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Communication and group life: How language and symbols shape intergroup relations

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Abstract

In this article, we review the different functions that language and symbols (in particular clothing) fulfill in group life; language and clothing are rarely, if ever, discussed together in the same conceptual space. Our review includes a consideration of how social identities are communicated and discredited, boundaries crossed, and group norms established, maintained, and regulated. Throughout, we integrate motivational and social-cognitive approaches, ending with proposals for future research and theory in intergroup communication.

Keywords

boundary-crossing, clothing, intergroup communication, language, norm talk, stereotyping

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Social groups are not fixed entities, but are actively defined and negotiated through intra- and intergroup communication. Language plays a central role in this, but other symbols such as clothing are equally powerful tools for expressing social identities and delineating group boundaries (see Giles, 2012a; Giles & Maass, 2016a; see also Giles & Maass, 2016b, for a historical overview of research and theory in intergroup communication). In this paper, we bridge social-cognitive and communication research, uniting two distinct empirical and theoretical traditions to offer a framework for understanding the functions that language and symbols (specifically clothing) fulfill in group life.

We will start with the prominence of category boundaries, discussing how social identities are communicated and how a common

group culture is established. Implications of the aforementioned processes for regulating ingroup behaviors through norms and leadership will be addressed, as will communicative strategies intended to discredit and stereotype outgroups. Thereafter, dynamic aspects of intergroup communication, in particular boundary-crossings, will be examined. Finally, we will propose a future research agenda

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concerning the role of language and symbols in intergroup relations.

Creating and Marking Group Boundaries

Most human characteristics such as skin and hair color, age, social class, or political beliefs are distributed along continua, yet we think of others, and identify ourselves, as belonging to distinct, mutually exclusive categories. This (seemingly artificial) creation of clear-cut group boundaries is driven by intrinsic language features, and by individuals' use of language and symbols.

Concerning intrinsic language features, both lexicon and grammar contribute to social categorization. For instance, languages that use four distinct words to chunk the age continuum (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age) suggest that development across age is discontinuous, with clear transitions between age groups (Giles & Reid, 2005). Grammatically, different languages may divide the universe into animate versus inanimate or male versus female objects, depending on the noun suffixes that are mandatory in a given language. Grammatical gender has been studied widely in European languages such as French, German, and Italian, in which any noun carries a gender. Grammatical gender makes gender highly salient, inducing people to apply grammar-congruent gender stereotypes not only to humans and their professions, but even to animals or inanimate objects, such as musical instruments or bridges (Boroditsky, Schmidt, & Phillips, 2003). Most importantly, grammatical gender languages implicitly shift gender boundaries, generally in favor of the masculine pole. Since the masculine form is also used in a generic sense (especially in the plural form, including males and females, e.g., *studenten*, *students_{masculine}*), the male category becomes prominent whereas the visibility of women is greatly reduced (Gabriel & Gygas, 2016). For instance, survey participants asked to indicate their favorite musicians or the ideal future president generally "overlooked" females when the question was framed as masculine "generic" (Braun, Sczesny, & Stahlberg, 2005).

Categorization not only depends on relatively invariant language features such as lexicon, grammar, and syntax, but also on individuals' specific and highly flexible use of language. For instance, in grammatical gender languages women may choose whether to describe their profession in "generic" masculine (e.g., *professore*) or in feminine forms (*professoressa*), thereby concealing or highlighting their gender identity. Although language can be used flexibly to disclose, underline, or conceal category memberships, it is still subject to grammatical constraints that may have interesting social implications. For example, in English, gay or lesbian individuals can easily mask their sexual orientation by referring to their "partner" in a gender-neutral fashion. Such concealment becomes impossible in Italian or German, where the article and/or pronoun accompanying "partner" (*il mio partner* or *la mia partner*) is necessarily gendered.

Spoken and written language is often a basic identifier of group membership, immediately allowing others to define a person as an ingroup or outgroup member. This, correspondingly, arouses intergroup attitudes, feelings, and stereotypes. Accordingly, groups' diverse modes of communication, which may include language, dialect, slang, organizational jargon, word choice, and accents, are important indicators of their category memberships.

