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Managing intergroup communication: Life-span issues and consequences¹

Howard Giles—Jake Harwood

1. Introduction

The rationale for this paper derives from two truisms: that we live in a world where, *languages* come, evolve, and go, and second, *people* come, develop, and go. Einar Haugen made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of issues in the former sphere through his research on linguistic conflict, language change, and language death (Haugen 1966, 1972, 1987). Our contribution is an attempt to make some headway in the latter, surprisingly less mined, life-span sphere. Hence, much of this essay (together with new empirical data) will necessarily revolve around intergenerational phenomena and processes. We raise questions as to how we accommodate to, and communicate about, our cultural and mortal identities, and how, as scholars interested in human communication, we can best deal with the ephemeral nature of human bodies as Haugen did with respect to the sometimes ephemeral nature of cultures and languages. Our orientations are guided by three principles and are illustrated with examples from different research domains. We place particular emphasis on interactive problems and miscommunication since our theoretical approach has applied aspirations (see Fishman 1995). Throughout we adhere, implicitly, to a further fundamental principle: that the personal and social identities (such as age and ethnicity) to which we subscribe are complexly formed, made salient, and reconstructed through the conjoint actions of our own, and others', sociolinguistic behaviors. Finally, we attempt to integrate the domains and principles with some speculative ideas for future research and practice.

2. Three principles

2.1. Much of linguistic interaction embodies “intergroup” processes

All persons are members of various social categories (e. g., ethnic, age, gender, disabled, homosexual) and their memberships in them are impor-

tant to greater or lesser degrees. Some situations call attention to these group memberships — individuals' social identities — rather than their idiosyncratic personal identities. Personal identity according to Turner et al. (1987) refers to self-definitions in terms of particular personality and behavioral characteristics, whereas social identity is a definition in terms of social-category membership. Hence, the distinction between inter-individual and intergroup saliences may be a crucial dimension of communication between people in general (Tajfel 1978), and ethnic and age categories in particular. In an interindividually-salient encounter, particular individual qualities of the participants are salient and attended to (Fiske—Neuberg 1990). The role of communication is important here as speakers can attune their messages to the productive and interpretive competencies of their recipients (e. g., by adopting paralinguistic features of a respected colleague, and slowing down for your infant working on a complex question, respectively) as well as their recipients' particular needs and wants (see Giles—Coupland—Coupland 1991 for a theoretical discussion of the antecedents and social consequences of such accommodative practices and Gallois et al. 1995 for a focus on intercultural issues).

So-called “intergroup” encounters, however, occur when people categorize each other as group members, and respond to each other by means of their social identities. Often, this results in treatment of individuals in terms of stereotypes associated with their particular social group and can lead to negative evaluations, misunderstandings and conflict. Rather than sociolinguistic behavior being “merely” responsive to immediate factors in the context of the interaction itself, participants who define their encounters in “intergroup” terms can sometimes bring hundreds of years of the history of relations between the two groups to bear upon their understanding. In other words, we bring to intergroup interaction a heavy cultural “baggage” on our communicative backs. At times, this baggage includes cognitive and affective representations of previous incidents of oppression, longstanding exploitation, and so forth.

Let us move away from explosive intergroup contexts to one wherein all of us participate, viz., intergenerational contexts. Often negative stereotypes held by young people of older people mediate interactions between them and younger people can overaccommodate and, perhaps unwittingly, patronize their elders, despite nurturing intentions (Ryan—Hummert—Boich 1995). Of course, stereotypic conceptions are not the province of just one generation (Giles—Williams 1994), and intergenerational overaccommodations from older to younger also occur as when a father might overparent his adult daughter. Furthermore, when people

subjectively define an encounter as an “intergroup” one, there can be a need to manage one’s social identity in a positive manner. Often this is achieved in face-to-face interactions not by converging towards others but rather, by diverging from them; that is, maintaining and emphasizing one’s distinctive sociolinguistic style. Although such “under-accommodations” can, of course, impede communicative efficiency in many situations, their function lies in their symbolic assertion of a valued identity (oftentimes under threat). Clearly, one’s identity as a member of an age category – be it, for instance, “young”, “middle-aged”, or “elderly” – can be salient across different kinds of interactions, intra- as well as inter-generational.

Our own perspective on intergroup interaction is, as the foregoing attests, greatly influenced by social-identity theory (SIT: Tajfel 1978). SIT maintains that individuals derive positive social identity from their membership in certain groups (see Hogg–Abrams 1988 for a comprehensive overview, and Hogg–Abrams 1993 for further developments). It follows, then, that social identity is an important part of one’s self-concept, and that people strive to positively differentiate their group from another as a means of further maintaining positive self-esteem. Social identity is established through a comparison of one group against another, and if individuals sense that their identity is threatened (see Branscombe–Wann 1994; Dubé-Simard 1983), they will attempt to sociolinguistically differentiate from the source of that threat.

The hierarchical nature of a social structure is also an essential element in the development of one’s social identity. That is, we agree “that society comprises social categories which stand in power and status relations to one another” (Hogg–Abrams 1988: 14). The dominant group has the potential to impose its value system and ideology upon subordinate groups for its own ends. Only when members of the subordinate group feel as though they are socially mobile (i. e., can rise from one group to another) will they attempt to assimilate and become members of the dominant group. If the subordinate group feels that the boundaries between them are impermeable, they may, through social creativity or social competition, attempt to improve their group’s social status. One socially creative strategy is for a subordinate group to compare itself to an even lower-status group, while an example of a socially competitive strategy would be the mobilization of civil actions in defense and promotion of one’s ingroup code. While we have invoked SIT across a range of the intergroup communication contexts including the intercultural (e. g., Cargile–Giles 1996; Giles 1978) – as have others (e. g., Giles–Coupland

1991a; Gudykunst 1986; Gudykunst—Ting-Toomey—Chua 1988) — it is only recently that it has been afforded attention in the intergenerational sphere (Fox—Giles 1993; Harwood—Giles—Ryan 1995).

