

The Applicability of Communication Accommodation Theory and Empathy Strategy in Speeches

—A Case Study from Remarks by Ambassador Cui Tiankai in 2018

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Abstract: This paper is mainly based on the topic of whether the theory of Communication Accommodation (CAT) is applicable in speeches and how the Empathy strategy is applied in speeches. A case study from a speech by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at the Welcome Dinner Hosted by Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin is analyzed as a sample of intercultural communication practice. The research analyzes and explores the origin of the CAT and its related theories as well as elaborates on similarity-attraction theory, social exchange theory, causal attribution, social identity theory and some major strategies such as convergence, divergence and over-convergence for the purpose of the applicability of CAT in speeches. What is more, empathy as an important strategy is illustrated in detail. After a careful analysis, it has been proved that it is effective and practical for the application of CAT in speeches. Furthermore, the application of Empathy strategy in speeches will create a rewarding outcome.

Keywords: Communication Accommodation Theory; Convergence; Strategies Empathy

1 Introduction

In this globalized society, people must be equipped with intercultural communication abilities so that they can adapt themselves to this diversified world. Every time members from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other they actually do intercultural communication. In academic filed at home and abroad, some fascinating theories about intercultural communication have come up, however, of which strategies of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has not attracted much attention and effort. In view of the case, the paper will research into it. CAT was developed by Howard Giles, professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which aims to demonstrate all of the value of social psychological concepts to understanding the dynamics of speech and explains the adjustment in speech, vocal patterns, and gestures that people make to accommodate others. In particular, it focused on the cognitive and affective process underlying individuals' convergence and divergence through speech. Apart from that, the Communication Accommodation Theory works as a tool to underline group distinctiveness in a positive way and emphasize the individual's social identity. Ever since Communication Accommodation Theory was developed in 1971, it has been applied repeatedly to analyze the communication problems among intercultural groups of different nations, religions, nationalities, regions, genders.

This paper intends to prove that using the theories and strategies of CAT and Empathy strategy can help individuals succeed in speeches and besides that, the paper would analyze some strategies in speeches in terms of a case study, in which Ambassador Cui Tiankai, who is a Chinese diplomat and currently the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, tactfully made a speech and accommodated well in communication with the Kentuckians. As a result of that, this research would be of great significance to intercultural learners and addressers.

2. The application of CAT in case study

2.1 A brief introduction to the theoretical framework of CAT

Communication Accommodation Theory was developed from social psychology, including four major socio-psychology theories: similarity-attraction, social exchange, causal attribution, and intergroup distinctiveness, which would help to explain how and why people make their behaviors in that way to seek the common. What is more, the Communication Accommodation Theory also depends heavily on social identity theory, which argues that the social identity is based on comparisons people make

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between in-groups and out-groups. According to social identity theory, people strive for maintaining a positive social identity by either participating in groups in which they feel more at home or making a more positive experience of belong to the groups they already belong to.

Therefore, the aforesaid theories are of paramount importance to Communication Accommodation Theory, the points of which have been reflected in the speech by Cui Tiankai. The concrete illustrations would be displayed in the following parts.

2.1.1 The Application of Similarity-attraction Theory

At the beginning of the speech made by Ambassador Cui Tiankai, he mentioned "Kentucky is well-known in China. ... It was a big event for the Chinese. It was the first American fast food chain restaurant opened in the Chinese capital. So people held their birthday parties, weddings, and other big events there. Of course, nowadays KFC and many other American brands have become part of the Chinese people's daily life." By referring to the famous American brand KFC, Cui Tiankai took the listeners from American cultures into a beautiful sight, in which the native brand of Kentucky is warmly welcome around China, and it would create a warm atmosphere between the speaker and the listeners. In fact, Ambassador Cui Tiankai unconsciously adopted the skill of similarity-attraction. It helps listeners to be higher accommodation caused by a greater sense of self-esteem and satisfaction than to be a receiver of low accommodation.