Throughout the lifespan, linguistic cues serve as signifiers of group membership (Dragojevic, 2016); many infants as young as 5 months prefer to be cared for by individuals with native- as opposed to foreign-sounding accents, and children often befriend those speaking with a native accent. Indeed, data suggest that accents can be even more powerful indicators of category membership than visible ethnic features (Rakić, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2011). When members of nonstigmatized groups interact with stigmatized outgroups, they sometimes engage in linguistic divergence to reinforce their group memberships. For example, younger individuals often patronize older adults by speaking in a higher pitch and with a modified register—a speech style often reserved for infants or animals (Gasiorek, 2016).

Like language, clothing and accessories also serve a self-categorization function, demarcating group boundaries. At the same time, they tend to activate pernicious stereotypes and prompt derogation toward outgroup members. Dress style is a publically visible signal of one's group membership(s) to both in- and outgroup(s), rendering categorization and stereotyping possible even in the absence of verbal communication with outgroup members (for a systematic review and model, see Keblysek & Giles, in press). A notable example is the hijab, a traditional head-dress worn by Muslim women. Individuals in Western cultures have been shown to report more negative reactions to Muslim women wearing a veil versus no veil, and to those wearing a full-face veil rather than a hijab. They also experience less perspective-taking when viewing an image of a veiled versus unveiled Muslim woman, suggesting less understanding and sympathy for the former, and greater attributed fundamentalist-extremist religiosity toward veiled relative to unveiled women (Everett et al., 2015).

Single articles of clothing and accessories can cue multiple social identities or group memberships, and they can reflect the values and interests of social groups. For instance, wearing a habit (black headdress and robes) generally signifies that the person is a female, a nun, and a member of the Catholic community at once, and reflects values such as modesty. Some clothing items—including uniforms that may not be merely optional criteria for membership—are fairly unambiguous cues to category membership. In a number of societies, the hijab among Muslim women as well as certain professional uniforms (e.g., firefighter, chef) are notable examples. Other artifacts are more ambiguous category cues, as their significance is often context-dependent or open to interpretation. For instance, a wedding dress conveys a slightly different message when worn by two women standing together rather than one woman standing next to a man in a suit.

Together, language and symbols define and communicate category memberships. They do so either unambiguously, as in the case of feminine-gender markers or socially shared symbols (e.g.,

crucifixes, football attires), or through implicit cues, as in the case of accent or “gay voice,” that leave space for subjective inferences. Although any single implicit cue may easily be misinterpreted, the simultaneous display of multiple cues such as gay vocal characteristics, gait, and gestures may signal category membership in a relatively unequivocal way, leading to typically accurate categorizations (Fasoli, Maass, & Sulpizio, 2016).

Once activated, categorization and self-categorization affect a wide range of behaviors, including stereotyping, within-group consensus-seeking, normative reasoning, and collective actions. Thus much of inter- and intragroup behavior depends on how group boundaries are defined at any given moment (for a review of intragroup communication practices as they function in terms of intergroup dynamics, see Hogg & Tindale, 2005).

Social Identity Expression and the Construction of a Common Culture

People use language and symbols, including music (e.g., Giles, Hajda, & Hamilton, 2009) and dance (Pines & Giles, in press), not only to define and communicate their category membership, but also to express their identification with (or dis-identify from) a given group. This leads to the construction and maintenance of a collective culture that is distinct from other groups.

Group-specific language practices and nonlinguistic symbols help solidify and institutionalize cultures and subcultures. In line with social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), this is often accomplished in a comparative way, by using distinct language to describe ingroups and outgroups. Groups' tendencies to communicatively favor their ingroup are affirmed by the linguistic intergroup bias (LIB) model, which states that individuals use more abstract language when referring to desirable ingroup behaviors and undesirable outgroup behaviors and more concrete language when referring to undesirable ingroup behaviors

and desirable outgroup behaviors (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995). This tacitly conveys that the former are more typical traits while the latter are more exceptional, thereby revealing a positive image of the ingroup. Similarly, Banga, Szabó, and László (2012) have identified an ingroup-favoring strategy, known as the syntactic agency bias. Here, people use less agentic language forms (e.g., passive voice) to describe undesirable behaviors of the ingroup, but they use agentic forms when describing equally undesirable outgroup behaviors.