In sum, even dyadic communication can be “intergroup”. Sometimes intergroup processes (e. g., those relating to gender) can mediate even the most intimate of longterm and/or marital relationships. How much of our everyday sociolinguistic energies are engaged in activated intergroup contexts of one kind or another (such as when we move from being a professor, to being an American, to being Kansan, to being a Republican, to being an administrator, a man, etc.) is an empirical question. Our guess — given that we rely on social categorization and inference processes so much in initial interactions for economically achieving our communicative goal — is that intergroup dynamics are immensely important sociolinguistically; certainly far more so than they have been given credit for. Moreover, how, when, and why we move back and forth between these situated identities (even within the same interaction) are other important empirical questions. By the same token, some encounters which might be superficially labeled as intergroup, can actually be defined solely in interindividual terms (i. e., race, age, gender, etc., are contextually irrelevant). Nonetheless, we suspect that sustained instances of this are rare. Indeed, while we may not be construing a situation in terms of a particular social identity, our conversational partner may have categorized us into a group based on some characteristic or other (sometimes sociolinguistic) and linguistically depersonalize us as a consequence. Not only are our identities and those of others strategically constructed — yet other times nonconsciously enacted — or made salient through talk, but we do have to manage the, sometimes unwanted, linguistic constructions of others’ conceptions of us (see Louw-Potgieter—Giles 1987). In other words, when a professor talks to a student man-to-man — or woman-to-woman — the latter may nevertheless feel that differences in age categories are dominating the conversational field and hence the student’s communicative responses to the situation.

In the light of the foregoing, a couple of perspectives can be forwarded here to account for the types of miscommunication that can crop up in intergroup contexts. First, it is possible that “miscommunication” between members of different groups can be a function of what they bring to the interaction as group members (i. e., different communicative norms, different speech styles, etc.) and hence that miscommunication occurs as a function of simple misunderstanding. An accent is difficult to understand, or another culture’s norms of communication are hard to

fathom (e. g., differences in eye-gaze patterns across ethnic groups (Condor 1976), or the predominance of painful self-disclosure in elderly talk (Coupland–Coupland–Giles 1991)). The second perspective is that group membership per se is sufficient to cause these misunderstandings (Coupland–Wiemann–Giles 1991). This would suggest that individuals from different groups seek differentiation from outgroups and this can result in miscommunication (e. g., stereotypes of older adults leading to patronizing speech; dislike of English Canadians leading to Francophone divergence).

These are not exclusive perspectives, but an emphasis on one side or the other can lead to very different interpretations of miscommunication, both by those of us concerned with the study of such processes, and for the participants in such exchanges. An emphasis on the first perspective views the participants in intergroup (mis)communication as essentially good, well-intentioned beings, who have difficulty relating to unfamiliar modes of communication. An extreme case here might involve two individuals who do not share a language exchanging greetings via gestures, smiling, and moving on. Effective communication is, to a large degree, unlikely, and hence the lack of communication can be attributed situationally. An emphasis on the second perspective views the participants in exchanges in a less complimentary light. These are people who are intolerant, and who, despite the possibility of effective and civil communication, refuse to even try. The extreme case here is the epithet-hurling bigot. Good communication is possible, but the individual(s) involved will not let it happen – the failure of communication is attributed to the outgroup interlocutor and interests and norms represented by their social category membership (see Hewstone 1989).

We would suggest that either extreme case is rare, but that the two together are informative as to the roots of intergroup misunderstanding. In particular we would suggest a situation where very often there are real communicative gaps between group members. Across different social groups individuals' backgrounds, communicative and psychological resources, norms for politeness, and beliefs about the role of talk differ substantially. Further, individuals entering an intergroup encounter will hold stereotypes of the group to which they are talking (or perhaps a particular subtype of it). These stereotypes will influence the ways in which they approach the partner and hence the nature of the communication and could influence the attributions made for any differences that are apparent. In addition, the need for differentiation may well influence the level of affiliation sought, and the degree to which they converge

towards, and attune to, the performance and needs of the other individual. Hence the differences encountered in intergroup encounters may be “differences that make a difference”, whereas in more interindividual encounters such differences might be accommodated, forgotten or ignored.

The sociolinguistic aspects of this go beyond the “effects” of categorization. We should remember that the very process of categorization can itself be a linguistic one, with particular vocal and verbal features triggering a wealth of social meanings. A particular accent may garner negative evaluations on some dimensions, yet relatively positive evaluations on other dimensions (see Giles—Coupland 1991a: chapter 2). Use of accents in the media will often illustrate very nicely the restricted roles and functions we expect of particularly-accented individuals. These expectations get played out in interpersonal interactions, where accents are processed and responded to. There is considerable evidence that perceptions of particular accents influence the types of messages directed toward individuals with those accents (see Cargile et al. 1994). These messages may be pitched at the recipient in variously overt, veiled, or strategically ambiguous forms. In addition to influencing evaluations of others, our “lay theories” about the nature of particular group (accent) memberships will influence the ways in which we self- or group-present.

