Convergence and Divergence in Telephone Conversations: A Case of Persian

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Abstract—People usually have a telephone voice, which means they adjust their speech to fit particular situations and to blend in with other interlocutors. The question is: Do we speak differently to different people? This possibility has been suggested by social psychologists within *Accommodation Theory* [1]. Converging toward the speech of another person can be regarded as a polite speech strategy while choosing a language not used by the other interlocutor can be considered as the clearest example of speech divergence [2]. The present study sets out to investigate such processes in the course of everyday telephone conversations. Using Joos's [3] model of formality in spoken English, the researchers try to explore *convergence to* or *divergence from* the addressee. The results propound the actuality that lexical choice, and subsequently, patterns of style vary intriguingly in concordance with the person being addressed.

Keywords—Convergence, divergence, lexical formality, speech accommodation.

I. INTRODUCTION[1]

I T is through conversation that we conduct the ordinary and perhaps extraordinary affairs of our lives. When we talk with one another, we are not merely communicating thoughts or information. Our relationships with others, and our sense of who we are, are generated, maintained, and managed in and through our conversations. We construct, establish, reproduce and negotiate our identities, roles and relationships in conversational interaction. In our interactions with others, we don't just talk; we also do things such as inviting, asking, blaming, greeting, advising, apologizing, complaining, or sympathizing [4]. These and other such activities are some of the primary forms of social action. They are as real, concrete, consequential and fundamental as any other form of conduct [5].

Communication Accommodation Theory (henceforth, CAT) explains some of the reasons for change in conversation as individuals seek to emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors [6]. The assumption underlying this theory is that we accommodate linguistically toward the speech style, accent or dialect of our interlocutors in order 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) were also included in the analysis, and since then, CAT has made a more fine-grained distinction between different types of (non-) accommodation such as counter-accommodation and over-and under-accommodation within the newly adopted term Social Accommodation Theory (henceforth SAT). In this way, it focuses not only on intergroup characteristics but on interpersonal features, cultural variability, and power. The major theoretical reference for SAT/CAT scholarship is Social Identity Theory (SIT), which argues that individuals attempt to categorize the world into social groups [7]. In this vein, sociolinguists argue that when speakers seek approval in a social situation they are likely to change their speech according to that of their interlocutor's [2]. 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, however, engage in divergent speech whereby emphasizing the social distance between themselves and their interlocutors by using linguistic or even non-linguistic features. *Audience design* is the term Bell [8] assigns to his sociolinguistic model in which he contends that linguistic style-shifting occurs in response to one's audience. He argues that speakers adjust their speech primarily toward that of their audience to express solidarity or intimacy, 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. People may, thus, converge or adapt their speech rate, the grammatical patterns, intonation and utterance length according to their addressees [2]. One important aspect of speech convergence is its dichotomous categorization. Imagine, for example, a man who intends to take part in a job interview. He 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, on that account, practicing *downward convergence*.

An important aspect of accommodation is the level of formality with which a speaker speaks in different social settings. This has been one of the most widely analyzed areas in the field of sociolinguistics bearing on the circumstances where the use of language is determined by the immediate situation of the speakers. This stylistic variation results from the fact that different people may express themselves in

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different ways, and that the same person may express the same idea quite differently when addressing different people. As Labov [9] noted, "the most immediate problem to be solved in the attack on sociolinguistic structure is the quantification of the dimension of style." 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 ways of expression. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics [10] 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." Although this definition gives us an idea of what a formal situation is, it 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 can be characterized not only by detachment, precision, and objectivity, but also rigidity and heaviness. An informal style will be more flexible, direct, and involved, but correspondingly more subjective, less accurate and less informative [11, 12].

Although style-shifting is not of main interest in the present study, it facilitates the purpose of this study which is to define situations where the level of formality varies according to varying situations. As the situations and the addressees vary, the speaker feels the need to speak in a different manner in order to maintain the social interaction. These differences are worth careful study since they are part and parcel of our everyday social life.

One interesting and revealing context in which variation occurs is a person's everyday telephone conversations. Obvious as it may seem, each person has a telephone voice, i.e., he/she adapts his /her speech according to the immediate addressee. This is a flowering situation for speech accommodation with special attention to formality variation since in such a situation the face to face interaction does not exist and, thus, speakers can just hear each other.