Another subtle language strategy used to favor one's ingroup is word order. Cooper and Ross (1975) noted that binomials tend to be arranged according to an ingroup-first rule (e.g., cowboys and Indians). More generally, groups and individuals that are proximal, liked, close to the self, or more relevant to current needs are mentioned first (McGuire & McGuire, 1992). For instance, people tend to mention same-sex members before other-sex members (Hegarty, Watson, Fletcher, & McQueen, 2011). This seemingly insignificant ingroup bias has remarkable consequences—elements in the first position attract greater attention, exert an overproportional influence on subsequent information processing, serve as a starting point for comparisons, and imply greater importance and agency.

These lines of research illustrate a pervasive tendency to use ingroup-favoring language that is reflected in lexical choices and subtle variations in grammar and syntax. Such message modulation allows speakers to express ingroup favoritism implicitly and subtly, in a way that does not arouse the negative reactions typically associated with blatant expressions of ingroup glorification.

Similar to language, exposing symbols or wearing clothing characteristic of one's ingroup helps solidify one's membership and sense of ingroup belonging. This can also mean adopting a dress style to distinguish oneself from outgroups. For instance, in an ethnographic study of Latina gang members ("*cholas*") in a northern California public high school, Mendoza-Denton (1996) identified a number of publicly visible appearance cues distinguishing recent immigrants with a

Mexican identity (called *Sureñas* or "Southerners") from U.S.-born Latinas with a hybrid identity (called *Norteñas* or "Northeners"). *Norteñas* wore deep red lipstick, had feathered hair, and used solid followed by liquid eyeliner. In contrast, *Sureñas* wore brown lipstick, vertical ponytail hair-styles, and solid eyeliner only. Eyeliner helps signify *chola* membership, and the length of the eyeliner indicates one's toughness and willingness to fight. Indeed, one *Norteña* noted: "When I wear my eyeliner, *me siento más macha* [I feel more *macha*]. I'm ready to fight" (Mendoza-Denton, 1996, p. 55).

Specific style and clothing choices can help individuals enter and stay in desired ingroups. This is demonstrated in the following quote from a bicyclist interviewed in Thompson and Haytko (1997): "a bright \$40 cycling jersey is just as expensive as a plain \$40 bicycle shirt. And then if you run into someone else who rides a lot then you're more in with them," as more serious cyclists wear brighter colored cycling suits (1997, p. 21). In line with symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982/2013), identity-revealing attires, symbols, or possessions are often displayed by group members who have not yet achieved full recognition or whose identities are momentarily threatened. For instance, describing rock climbers, one interviewee in Donnelly and Young (1988) noted that, "Those in beat-up looking clothes were either good or doing a lot. The ones in new clothes were usually beginners" (p. 230). Thus, clothing and symbols are not only cultural expressions of ingroup commitment, but can also be manifestations of attainment of an ideal, but currently incomplete or uncertain, identity.

Ingroup Regulation: Language, Norms, and Leadership

A considerable portion of communication is exchanged among ingroup members, and these messages can help regulate ingroup norms and behaviors (Hogg & Giles, 2012). Through intra-group communication, individuals control and negotiate normativity, enabling them to recognize

ingroup deviancy and publically discredit and marginalize offenders. Consequently, group leaders who more prototypically manifest communicative practices of the ingroup emerge and/or are elected over influential others.

Individuals frequently engage in “*norm talk*”—the communication of normative information within groups—as it creates and conveys information about ingroup standards. Belavadi (in press) contends that a

[M]ajor proportion of communication within groups is dedicated to clarifying ingroup identities and group attributes such as attitudes and behaviors that characterize the group. Group members can glean normative information by attending to norm talk, for instance, by attending to the content of fellow group members’ communication, from their behavior, and from influential or prototypical sources within the group.