Recent data we collected in Catalonia are pertinent here. Catalonia is fascinating because it is an autonomous Spanish region where public opinion and legislation have recently supported ingroup cultural values and language habits (see Woolard 1989). The King of Spain’s opening address at the Barcelona Olympics — which included Catalan — was a huge reflection of the symbolic value and pride placed on this previously stigmatized, nonstandard language variety. Rather than converging towards Castillian Spaniards as they had done in the Franco era, Catalonians are now less prone to converging towards them, but rather prefer to maintain their Catalan. Giles and Viladot (1994) found such maintenance was reported to be a function of how much they believed the status of Castillian to be illegitimate and the more they dis-identified with being “Spanish” (interestingly more than the extent to which they identified with being Catalan). Such issues of ethnic differentiation based on what we believe to be the need for a positive sense of identity may be becoming all the more prevalent as is evidenced in the old Soviet Union and the old Yugoslavia.

The consequences of being treated in terms of group memberships can be debilitating in many ways. As we have reported before (e. g., Giles—Coupland 1991b), we have preliminary data showing that when we make older people’s age salient by overaccommodating to them (e. g., speaking

slower, grammatically more simply, nonverbally over-friendly), recipients move more slowly, become more somatically-aware (that is, of their aches, pains, etc.), sound older, feel older, and look older – to the tune of between 5–10 years – than they do when age is not made (negatively) salient. In other words, by our communications, we can “instantly age” each other time after time – a communicative component of the social construction of aging, and even death. Of course we make age negatively salient to each other in numerous ways across the life-span – by sending agist birthday cards to twenty-nine-year-olds onwards (and often earlier) so that by the time of retirement our creative collusions have softened us for accepting overaccommodations and their dire consequences. In the same way that there are variable ways for speakers to disclose their ages (Coupland–Coupland–Giles 1989), there are many communicative devices by which one becomes aware of one’s age in the first place. In Table 1, we catalogue some of the numerous – sometimes overlapping – situations that can trigger age categorizations. Future research will doubtless provide

Table 1. *An initial taxonomy of some of the communicative events making age salient for an individual*

-
1. Talking to someone “my age” or a “different age”
 2. Medical/optical/dental professionals recourse to age attributions to account for sensory and other changes
 3. Observing physiognomic changes in past friends/colleagues (e. g., reunions), older public figures, and the self (e. g., via photos, videos)
 4. Sudden change in address terms to honorifics (e. g., “sir”, “madam”, or “young man”)
 5. Own and others’ physical activity limitations – anticipated, perceived, and/or real – verbalized and attributed to age
 6. Hearing others age-attribute aches and pains of theirs or yours
 7. Own (and peers’) children’s apparent obsession with age differentials, birthdays, and their growth/development
 8. Family and other bereavements (especially those premature)/reading obituaries
 9. Official requirements/requests to document age
 10. Recognition of own/others’ achievements as being somehow “historical”
 11. Being informed of age-related services, discounts, and bonuses (e. g., auto insurance, airfares)
 12. Explicit and implicit statements that are negatively age comparative (e. g., “my, you’ve aged!”)
 13. Others (believed older/younger) seeking age-based solidarity, or attempting (and failing) to gain solidarity with others of different ages
 14. Media portrayals which are agist (e. g., certain birthday cards), age-defying (e. g., health ads), and age-targeting (e. g., generationally constructed programs)
- etc., etc.
-

us both with an empirically-derived list for different age groups as well as the cognitive and affective dimensions which underlie them. It is this process of socialization into different areas of the life-span — and hence our second principle — that is the focus of the next section.

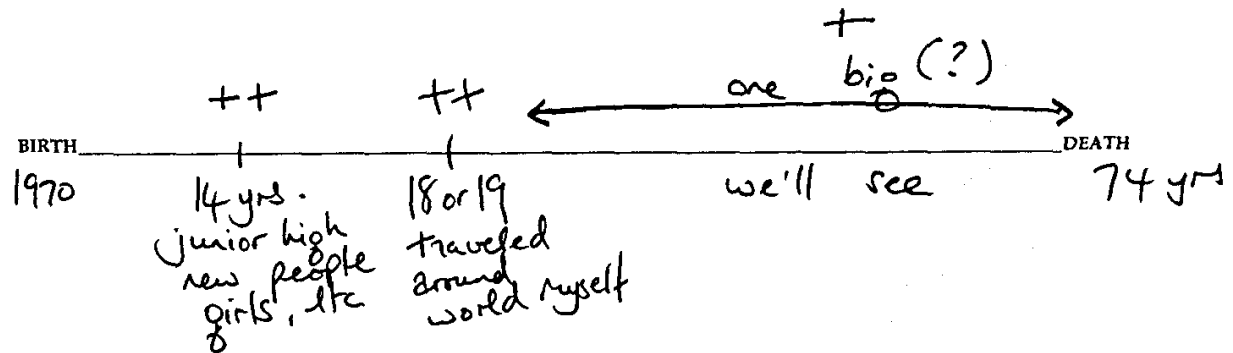
2.2. Communication practices are a function of life-span position and our responses to the “interculturating” process of aging

Currently, we are looking at the components of young people’s life-span maps as well as some of the communicative correlates of these. Our data suggest that, at least on paper, people can split up the life-span and make divisions based on a complex range of factors (e. g., educational, occupational, family status, and critical life events); see Figure 1 for the procedures presented to our respondents. A group of eighty-one young respondents (mean age = 19.85 years) divide the life-span into an average of 8.7 stages (with a large standard deviation of 3.23). This is evidence that people vary considerably not only on the dimensions along which they evaluate the life-span, but also the number of divisions they view as important. The number of stages described by our respondents indicates that simple divisions of “young”, “middle-aged”, and “old” are inadequate in dealing with different cognitive representations of the life-span. Indeed, our respondents describe a mean of 5.35 stages prior to their own (relatively early) position in the life-span. We can only hypothesize that older individuals will describe a greater number and variety of stages, given that stages of the life-span which individuals have experienced appear to be described in more detail than those which have not yet been experienced (see also, Bourque—Back 1970; Cottle 1976; Cross—Markus 1991; Whitbourne—Dannefer 1985; and, Whitbourne—Sherry 1991, for complementary techniques of accessing individual cognitive representations of the life-span).