Speech has variously been categorized into different styles or modes. One widely-quoted classification belongs by Quirk et al [13], who divide language into 4 styles ranging from formal to very informal, casual and familiar over a spectrum. Not surprisingly there is little agreement as to how such spectrums should be divided. In one prominent model, Joos [3], however, elaborates on five differing styles in spoken English:

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

Although Joos's model is relatively old, it is usually used in studies of style-shifting. Several studies have delved into the concept of linguistic accommodation but it seems that none of them has, so far, been devoted to the investigation of this phenomenon in telephone conversations in general and in Persian in particular. In the present study the researchers use Joos's model to shed light on the lexical choice of a Persian speaker in his telephone conversations. This study provides further evidence of an explicit link between social situation and level of formality. 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.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first work on accommodation was published in 1973 when Giles [1] put under scrutiny the phenomenon of accent convergence in an interview situation. He argued that situational variation should be studied with reference to receiver characteristics and not only with reference to formality or informality of the context. In more recent versions of the theory proposed Coupland [14], the aim is to clarify the motivations underlying the speech as well as the constraints operating upon the phenomenon and their social consequences.

In one of his studies, Bell [8] 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 their target audience. Bell concluded that the most plausible way to account for the variation was to posit that newscasters were attuning their speech to what they perceived to be the norms among their respective radio audiences.

Some linguists [15, 16] have tried to determine the formality level of a spoken interaction by focusing on the frequency of words and grammatical forms that are viewed as either familiar or careful (e.g., *vous* vs. *tu*, the omission of the negative particle in sentence negation in French, or 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.

In another study, Coupland [14] set out to investigate whether or not people speak differently to different people. To this aim, he decided to find a situation in which one single speaker would speak 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 by having a microphone located in front of her counter to record the conversations. The results confirmed *accommodation* although Coupland was mainly interested in aspects of pronunciation.

Heylighen and Dewaele [17] proposed an empirical measure for formality (F-score), which is based on the average degree of deixis for the most important word classes. They revealed that nouns, adjectives, articles and prepositions are more frequent in formal styles while pronouns, adverbs, verbs and interjections are more frequent in informal style.

In a different study, Sarangi and Slembrouck [18] claim that although Grice's theory is apparently about conversation it has

a potential to account for and explain discourse in institutional contexts. However, in order to achieve this, due attention should be paid to factors of a societal kind. For the authors, this means, on the one hand, examining the correlations between participants' socioeconomic interests, their social identities, the social and situational powers they (do not) possess, and their expectations, and, on the one hand, principled forms of language use.

In the most recent study, Ladegaard [19] regards resistance and non-cooperation as a discursive strategy in authentic student-teacher dialogues arguing that contrary to Grice's cooperative principle, 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. He suggests that meaning in language makes sense only in the light of the social and psychological conditions under which language is produced, and that the notion of cooperation should be analyzed in terms of what people want to obtain by their communication. In his article communication accommodation theory is proposed as a more appropriate explanatory framework to achieve this end.

III. DATA

In order to gather the relevant data, a 28-year-old Iranian man 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 would require him to have several calls with a range of different people. He was free to exclude any conversation he thought too personal to be included in the data. Through this data gathering procedure, the researchers came to about 50 natural conversations he had conducted with different people during that week. Not surprisingly, a number of conversations were too short to have any informative data to our purpose and some others, although of a reasonable length, did not include any revealing information.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION

As mentioned above, the aim of this study was not to examine Gricean cooperation. Rather, its main objective was to study patterns of accommodation and formality in relation to different speakers on the phone. The context under which the recordings were done is natural. The study was conducted with one Persian speaker as the main subject of the study and some other addressees who triggered variations in the subject's speech. 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 preferred discourse strategies constituting the norm rather than the exception in the contexts under scrutiny. Notice that in all the examples presented here, one party, namely subject (A), is kept constant and the addressees vary. All the examples will be presented in succession without comments and will be analyzed

thematically in the following section (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

Extract 1 (subject A and wife B)

آ: سلام! سلام! سلام!
ب: چطوري؟
آ: مرسي!
ب: چه خبر؟ كجايي؟
آ: من تو ادارم.
ب:= تو اداره اي؟!
آ: آره!
ب: مي گم نهار چي مي خوري؟
آ: نهارم (٢) نمي دونم! چي پختي؟
ب: من كوكو سيب زميني پختم.
آ: واي! دستت درد نكنه!

