the price is fixed, and I’m not entitled to change it.

F: Who's in charge of price fixing? You may ask for permission to lower the price. You see, I really like this coat...

To begin with, F spoke her own dialect, Guizhou dialect (Guizhou Province, Southwest China) to keep the “intergroup distinctiveness”, but later on she shifted to Mandarin when the situation changed in her interlocutor’ favor – she had a strong will to get that coat at a cheaper price but it was the salesgirl who had the right to decide whether to offer a discount or not. It was probably her intention to be respectful and reduce the social distance that led to her change of the dialect into Mandarin.

Teachers E and F’s cases are in tune with the teachers’ perceived motives elicited through the questionnaire. The participants are asked to identify their motives if there do exist such occasions when they converge toward the service workers. The result shows that 92.31% of them would do so because they want to be better understood, 46.15% would do so because they want to be respectful and 34.62% would do so because they want to reduce the social distance. See Table 3 which reveals the percentage of the participants who chose each of the items:

*Table 3 Motives underlying convergence in service encounters*

Motives	Percentage (%)
to be well understood	92.31
to be respectful	46.15
to reduce the social distance	34.62
to be friendly	23.08
to be forced by external pressures	19.23

Notably, the most favored motive in casual talks (“to reduce the social distance”) gives way to the motive of “being well understood” in service encounters, which means that even if college teachers accommodate to service workers, the majority of them may do so in order to facilitate communication instead of maintaining relationships. But the motives of “being respectful” and “reducing the social distance” both rank relatively high in the list, which sheds light on the fact

that a number of teachers (26.92%) *sometimes* speak Mandarin instead of their dialects to the service workers.

### **5.3 Attitudes toward interlocutors' convergence**

As have been noted, Chinese college teachers converge toward their interlocutors in order to be socially approved and well understood. But how would they view their interlocutors who also adopt the strategy of convergence toward them? 22 of the 26 participants (84.62%) would take a positive attitude toward them, the rest 4 of them (15.38%) express no inclination of like or dislike (i.e. neutral), and none would take a negative attitude toward them. This finding is consistent with CAT which claims that people experiencing convergence by their interlocutors would react favorably and form a positive attitude towards them.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study investigates Chinese college teachers' choice between Chinese dialects and Mandarin in casual talks with friends and in service encounters. The data collected through a questionnaire and several observations shows a strong tendency of convergence toward friends in casual talks and a strong tendency of divergence from strangers in service encounters (if the latter are known to be able to understand the teachers' dialect). The motives underlying the convergence to friends include the desires to reduce the social distance, to be well understood, to be friendly and to be respectful. On occasions where convergence to service workers in service encounters does exist, most teachers seem to take the desire to be well understood as the motive underlying this convergence. This contrast shows their desire to keep their intergroup distinctiveness. No matter how they choose to converge or diverge in communication, Chinese college teachers seem to be almost unanimous in their positive attitudes toward their interlocutors' convergence to them. Thus far, all the three research questions have been answered, and it seems safe to conclude that CAT has been well supported in this study.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although Mandarin is also a dialect of the Chinese language, to avoid confusion, dialects in this study refer to only those local ones, excluding Mandarin.

<sup>2</sup>Actually there is some overlapping between the need to facilitate communication and the need to be better understood.

<sup>3</sup>Although a few participants provided additional motives, all of them actually can be assigned to the already existing items in the list of motives in the questionnaire. So the study does not address them.

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