Figures 1 and 2 indicate some of the variation that we found in the life-span maps. In particular, we feel it is worth making reference to some distinct patterns and elements of representation that are apparent. This does not constitute a comprehensive analysis of types of maps, but does indicate some interesting features, and we speculate on the potential outcomes in terms of communication and life-span adaptation. A number of individuals emerge who have particularly undifferentiated views of their future: some represent the future as a large empty space, others do not include it as a feature of the representations (e. g., see Fig. 1). For these individuals we might predict particular problems in adapting to future events and life-span developments. In addition, we might expect accommo-

LIFE-SPAN STUDY

Below you will see a scale which represents your life-span, i. e., the period from birth to death. We are interested in whether or not you believe there are distinct stages in your life and what these stages are. Please read the instructions in this paragraph before you begin. What we would like you to do is to think about and then graph the different periods in your life. The life stages can be divided up however you like, with as many or as few stages as you feel are important. Some possible ways to split up your life-span are by events, education, transitions, ages, certain stages or states, etc. Feel free to use these or make up your own. The scale below will be your first draft. Please use vertical lines on the scale below to clearly separate the stages that you choose. Be sure to label each stage and indicate the age at which the beginning or end of the stage occurs.



Having drawn all the lines that you feel are important, we would like you to **first**, go back and put an X where you are now and label it "ME NOW". **Second**, under the word "death" on the scale, indicate what you think is the average age of death. **Third**, go back and evaluate how you feel about each stage that you have indicated. Put your evaluation above each stage using the following format:

- ++ means you feel very positive about that stage
- + means you feel fairly positive about that stage
- 0 means you feel neutral about that stage
- means you feel fairly negative about that stage
- means you feel very negative about that stage

Figure 1. Instructions for the life-span study and a reproduction of one map type

dative problems when engaged in intergenerational talk, given that the individual's view of the partner will be fairly abstract, unclear, and uncertain.

In contrast to this, there are those for whom the future is differentiated, and, at times, more so than their past. In most cases, the differentiation is along fairly standard socio-structural or socio-developmental lines (work, family, etc.), but even here we would expect more sensitivity, tolerance, and a higher ability to cope with intergenerational conflicts. Crossing these divisions, there is a contrast between those who view the future positively (Fig. 2a) versus negatively (Fig. 2b). Interestingly, there appears little correlation between affective views of old age and differentiation of the future.

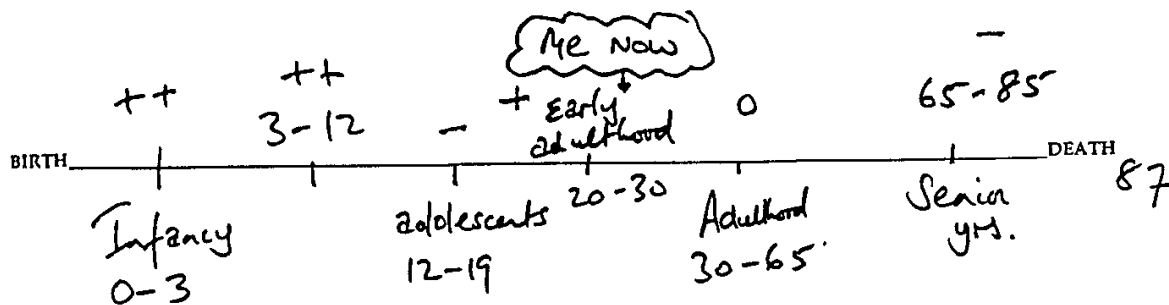
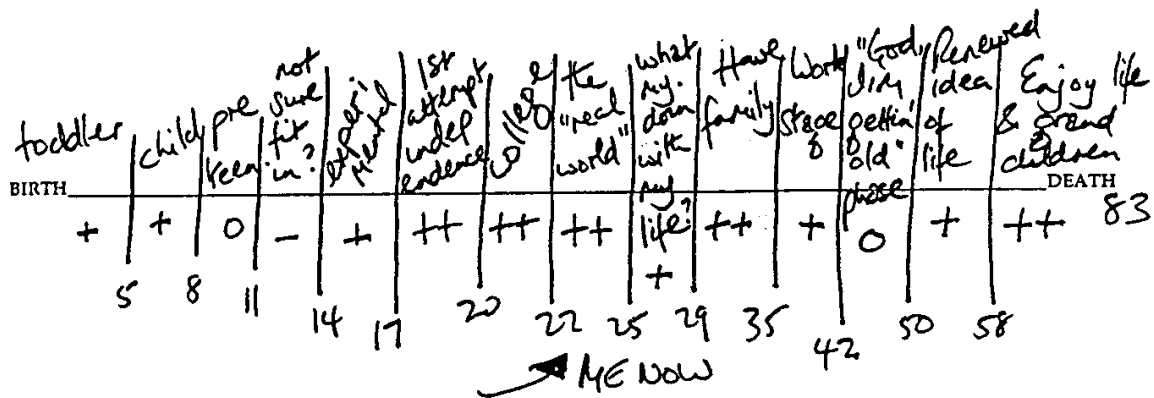


Figure 2. Reproductions of two other map types

As mentioned earlier, there are certain dimensions on which students appear to view differences particularly strongly – family, education, relationships, work – which, in themselves, speak volumes about what we view as important elements of evaluation in our own societies. However, the ways in which people talk about these vary: in some maps, individuals discuss start-points and end-points of particular stages along these dimensions (start school; graduate; get married) while others discuss the “duration” or process of the stage (married life; K through 12; college years; retirement years). It seems possible that those who are concerned with periods of “doing” a particular stage might be more conversationally equipped for the demands of that stage than those who conceive only of the instant of transition. Finally, there are those who incorporate particular important events, which do not constitute start-points or end-points, but rather high points or low points: possibly comparisons around which other events and experiences are organized. Particularly noticeable here are deaths of friends and relatives, and particular achievements (e. g., “Miss Teen San Diego”; “first manly experience”).