A: Hey! Hey! Hey!
B: How are you?
A: Thanks!
B: What's going on? Where are you?
A: I'm at the office.
B: =At the office?!
A: Yeah!
B: What are you going to have for lunch?
A: lunch? (2) I've no idea! What have you cooked?
B: I've cooked potato rissoles.
A: Oh great! Thanks a lot!

Extract 2 (subject A and wife B)

ب:خوب اگر مي خواي برو خونه مامان و اينا. اداره وايميسي؟
آ:اداره؟ امروز پنج شنبس!
ب:اگه واي نمي سي مي خواي بري اونجا؟
ا:تو كي مي خواي بزني بيرون؟
ب: من يه نيم ساعت ديگه. الان يك و نيمه ساعت؟
ا:يك و رب الان.
ب: من ٢ مي خوام برم.
آ: مي خواي بزني بيرو/ان؟
ب: آره.
آ:حالا نه اونجا كه نمي شه بيام حالشم ندارم.
ب: ها؟
آ:يه كاري مي كنم مي رم خونه مامان و اينا.
ب: اُكى!
آ:معذرت مي خوام.
ب: خواهش مي كنم.
آ: يه كار ديگه هم داشتم. (٢) كتاب جي مت مياري برام؟
ب: كيفم ديگه جا نداره!
آ: بيارش. كتاب گند يه رو.
ب:= باشه.
آ: دست شما درد نكنه!

B: Well, um if you like, go to mom's place. You're going to stay at the office?

A: The office? Today is Thursday!

B: If you don't stay at the office, are you going round there?

A: When do you want to head out? ⬅

B: In about another half an hour. Is it half one now?

A: It is a quarter past one.

B: I want to go at 2.

A: You're going to head ou//t? ⬅

B: Yeah.

A: I can't go there. I can't be bothered either. ⬅

B: mmm?

A: I'll do this. I'll go to mom's place.

B: OK!

A: Sorry.

B: That's alright

A: I wanted something else too. (2) Can you bring the Gee Met book?

B: There's no space in my bag!

A: Bring it. It's the big hefty book. ⬅

B: =OK!

A: Thank you very much. ⬅

Extract 3 (subject A and wife B)

ب: بيداري؟

آ:آره بابا ! ➡

ب: من دارم مي//آم.

آ:بدوووو! ➡

B: Are you awake?

A: Yeah. Already, I am! ⬅

B: I'm com//ing.

A: Shake a leg! ⬅

Extract 4 (subject A and wife B)

آ: منم تقريبا يه نيم ساعت رسيدم اداره.

ب: إ؟!

آ:آره خيلي طول كشيد.

ب:= جلسه بودي؟

آ: چي؟

ب: تا حالا جلسه بودي؟

آ:آره!

ب: أه!

آ: تا ساعت 10 و ربع و اينا جلسه بودم. بعدشم (١) تو ترافيك بودم.

ب: ها چي شد؟

آ: ترافيك بودم!

ب: آهان!

آ: ترافيك بودم تازه الانم نيم ساعت رسيدم اداره!

ب: = پس سر آژانسم نرفتي؟!

آ:نه بابا نمي شد يك ترافيكي بود! ➡

ب: حالا به هر حال يه سر برو نمي دونم حالا. ➡

آ:خوب (١) مي خواي خودت تماس بگيري ببيني چه جوريه؟

A: I reached the office about half an hour ago.

B: Really?!

A: Yeah it took a really long time.

B: =Were you in a meeting?

A: Pardon?

B: Were you in a meeting up till now?

A: Yeah!

B: Oh!

A: I was in a meeting till 10 and then (1) I got stuck in traffic.

B: Oh what happened?

A: I was in traffic!

B: Oh right.

A: I was stuck in traffic and now it's only been half an hour since I reached the office.

B: =So you didn't call in at the agency?! ⬇

A: Hell no, really couldn't. It was a really bad traffic jam!

B: Anyway, drop in some time. ⬅

A: I tell you what. (1) Why don't you give them a ring yourself, see how it is?

Extract 5 (subject A and wife B)

آ: سلام! خوبي؟

ب: سلام!

آ: صبح بخير.

ب: صبح؟!

آ: = بله صبح.

ب: ظهر الانه!