2.1.2 The application of social exchange theory

Following that, Cui Tiankai mentioned that "The Chinese people and business leaders have a strong interest in building strong relations with the people and businesses here. I understand that the Chinese investment here has reached ten billion dollars, creating thousands of jobs." "I am very sure the prospects and potential are just there for even better and more extensive relations between Kentucky and Chinese provinces and cities." The sentences delivered by Cui Tiankai expressed his good expectation towards the future and he believed that through working together the two countries would bring forth a good future and rewards. What is more, by emphasizing a large amount of investment from China in Kentucky and thousands of jobs created as a result of Chinese investment, he, as a matter of fact, laid great stress on the mutual benefits for both countries. Furthermore, by speaking of the exports in both goods and services to China made by Kentucky, he underlined the much importance China attaches to economic development. Hence, the passages embody the theory of social exchange process, and through alternate courses of action, greater rewards and fewer costs would be created. At the same time, the Ambassador reminded the listeners that they are the community of shared interests so that the listeners become an active receiver in communication.

2.1.3 The application of casual attribution theory and social identity theory

Next, Ambassador Cui Tiankai quoted words separately from Governor Bevin and the state motto: "We are the two largest economies in the world." "United we stand, divided we fall." In these two sentences, it contains a signal that if China and the United States work together and cooperate with each other well a rewarding result would be brought about. Here, as a Chinese and an Ambassador in the United States, Cui Tiankai takes the responsibility to build a friendly bridge between China and America. His speech would evoke affection among the audience, making a direct influence on the relationship between the two countries. Especially, as the two biggest economies around the globe, the development and relationship of the two countries will affect the tendency of the world. Cui Tiankai combines the interests of Kentucky with Chinese people to bring the two countries together. In this part, the speaking style of Ambassador Cui Tiankai is consistent with the theory of causal attribution. He put himself in the boat which shares the mutual interests of the two nationalities, making himself to be approachable and accessible to be understood by different groups. At the same time, he ingeniously constructed his own identity that refers to the position of the participants in the social network, which is multi-dimensional and dynamic. He made it clear that he has been an embassy for five years in the United States and his pleasure to set foot on the land of Kentucky, which would bring about favorable impression on his listeners.

2.2 The application of strategies of CAT

2.2.1 Convergence

According to the theory of Communication Accommodation, Convergence refers to the process through which an individual shifts speech patterns in interaction so that they more closely resemble the speech patterns of speech partners. People can converge through many features of communication such as their use of language, their pronunciation, pause and utterance lengths, vocal intensities, non-verbal behaviors. Therefore, the use of the principle of convergence provides a new perspective for the analysis of Ambassador Cui Tiankai. In the remarks of Cui Tiankai, there are many parts where Convergence was used to strengthen the warm atmosphere and increase the effectiveness of the communication. The way of convergence can lower uncertainty, interpersonal anxiety and promotes mutual understanding.

In the speech at the Welcome Dinner, Cui Tiankai masterly avoided the divergence by adopting the way of convergence. When asked by some reporters whether there are some differences between what he has experienced in Kentucky and what he had to deal with every day in Washington DC, Cui Tiankai just focused on the commons rather than differences. His answer highlights the point that brought two countries and peoples together and at the same time, he achieved a successful identity construction, causing a community of shared interests. It laid a foundation for his following point in which cooperation with each other is the only option and the only right choice the two countries should make. When making a reply to the ongoing discussion about what China tries to achieve in the world, Cui Tiankai made it clear that China is trying to develop itself so that Chinese people could have a better life. Aside from that, he mentioned Abraham Lincoln, a native Kentuckian, who is a supporter to stand for a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, whose view accorded with the idea of the Chinese government which put stress on people-centered development. Therefore, the aspiration of the two countries is the same goal, that is to say, fighting for a better life. In this context, the application of convergence helps Ambassador Cui Tiankai to establish a viewpoint among listeners that only by working together with other countries will it be possible for human beings to be a bright future and to be win-win results.

2.2.2 Divergence and over-divergence

As a matter of fact, in Communication Accommodation Theory, there are three main linguistic phenomena containing convergence, divergence, and over-accommodation among which divergence is a strategy which is seldom used or studied because sometimes the communicators tend to place special emphasis on their distinctiveness between their languages and behaviors. Divergence is a totally different method from Convergence in that by via of the divergence way, the two speakers will not be connected with each other. They actually do not concern about the other party, be the speaking speed, volume, gesture or posture. Anyway, they just want to avoid the similarity of each other and they are not concerned about whether the other party accommodates or not in communication. Contrary to the divergence strategy, in the remarks of Ambassador Cuikai, he tried to use convergence strategy instead of divergence aiming to make his views be accepted by the native Kentuckians. By means of convergence, he displayed his charming personality and his credibility to the listeners. Although he is Chinese, he brought closer the distance of two peoples by speaking of the mutual goal and the same pursuit, narrowing the gap between different nationalities. In reality, Convergence is very much similar to similarity-attraction, through which individuals will make use of their language, smile or other ways to accommodate with communicators. As for over-accommodation, just as the name implies, the speakers often accommodate with others immoderately, which, as a consequence, creates just the opposite to what one wishes. In general, over-accommodation is divided into three cases made up of sensory over-accommodation, dependency over-accommodation and intergroup over-accommodation, which is not be found in the speech by Ambassador Cui Tiankai, which accordingly illustrates the accommodation communication ability of him.