There is massive detail left which we have not examined yet: particularly interesting are patterns of transitions between dimensions: Where do work and family intersect? What are the differences between individ-

uals who see work and family transitions as occurring simultaneously and those who do not? Are there particular ages at which there is some agreement that transition has occurred and perhaps some agreement on a label? This latter question could lead us to approach research with an understanding shared with respondents of what age groups are consensually seen as important, and what to call those groups. Clearly cross-sectional, and ideally longitudinal, crosscultural, data are needed here (see Ikels et al. 1992). We are gaining a large repository of crosscultural data from around the Pacific Rim and elsewhere about how young adults see the societal strength of younger, middle-aged, and older adults (e. g., Harwood et al. 1994). It appears that there is a consensus on the fact that middle-age brings with it tremendous social rewards in terms of social power and institutional support. Being an older adult – even in many Asian cultures – appears to be associated with large losses in these regards. However, cultures appear to differ in the extents of the middle-aged gains as well as the corresponding older losses. It may well be that cultures where moving from young adulthood to middle age is associated with elevations in perceived societal strength, which are then however followed by extremely large (and perhaps suddenly felt) declines from this stature upon attaining elderliness, are those which manifest unhealthy social climates in which to grow, and cope with being, old.

Yet however sophisticated people's maps are, they are almost certainly inadequate for meeting the changing sands of "cultures" (e. g., going through adolescence, young adulthood, through to middle-agedness, and then elderliness) that need to be accommodated during life-span development. As soon as we feel we are even finding out about one unique cultural phase, we are thrown, often we may feel all-too-soon, into accommodating the next foreboding ambiguous one. Later in life, our "existential" positions in the life-span (e. g., what we have achieved, what we have left, where we are going, and the meaning of the process) can provide an (often unstated) macro-context – much like the intercultural *baggage* mentioned earlier – which significantly impacts our sociolinguistic practices. Throughout the life-span we suddenly find ourselves having to accommodate to new cultures – often ones that no one really wants to talk about. Such adjustment requires us to become, in some sense, bilingual, and bicultural too. We are permanently constructing and reconstructing identities of who we are and who we are becoming, as well as retaining identities of who we have been for those who retain those views of us. And of course we have to accommodate others' life-span positions as illustrated by this anecdote (which maybe is shared in others' experi-

ences). One of us has had our elderly father tell us for years that this was his last Christmas, that he was ready “to go”, and had made all necessary provisions to have his estate left in a straightforward fashion. Typically, this younger recipient (who, frankly, could not handle close-death issues) would counter by deflecting such statements – sometimes attributed as “emotional blackmail” or the like – and retort, “don’t be silly, you’ve many years left in you yet!”. While this may be functional for those eagerly seeking such confirmation, it can be disastrous for others. Recently, the retort has been something like “well, you’ve had a good life and when it comes I shall miss you desperately, and I am relieved you’re coping with it and I thank you for thinking of us in all this”. We notice (from his nonverbals) that the attempts at validating his gracious actions and resolute beliefs are appreciated and bring some kind of negotiated closure to his personal identity. That said, it is possible to imagine converse situations in which closure is brought about too soon by others.

This is what we refer to as the “interculturating” nature of development – the constant process(es) of enculturation which occur throughout the life-span (see also, Giles et al. 1991–1992). Hence, while immigrants may go through a single (albeit changing) acculturation/enculturation process when entering a new culture (Kim 1988), as we age, we pass through a series of cultures and roles (e. g., parent and grandparent and simultaneously mature child of our own aging parents) with different expectations and demands. We may only just be coming to grips with one set of, sometimes competing, demands when we are beginning to be categorized and dealt with in terms of the “next” stage. Hence we are permanently in a state of transition between age cultures, permanently interculturating – as well as involved in the transition states of others. It could be that one critical aspect of personal growth (and the root of development) can be located in the accommodating successfully to, and communicating about, this demanding flux. To our minds, such issues have not been sufficiently confronted in the language sciences (see, however, Coup-land–Nussbaum 1993).

2.3. Consequentially, communication is plagued with accommodative dilemmas

Our sociolinguistic lives are an historical account of an intricate web of intergroup communication problems from babyhood onwards (e. g., “adult time”, “adult talk”, the good vs. the bad guys). Those who have experienced friends becoming disabled may try to communicate with them as they did before, with just as much and just the same kind of

talk. This will constitute an attempt to accommodate the person as a human being and not a social category (see Fox–Giles 1996). These attempts may work and be appreciated. However, on occasions, the disabilities and angsts may need to be recognized, but we may remain uncertain of how to broach the issue without seeming suddenly vulnerable or feeling that the conversation need always sway in that direction. How to breach the interindividual and intergroup divide is an accommodative dilemma that requires collaboration and sensitivity. Suffice it to say now that how we communicatively manage this dilemma, in its multifarious manifestations, has profound implications for our well-being.