آ:نه الان ١١٣٠! خوب چي كارا مي كني؟ ➡

ب: مي گذرونيم. ➡

آ: = چه خبرا؟

ب: قابل عرض سلامتي. شما چه خبرا؟ چه طور شد؟

آ: جان؟

ب: چي طور شد؟

آ:چي چي؟! اون كه هيچي.

ب: به اقاي شريف زنگ نزدي؟

آ: نه. حالا مي گم برات شب.

A: Hi! How are you?

B: Hi!

A: Good morning

B: Morning?!

A: =Yes, morning.

B: It's the afternoon now!

A: No it's 11:50 now! Well what are you up to? ⬅

B: This and that. ⬅

A: = What's new?

B: Nothing much. What's new with you? How did it go?

A: Sorry?

B: How did it go?

A: You what?! Oh that didn't come to anything.

B: Did you phone Mr. Sharifi?

A: No, I'll tell you what happened tonight.

Extract 6 (subject A and stranger B)

آ: الو!

ب: آقاي روان بخش؟

آ: بفرمائيد بله؟

ب: صبحتون بخير از موسسه ي ...مزاحمتون مي شم.

آ: خواهش مي كنم.

ب: آقاي روان بخش! نمايشگاه كامپيوتر در خدمتتان بوديم.

آ: بله!

ب: در جريانيد كه اسمتون نوشته شد براي يك سمينار؟

آ: بله!

ب: مي خواستم خدمتتون عرض كنم روز دوشنبه ساعت چهار ونيم سمينار ما برگزار مي شه.

آ: اينو فقط من ببينم برنامه كاريم چطوريه. ما راستياتش هفته اي 3 روز بيرون از شهريم. (۱) بعد تا مي آيم بر گرديم ساعت 4و 5 بعد از ظهر. حالا اگه تونستيم كه حتما جورش مي كنم بيام در خدمت باشم.

A: Hello!

B: Mr. Ravanbakhsh?

A: Yes, speaking.

B: Good morning, I'm phoning from the … institute.

A: Oh right?!

B: Mr. Ravanbakhsh! We were at you service at the computer exhibition.

A: Yes!

B: Are you aware that you name has been written down for a seminar?

A: Yes.

B: I just wanted to let you know that our seminar is going to be held on Monday at 4:30.

A: I just have to check my work schedule; it's just that we're out of town 3 days a week. (1) By the time we get back it's around 4, 5 o'clock. If it's possible I'll try to come and be of service to you.

Extract 7 (subject A and stranger B)

ب: صبحتون بخير!

آ: قربون شما!

ب: موتور خو//نه ي...

آ: بله!

ب: اينا با آقاي ... صحبت كردم گفتن دو گانه سوز ببنديم، 189 هزار پارس دو گانه سوز.

آ: الان؟!

ب: اينا بعد از اينكه با شما تماس گرفتن مشخص شد كه حالا باشه يكي شو يكي شو دو گانه يكي شم گاز سوز770.

آ: ممنون!

ب: نه مشكلش برطرف نشده!

آ: =مشكلي كه الان روش هست مشعل 10000 اصلا جوابگو نيست يه مشكل ما تو يه مدرسه بستيم 64000 پارس مشخصات مشعل من من يه جا نوشتم اما الان تو اداره دنبالم نيست بيرون شهرم فردا صبح يه تماس مي گيرم درخدمتتون هستم.

B: Good morning!

A: Good morning to you too!

B: I say, the engine ro//om

A: Right!

B: I talked to Mr. … He said we should use a dual gas burner. 189 thousand Pars dual gas burner.

A: Now?!

B: After they phoned you they decided to make one of them a duel burner and the other a 770 burner.

A: Thanks!

B: No it's still not fixed!

A: =The problem they have is that the pilot 1000 isn't working for them. We fixed one in a school once, with a PARS 64000, I wrote the particulars of it down somewhere but I don't have it with me at the office, I'm out of town when I get back tomorrow I'll phone you and I'll be of service then.

V. ANALYSIS

We will now try to closely analyze the excerpts. We will focus on the two types of linguistic strategies our subject used and the corresponding motivations. It goes without saying that while talking to an intimate relative or fiend, we normally use informal and even intimate phrases, to use Joos's terms, and that this intentional informality creates a sense of in-group membership among the participants. In the first extract, the way the subject starts greeting his wife is a clear example of the uses of informal word choices, which would certainly differ if the addressee were one of the out-group members. Repetition of *hey* which is in itself an informal word not only once but three times seems to be in consort with the informal nature of the talk the speaker is to have with his wife.