3 The application of empathy in speeches

As a communication strategy, empathy has been widely applied in a variety of kinds of communication, significantly contributing to the success of communication. As the saying goes, communication can bring people together, but culture may keep them apart. As a result, in intercultural communication, more barriers and obstacles lie between communicators and in that connection, empathy strategy plays an important part in realizing successful intercultural communication. However, empathy should observe the moderate principle which means neither under-empathizing nor over-empathizing. It is important to distinguish empathy from sympathy, under-empathy, and over-empathy.

In this paper, empathy in intercultural communication means the addresser intentionally makes linguistic choices to accommodate with the addressee's benefits by adjusting himself to the intercultural context for purpose of making himself accepted by the addressee emotionally, and then make his ideas that are different from the addressee's more easily accepted by the addressee, and accordingly realize his own communicative objectives. In the speech, Ambassador Cui Tiankai appealed to the American people to concentrate on the same goal for a better world and keeping in mind the real big picture that the new wealth generated by globalization will benefit more countries and more people in each year rather than make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Thus it can be seen that the application of empathy in the speech help Ambassador Cui Tiankai attract the audience and good results have been achieved.

However, making empathy strategy realized in practical intercultural communication needs to pay attention to some points. First of all, individuals must make good preparations for speeches in advance including cultural knowledge and so on, so that the individuals can speak from the perspective of the foreign culture, which will be greatly facilitate the communication. What is more, figuring out the common points and positive relations between both sides of the intercultural communication, take them as a starting point of the communication. This point is greatly supported by the illustration of Ambassador Cui Tiankai, he wisely employed the strategy to focus on the common things and avoid the differences. Last but not least, the intercultural communication should be treated as a dynamic process and individuals should adjust their language according to the context.

4. Conclusion

According to the previous analysis, the theories and strategies of Communication Accommodation Theory make it possible to be applied to speeches in spite of some limitations. In the speech of Ambassador Cui Tiankai, he successfully fulfilled the accommodation in communication by means of the strategies of CAT.

The speech by Ambassador Cui Tiankai won a good response, which benefited from the practical and effective application about the strategies of CAT. He artistically used language to integrate into the community of Kentucky. He first referred to the famous fast food chain restaurant closely relevant to Chinese fast food field as the first American fast food restaurant setting foot on the mainland of China. Moreover, Cui consciously spoke highly of the popularity of KFC in China, as well as other great things in Kentucky such as their agricultural products, aerospace industry, automobiles, and their beautiful horses to strike a chord with the native Kentuckians. Having finished a good start at the beginning of the speech, Ambassador Cui Tiankai began to build a bright prospect in communication, which further pushes forward the dining atmosphere at the highest level of accommodation and, in consequence of this, achieved a fascinating interaction by speaking of the mutual interests. Through talking about the close connection with Kentucky, Ambassador Cui Tiankai successfully attracted the attention of people to concentrate on what they have in common rather than in differences. As a matter of fact, this is the process in which convergence was constructed and divergence was avoided. As listeners gradually accepted the view and feel good, Cui Tiankai further talked about other rewarding outcomes if the United States and China work together to make sure that better predictability and sustainability serve global economic growth rather than create more barriers and obstacles to the prospects for global prosperity. In the end, empathy works in the heart of the listeners, making them attracted by the addresser. Once this empathy was established, the distance between communications would be narrowed, making for good accommodation in communication.

In conclusion, using the Communication Accommodation Theory and empathy strategy in speeches is applicable and effective.

It can help communicators make a more relax and pleasant atmosphere in intercultural communication, eliminating the barriers from different cultures and so on. Therefore, the paper maybe will give readers some enlightenment, however, in spite of the great effort made by the author but in view of the limited ability of the current study, further research on this topic can be done in the future.

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