To further illustrate what we mean by the term “accommodative dilemma” – first introduced into the intergenerational sphere (N. Coupland et al. 1988) – it is worth briefly considering the dilemmas surrounding one aspect of intergenerational communication which has received some attention in the literature – painful self-disclosure (PSD). Simply put, this would be exemplified by an older person – oftentimes out-of-the-blue – inserting extended information about their illnesses, past tragic events, and so forth into a conversation with a relative stranger. Our argument, previously discussed by J. Coupland et al. (1988), is that there are two, equally dispreferable, options for the younger recipient of PSD:

- 1) They may change the subject, hence withdrawing from, or “avoiding” the disclosure. This has the benefit of avoiding further disclosure, which hence avoids further threat to (negative) face. However, this strategy risks harm to (positive) face, through perceptions of being cold, uncaring, or hostile toward the conversational partner.
- 2) They may inquire further about the disclosure, hence encouraging, or “approaching” the painful issues. This avoids the threat to positive face, indeed the younger individual may enhance positive face by appearing caring; however they will engender further threats to negative face through receiving further disclosure.

What is often displayed in interaction is a compromise or minimal move (J. Coupland et al. 1988). Hence in the furor of interaction, it seems that an apparently cut-and-dried dilemma may often play out more as a problem of managing divergent goals, demands or concerns. The divergence may be along any number of dimensions (e. g., approach–avoidance, autonomy–connectedness, status–solidarity, individual–relationship, talk–silence, individual–group, responsibility–freedom). The notion of an accommodative dilemma being a “choice” between two (or more) alternatives may hence be rather simplistic, and it may be more

useful to see it as an internal negotiation and the weighing of costs and benefits. In addition, we should probably note that although both options in a situation may appear to be equally dispreferable, in the context of interaction there are infinite variations by which an individual can choose to mitigate negative consequences of a chosen course of action, and accentuate positive consequences. Indeed, were this not the case, there would be no dilemma: the dilemma arises in choosing/generating the least dispreferable option. Discussions of how to respond will be grounded in contradictory themes of the functions that the PSD is serving for the elderly person (is this healthy venting, or is it unhealthy self-indulgence), and of the best thing for the young person to do in such settings (encourage the venting; stall the self-indulgence). The dilemma of responding may be a personal one, but it may also be grounded in a larger scale dilemma of societal versions of right and wrong, or good and bad.

The key to the dilemma here is that the discourse is occurring at multiple levels, something we would argue is potentially the case with much “intergroup” communication. In treating an individual as a group member there is the possibility of denying individuality, and in treating a person as an individual, there is the possibility of denying very real and valued aspects of social identity. Such concerns may plague attempts at intimacy, or stall attempts to confront group issues. A sympathetic “approach” style management of a painful disclosure may emphasize age differentials in a situation in which differentiation along any dimension appears inappropriate. An avoidance of the disclosure dismisses the issue of age at precisely the moment where it is being engaged, and where attention to the difference is most needed.

Questions yet to be posed, and central to the current contribution, relate to the dilemmas of identity management in terms of when to accommodate and when to differentiate, and how to accomplish this in a beneficial manner for all concerned. Giles and Williams (forthc.) have been looking at why intergenerational communication is so dissatisfying for younger people – and especially so in the light of studies suggesting that there is very little intergenerational contact anyway. They find that a left-over from dissatisfying contact amongst younger people is “reluctant underaccommodation” – an intense feeling of frustration for “why didn’t I stick up for myself and my generation?” – yet being at a loss as how to do it respectfully, graciously, and without inflaming the situation further at best, and not even engaging such consequences at worst. Such situations can be made even more complex by participants contextually “buying into” and “out of” age identities.

We are only now beginning to explore the ways in which occurrences of different linguistic prejudices are managed by recipients – they are

dilemmatic and costly whatever the strategic mode of response. The accommodative dilemma of managing prejudicial and/or abusive agism, sexism, racism or ethnic slurs (see Lukens 1979) – and especially when they are enacted more indirectly or covertly (Essed 1991; van Dijk 1987; Leets 1995) – is central here. Virtually any unaccepting response may well be received as an inability to take a joke, unwarranted grumpiness, or as being “overly sensitive”. A colleague asked one of us some time back what we were currently studying. He was told, “research on intergenerational issues” – “Ah, wrinklecomm!” he retorted. What was the response? Laughter (and hence collusion) – another small event in solidifying one’s own vulnerability in later life. As with the dilemma associated with receiving PSD, the options for the recipient here do not offer much scope for painless extrication. An answer which self-presents in a positive light (e. g., the one given) colludes in the process of age discrimination, and denies the reason for the work in the first place. An academic response might elicit negative evaluations from the other in terms of not being able to take a joke. We would argue that these dilemmas pervade our daily interactions, and that often the demands of being a good conversational partner may lead us to be untrue to ourselves.

Interestingly, the large literature on language attitudes (see Ryan–Giles 1982) seems to fall short of the above pointed concerns. Attitudes (stereotypic and prejudicial) are easily elicited in such studies about non-standard- and minority ethnic-accented speakers. What is not followed through is how the listener-judge who holds these discriminatory vocal maps expresses or leaks – directly or indirectly – these intergroup biases in everyday contact. How, in turn, do recipients of them interpret and accommodate the abuse, neglect, and put-downs and so forth? Moreover, to our minds, the success – or lack of it – in combating such intergroup discourse remains with us for a long time and, as we shall add below, can become a core part of our sociolinguistic histories having significant psychological ramifications.

3. Modeling the effects of managing intergroup accommodation dilemmas

At this point, it would be useful to review briefly our three guiding principles:

I: Much of linguistic interaction embodies “intergroup” processes and much of this is concerned with “differentiations”. We would argue that

truly interpersonal communication is rare, and that even the most intimate of conversations can be infused with styles and modes of communication that are a function of the group memberships of the individuals involved. In addition, even in the most solidary of relationships, group differentiations will emerge, and need to be managed. The following extract from an interview with a Russian resident in Moldavia from *The LA Times* (September 2 1989) is a classic instance of this for us:

“Everyone is becoming so strident”, he complained. “One man, a Moldavian writer who has been my friend for 12 years, knows that my ability to speak Moldavian is not up to the mark. We always spoke in Russian. But suddenly he has begun speaking to me only in Moldavian, and elaborate, literary Moldavian at that”.