Yet, individuals often have multiple, and sometimes overlapping, social identities (e.g., woman and Nigerian) that can have relatively equal (e.g., White and wealthy) or very different levels of vitality (e.g., White and homeless). For each social identity, there are, as mentioned, prototypes, or a set of related characteristics (e.g., attitudes, behavioral routines, communication styles) that depict ingroup similarities and intergroup distinctions. When engaging in norm talk—conveying who belongs to a group, how they differ from other groups, and who is of highest or lowest status within the group—individuals exchange and gather information about the characteristics of groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

Individuals also use norm talk to communicate their loyal group membership to both ingroups and outgroups. Group members are expected to engage in norm talk and to express norm-consistent perceptions, attitudes, and feelings. If they do not, their group membership, normativeness, loyalty, and trustworthiness may be questioned (Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010). Importantly, norm talk is prescribed for particular occasions, such as a political

commentator defending their preferred presidential candidate on TV, and individuals are more likely to accept norm-related messages from prototypical group members (Hogg, 2001).

Similarly to adopting norm talk, individuals adopt normative dress styles to show their loyalty and connection to the group. Indeed, style choices—including clothing and accessories, as well as hairstyles, cosmetic use, tattoos, and piercings—can serve as visual benchmarks to evaluate ingroup members, specifically their prototypicality and ingroup hierarchy position. More prototypical group members who adhere to dress style and other communicative and behavioral norms for the group tend to be more influential and often rise to high-status leadership positions (Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). Ultimately, influential, high-status group leaders help maintain and enforce dress style norms. For example, a manager may send an employee home when dressed inappropriately for work, or a basketball coach may not allow a player to participate in a game without a jersey.

As implied before, those who deviate from group standards are often subject to denigration or marginalization. For instance, women police other women’s dress choices, using sexualized derogatory terms such as “slut” or “floozy” to marginalize those wearing too much makeup or showing too much skin. Indeed, evolutionary scholars argue that derogating women on the basis of promiscuity and appearance is a female intrasexual mate competition strategy (Buss & Dedden, 1990). Older women who dress “too young” for their age are also objects of ridicule, being called “mutton dressed as lamb” (Twigg, 2007), and those who dress “too conservatively” might be labeled “frumpy” or “plain Jane.”

As we have seen, different social groups often have distinct dress and linguistic norms, and individuals have various *overlapping* group memberships. Ultimately, this can be problematic, as dress norms may be inconsistent or contradictory across groups. A boy who enjoys wearing dresses and cosmetics to his Boy Scout meetings may not be violating norms for his gender identity, for instance, but he is violating traditional norms for

those of his biological sex and his Boy Scout troop (who wear uniforms).

Group members who conform to ingroup language norms and those who highlight the link between themselves and the ingroup (e.g., through inclusive first person plural pronouns such as *us, we, ours*) are more likely to enter leadership positions, to receive support from followers, and to be reelected if they systematically use we-referencing language (Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Hence, collective language linking the speaker with the ingroup serves both the construction and maintenance of charisma.

Outgroup Denigration and Stereotyping

Since intergroup differentiation is comparative in nature, favoring the ingroup often implies a relative disadvantage for the outgroup (as in the aforementioned LIB). In addition to these relatively “mild” and indirect forms of outgroup discrimination, we can often observe more extreme cases of hostile communication that have extensively been studied by communication researchers (Waltman & Haas, 2011) and have, more recently, gained the attention of social psychologists.

A common linguistic marker of hostile attitudes toward the outgroup is the use of derogatory labels, or *ethnophaulisms*. These reveal a group’s position within the intergroup status hierarchy and, as such, there is a relationship between a group’s size and position in this hierarchy and the offensiveness of labels used to describe the group (Mullen & Johnson, 1993). Some ethnic slurs are fairly innocuous (e.g., the term *Taffy*, used to describe a Welshperson and referring to the River Taff crossing Wales’ capital city), while others are far more pernicious. Ethnophaulisms are not only hurtful but also carry tangible implications for targeted groups; studies have shown that groups referred to with less complex and more negative slurs are less likely to marry into the mainstream dominant group and more likely to hold low-paid occupations, appear less attractively in children’s literature, and even commit suicide more frequently (e.g., Mullen & Smyth, 2004). That said,

derogatory assignments directed at a group can often be more socially harmful than outright and offensive slurs (Leets & Giles, 1997).

Derogatory labels are also invoked to denigrate groups based on factors such as religion, sexual orientation, and age. For example, Christians and Muslims may refer to nonbelievers as heathens and infidels, respectively, simultaneously reinforcing their religious identity and differentiating themselves from nonbelievers. Similarly, when men use homophobic slurs to refer to homosexual men, they are reaffirming their masculine identity and distancing themselves from an identity they perceive as less masculine (Carnaghi, Maass, & Fasoli, 2011).