We see a similar phenomenon in extract 2, where the subject's speech is full of highly informal words as in *I can't be bothered either* or *the big hefty book*. The word the subject uses for *large* in Persian (translated in English as *hefty*) is definitely categorized under intimate style according to what Joos has suggested. What is interesting here is the way the subject thanks his wife for bringing him the book. He uses formal, if not highly formal, words to show his gratitude, which can be regarded as 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 he and his addressee are not in the same position now and that his wife should be respected for what she is going to do. To wit, A sees B more powerful in this situation and this makes him opt for a formal way of appreciating her.

Likewise, in the last line of extract 3, *shake a leg* seems to be another example of conversational accommodation, in this case convergence, toward the addressee. As it can be inferred from the data, in this short talk, A is waiting for B to pick him up. Besides, he seems to be in a hurry. This is perhaps why he pays almost no attention to the words he chooses to express the situations he is in. Not surprisingly, then, we observe an instance of turn-taking violation on the part of A since A does not wait until B finishes her talk and interrupts her.

The salient features of extract 4 are the amount of redundancy and repetition of the same ideas between A and B. In this excerpt all the utterances evolve around the topic *traffic* and no specific information is being transferred. In fact, A is rephrasing himself over and over, which seems to be characteristic of highly informal conversations. The most notable instance of informal language use seems to be A's *hell no*, which seems not only to convey his frustration of traffic but also his frustration of his wife's untimely question. Additionally, B's informal *drop in* in her final turn can be regarded as an instance of informal language use. This informal language use is, however, in harmony with the overall informal tone of the conversation

In a similar vein, in extract 5, B, having heard A's informal *up to*, which is of course, again, in consort with the overall informal tone of the conversation, blends in by her informal *this and that*.

Now let's focus on a couple of conversations held with unfamiliar people. We begin by focusing on Extract 6, where an unfamiliar lady calls A. The lady who is calling is almost unfamiliar to A and thus A answers just by short phrases and simple sentences. The woman, however, speaks quite formally. In Joos's model [3], this is regarded as a consultative style because there is a lot of back-channeling. Here, the subject finally converges toward the way the woman speaks by repeating B's *be at your service* at the end of the conversation.

In extract 7, A is talking to a co-worker of his using a formal style the function of which seems to be accentuating the differences between the two interlocutors. As we can see, B starts by using everyday ordinary phrases, which are, in point of fact, related to the quality of his speech. To put it differently, B's utterances are almost neutral; they are neither formal nor informal. However, these utterances are first answered by A's minimal responses and finally by a highly formal utterance. Therefore, it can be argued that at times when people are themselves cognizant of the neutrality of a situation, they may, as active participants in a conversation, try to keep themselves away from the other interlocutor. This may imply that not all cases of speech divergence occur between two socially different parties. If we consider the motivations for speech divergence within SAT/CAT, A's behavior does not seem to be strange. He clearly defines the encounter in intergroup terms and desires a positive in-group identity to which his interlocutor does not belong.

VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to probe into the patterns of accommodation within authentic conversations and try to explain their underlying motivations. Communication Accommodation Theory [6] and Social Accommodation Theory [20] seem to have come along way toward explaining how meaning emerges out of social and positioning of the communicators, either in face-to-face communications or in telephone conversations. In this way, scholars working within such theories have tried to bring to light how macro-level social structures of a society have bearings on micro-level situational contexts such as authentic conversations.

What was emphasized in this study was the fact that conversation is not a succession of disconnected remarks, but cooperative efforts where the participants recognize a common purpose, or at least a mutually accepted direction [21].

Delving into conversation analytical works, however, leaves always 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 this study. First, style-shifting patterns are worth paying closer attention in future research. Also, researchers may focus on the shift of accent as an aspect of speech accommodation. Another area which requires more attention 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. Last but not least, as Richards [22] 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 thus has left open other aspects of variation in style for further research.

APPENDIX

Conventions

   A. A comma indicates a short pause (half a second or less).
   B. Numbers in parentheses show duration of pauses in speech.
   C. // Indicates an interruption.
   D. $\longrightarrow$ Indicates the significant utterance under scrutiny.

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