II: Sociolinguistic practices are a function of life-span position and our responses to the interculturating process of aging. As we adapt to, resist, and sustain the age boundaries we travel, we engage in a process of rehearsing, performing, and ultimately shedding the roles associated with those age boundaries. We all have intergroup histories from early parental differentiations (“grown-up words” and “children’s corner”) and age-differentiations from (or by) our younger or older siblings. The extent and nature of these intergroup communication histories vary amongst us, as do our developing responses to them.

III: Consequentially, communication is plagued with accommodative dilemmas. From dealing with racial epithets, to negotiating being patronized, group memberships can lead to communicative dilemmas of how to manage self- and other-identities in an interaction. Whether we let-it-pass, assert ourselves individualistically, or even respond with explicit recourse to the group memberships involved, will have implications for the immediate interaction, and future interactions.

This leads us to some speculative, and admittedly embryonic, ideas about the relationships between intergroup communication, the life-span, and accommodative dilemmas. While we view our model below as starting to have real currency in middle-age (however that is variably constructed crossculturally) and particularly in a cumulative sense in later life, we do feel it has potency even from infancy onwards; the life-span implications of this model are of course worthy of study in themselves. A one-sided, schematic summary of these relationships — our “intergroup management effects” model — is presented in Figure 3 and can be reviewed in the following way. In the course of daily life, we are placed in accommodative dilemmas, often as a result of unexpected, unwar-

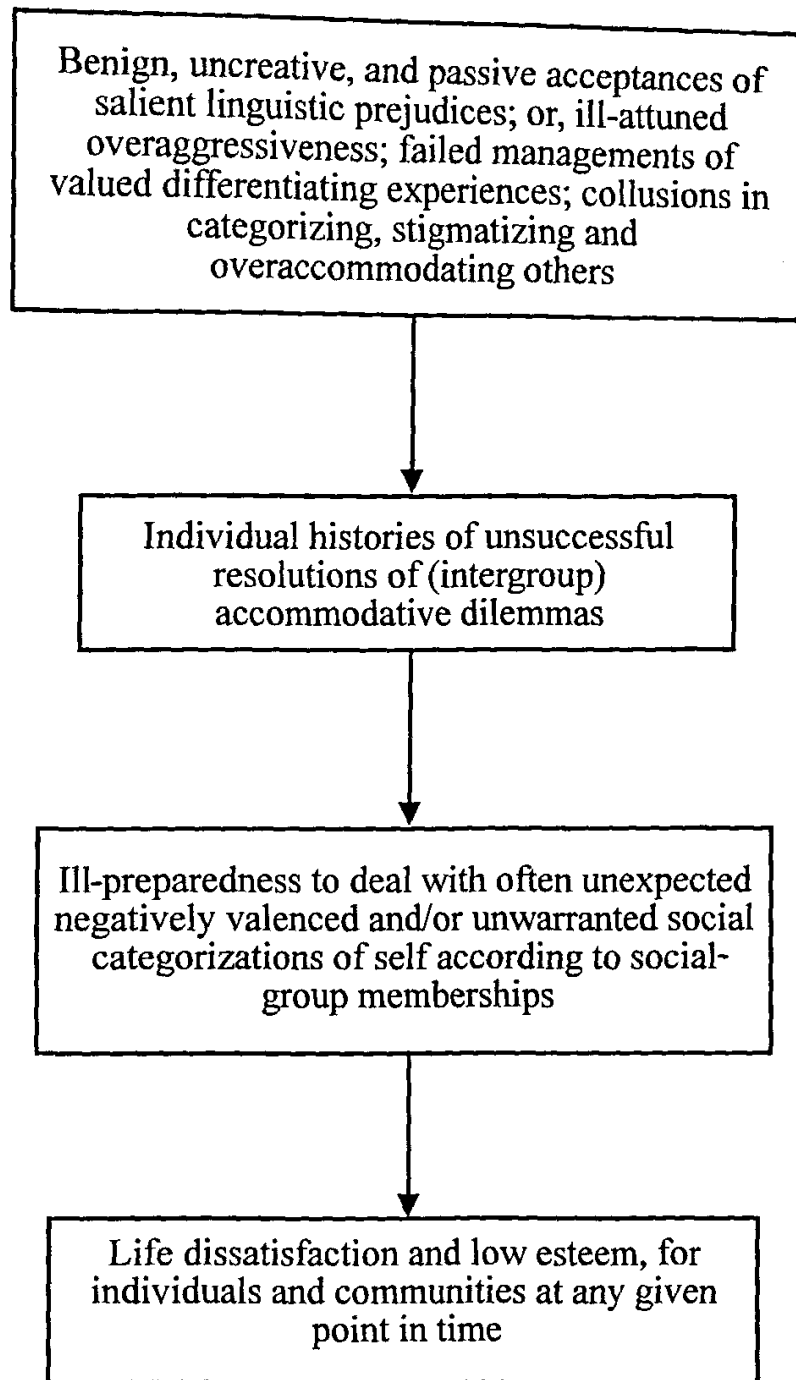


Figure 3. The intergroup management effects model

ranted, or negatively valenced social categorizations of self according to social group memberships. The inability to successfully negotiate these dilemmas, and particularly a *history* of unsuccessful resolutions, will lead to decreased life satisfaction and self-esteem for individuals and communities, and to difficulties in accommodating personal change (e. g., aging). An unsuccessful resolution of these situations might include some blending of benign, uncreative and passive acceptances of salient linguistic prejudices; ill-attuned over-aggressiveness; failed management of valued

differentiating experiences; or collusion in categorizing, stigmatizing, and overaccommodating others.