A particularly powerful tool used to dehumanize and delegitimize the outgroup are *metaphors*. In metaphorical language a relatively concrete *source domain* is used to describe a more abstract *target domain*. Metaphors are a common communicative practice in intergroup relations, where animal and food metaphors abound (Maass, Suitner, & Arcuri, 2014). Examples are “frog” to describe French, and by extension Quebecois individuals and “kraut” to describe Germans. In both cases, inhuman entities are used that deny full humanity to the group to which they refer.

At moments of conflict, animal metaphors are particularly likely to enter public discourse and political propaganda. Interestingly, animal metaphors include both very distant animals (e.g., worms, parasites) that generate disgust, and phylogenetically close animals (e.g., apes) that lack critical human features (Haslam, Loughnan, & Sun, 2011). For instance, as a central part of fascist propaganda, Jews were equated with parasites and the same metaphor reappeared recently in populist and social media in Germany when commenting on Greece during the Greek debt crisis. The “ape metaphor” has been utilized as a derogatory, dehumanizing metaphor for Blacks since the colonial era in both text and images (Volpato, Durante, Gabbiadini, Andrighetto, & Mari, 2010). Such metaphors of primitiveness produce specific cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Haslam, Holland, & Stratemeyer, 2016). For instance, outgroup members are more readily identified and

receive more visual attention following ape primes (Boccatto, Capozza, Falvo, & Durante, 2008). Similarly, men who link women to nature, animals, or objects are more willing to endorse sexual harassment and sexual assault (Rudman & Mescher, 2012).

Animal metaphors are prominent in intergroup relations as they fulfill myriad functions. Like other metaphors, they direct attention to certain features of a group's stereotypes and make a group seem more homogeneous, a process that can influence decision-making about how outgroup members should be treated. They also create a feeling of superiority and justify unequal intergroup relations. For instance, prior to the 1967 Australian Act, Aborigines were classified as "flora and fauna," a label that dehumanized this group and likely facilitated White Australians' justification of centuries of oppression. Most importantly, they facilitate moral disengagement (Bar-Tal & Hammack, 2012), thereby justifying discrimination and social exclusion of the outgroup.

Besides denigrating and dehumanizing the outgroup (Hülse & Spencer, 2008), language also transmits and maintains shared stereotypes of the outgroup. Stereotypes may be transmitted and perpetuated explicitly, for instance by associating group labels with corresponding traits and behaviors (e.g., women are bad drivers) or in rather subtle ways, as when stereotypical information about the ingroup or outgroup is communicated at a higher level of abstraction than unexpected, exceptional information (linguistic expectancy bias).

Finally, language tools have been identified that give the impression that a social category has an underlying essence and/or is naturally given. When social categories are seen as "natural kinds" (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992), they are also perceived as relatively invariant, homogeneous, having clear and meaningful boundaries, and having deeply rooted biological features that distinguish them from other social groups (see Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). Psychological essentialism is sustained by linguistic choices, some of which are, again, rather subtle. An example of such essentializing language

is the use of nouns rather than adjectives to describe a social category. Stating that *Sarah is Jewish* (adjective) or that *Sarah is a Jew* (noun) is semantically almost equivalent, yet the two statements reveal a different degree of essentialism. As empirically demonstrated by Carnaghi et al. (2008), nouns, unlike adjectives, have an essentialist and quasigenetic quality.

The aforementioned clearly shows that people use a wide range of language tools to describe outgroups which serve very different communicative functions. They may denigrate and dehumanize the outgroup, they may maintain shared stereotypical beliefs, or they may, at the most general level, communicate the idea that the distinction between ingroup and outgroup is based on essential features that make groups profoundly and unchangeably different from each other.

The Accommodative Chase

So far, we have treated intergroup relations as relatively stable, yet group boundaries are rarely impermeable and people may cross or even dismantle boundaries through communication. Group members (especially minority group members) may strive, and are sometimes encouraged to acquire the communicative practices of the dominant group; this "accommodative chase" (Giles, 2012b) can be prolonged and is oftentimes ultimately abandoned because of its deleterious effect on maintaining a positive social identity.