In other words, we are suggesting that our ability to cope with our own group memberships, and with changes in those memberships (at least as far as age is concerned) is related to our ability to deal with unwanted categorizations and the ensuing accommodative dilemmas. Life satisfaction (Caspi—Elder 1986) and high self-esteem (Krause—Alexander 1990) would then be a function of individuals' preparedness to deal with unwarranted categorizations, given their capacities (in the past) to have resolved accommodative dilemmas. Moreover, we believe such capacities are independent, or maybe an additional component, of traditional conceptions and measures of communicative competence (see Spitzberg 1989) and/or sociolinguistic flexibility. The communicative dynamics of such successful resolutions would be more than just the converse of unsuccessful resolutions, and would include the ability to access situationally-sensitive, creative, pro-active and reactive assertions when one's identity is questioned, stigmatized, or threatened. Other features of this successful management might include:

- preparedness to deal with negatively valenced/unwarranted social categorizations of self;
- some level of intimacy with other generations, social groups;
- tolerance/acceptance of values of other generations, social groups;
- consciousness of stereotypes and the willingness to discard them;
- avoidance of aggressive/hostile responses;
- willingness to accommodate intergroup discourses;
- practicing "intrapersonal" rehearsal of prior negatively valenced accommodative dilemmas so as to better cope with future intergroup problems;
- and relatively positive personal and social identities.

The paths specified in Figure 3 do not represent definitive causal relationships — and they are doubtless recursive anyway — but rather some potential interactions between variables that have been underrepresented in the literature, and may offer new insights as to the nature of communication (and life) satisfaction and intergroup relations. Clearly, the processes here need further deliberation — such as, for example, what constitutes subjectively "successful" versus "unsuccessful" management across various time frames. Nonetheless, we have here the possibility of invoking new constructs and processes such as different forms of accommodative dilemmas together with the variably-sequenced ways in which they are both manifested and responded to. Aptitude at accommodating intergroup dilemmas across the life-span may have significant consequences for psychological and relational health — if not physical health as we

have argued elsewhere (e.g., Giles–Williams–Coupland 1990). We would not wish to pretend that these forces are necessary for successful aging – at all points along the life-span continuum – yet we would submit that communicative resources of this kind deserve our theoretical, empirical, and pragmatic attentions. In other words, the model can be tested and given the large numbers of social categories with which most of us identify, our potential for encountering accommodative dilemmas in one group form or another is likely to be large on a day-to-day basis.

Those who are examining issues of successful aging (see, for example, Abraham–Hansson 1995) might well look to the abilities of specific elderly individuals to deal with accommodative dilemmas. Among the criteria for successful aging suggested by Ryff (1986) are “positive relations with others” and “environmental mastery”. Being able, sensitively, to deflect or challenge intergroup derogations are just one way in which such relations and mastery might be achieved. As age becomes more salient in interactions (as seems inevitable for older adults, see Coupland–Coupland–Giles 1991), the specifics of such interaction skills might be increasingly important. We would argue that the development of such skills is not an issue for elderly social-skills training, but a life-span project in which we rehearse our own management of such dilemmatic situations as we shift, and are shifted by the discourse of others, through different cultural stages.

Successful aging has been constituted in interactional and relational terms (Caspi–Elder 1986; Nussbaum 1985), although clearly the predictors of it can be found in health, financial, work, and leisure activities (Nussbaum–Thompson–Robinson 1989). However, and in addition to interpersonal ties (Krause 1990), to what extent is successful aging and social satisfaction determined by intergroup processes? To what degree is one’s psychosocial health as an aging individual determined by one’s views of the aging group as a whole, the resources available, the support or status accorded to your group, as well as the ways you, as an individual, are dealt with in age normative terms? To this extent, an intergroup communication focus on successful aging is essential.

We now return to some of the sentiments raised at the outset: that we live in a multilingual world where languages come and go and where people come and go. It really does matter how we accommodate to, and communicate about, our cultural and mortal identities, many of which are imposed upon us without warning. Interestingly, society in general has shown little sustained interest in the survival of communication codes, large numbers of which – despite our Catalan example – are

disappearing at an alarming rate (Fishman 1995). As Einar Haugen has shown, languages which fail to change, fail to live up to the demands being placed upon them, fail to adapt to new multilingual situations may suffer decline. Similarly, in Western societies anyway, we appear to be ill-prepared, both as academics and as individual communicators, for communicatively accommodating the life-span and its challenging – and sometimes debilitating – trajectories. We rarely explore the fact that our sociolinguistic patterns are a function of the particular social position we have reached in the life-span – in some ways, our perceived distance from anticipated demise.

Finally, we are strong advocates of life-span *and* intergroup communication studies being an essential ingredient of high-school education. “Life skill” courses, as typically constructed, focus explicitly on coping only with early adulthood, thereby leaving the vast majority of a person’s communicative life unconsidered. Those who fail to adjust to changing life and cultural conditions may well be isolated from the groups they are categorized into as well as the very ones with which they identify – and thereby ultimately endure parallel kinds of survival problems as underscored by Haugen in the language-planning sphere. We recommend that intergroup and life-span issues be formally introduced into critical language-awareness programs (e. g., Fairclough 1992; James–Garrett 1993). In particular, such courses would need to concentrate on developing long-term confidences in accommodating new life-span demands and communicative roles such as, for example, the potential sociolinguistic pitfalls of middle-age (see Harwood–Giles 1993; Platt–Weber 1984). We commend these issues and problems as worth engaging in, and sensitivity to them should yield many important theoretical insights and practical benefits down the road.

Note

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