In line with social identity theory, individuals wishing to change their position in the intergroup status hierarchy can engage in social mobility, attempting to leave one's group in favor of a higher status group. In order to successfully join another group, one typically must accommodate to the other group's communicative practices, as these can serve as critical boundaries that distinguish ingroup from outgroup members (Giles, 2016).

Although accommodation can improve individuals' social identities, it can also negatively affect them or be used to justify a group's low status. For example, acquiring habits associated with Caucasians can invite accusations of cultural betrayal by those who energetically stand by their

own ingroup affiliation (as in the case of ethnic pejoratives like “coconut,” “apple,” and “banana” for socially mobile Blacks, Native Americans, and Asians, respectively). Furthermore, those who successfully move into a higher status group are often used as tokens to perpetuate the myth that social inequalities reflect meritocracy, which can be used to justify the low status of the successful accommodator’s group by suggesting that members who did not move similarly upward are lazy, incompetent, or undeserving of higher status. Members of low-status groups may be disposed to adopt linguistic styles of more prestigious groups, and to encourage their children to do the same, but this can lead to language death (or suicide), or the disappearance of the communicative codes of low-status groups (Giles & Johnson, 1987). For these reasons, group members often abandon the prolonged accommodative chase in pursuit of the communicative practices of other groups.

Accommodation can also occur through non-linguistic symbolic practices. Socially mobile individuals may dress like members of the desired ingroup as a means of acceptance into the higher status group. For instance, popular wisdom tells us to “fake it until you make it,” which can include dressing like a higher status individual (e.g., by wearing designer brand labels or attire befitting of a white-collar employee) in an attempt to attain higher social standing in one’s career, social circle, or society at large. The notion that dress can enhance status is supported by research indicating that those wearing professional (vs. casual) dress are perceived as more competent (Furnham, Chan, & Wilson, 2014).

Continuously attempting to accommodate to higher status others is costly in terms of time, money, and effort—particularly in the expensive, fast-paced, and ever-changing world of fashion—and repeated failure to attain ingroup status might render this “accommodative chase” too costly to continue over extended periods. Indeed, fashion trends may be transient as a barrier to entry into the group of hip, affluent, and committed individuals who can keep up with the accommodative chase. Repeated unsuccessful attempts to adhere to ingroup dress style norms

can contribute to derogation from ingroup members, a drop in ingroup status, or even ostracism from the group.

Individuals might ultimately abandon the accommodative chase—dressing nonnormatively or leaving the group—upon facing derogation from either ingroup or outgroup members for their dress choices. Given these risks, it is clear that a failed “accommodative chase” is deleterious to one’s psychological wellbeing—it threatens one’s personal and social identity rather than bolstering it. Indeed, hiding a stigmatized social identity is associated with a lowered sense of belonging and heightened feelings of inauthenticity (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014).

In contrast to accommodative chases, minority members can reclaim offensive terms used by the majority and integrate them, with opposite valence, into their own vocabulary and be socially creative. In these cases, minority group members not only redefine their ingroup through positive labels (as in the “Black is beautiful” movement in the US), but they import labels originally created as derogatory slurs by the majority group (such as “nigger”), appropriating the terms as positive labels to strengthen and celebrate their minority ingroup identity. Such reappropriation of stigmatizing labels empowers those who are targeted and reduces the negative impact of the term (Galinsky et al., 2013).

Conversely, members of dominant groups may adopt the language styles, symbols, clothing, or hairstyles typically associated with the minority. For example, when African American teen Treyvon Martin was shot and killed by White neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in 2012, Zimmerman pleaded self-defense, noting that Martin’s hooded sweatshirt was suspicious and intimidating. The incident sparked a “hoodie” movement across America—government leaders and activists of all races wore hoodies to signify the injustice of discrimination on the basis of race and dress.

This unfortunate scenario highlights the role of dress as a form of intergroup communication that has the power to change race relations virtually overnight. Hoodies, previously associated with teen

culture, came to be more strongly tied to gun control regulations and race relations—in effect, they became politically charged symbols. At the same time, however, the hoodie was co-opted as a symbol of racial pride and solidarity, and wearing one as an outgroup member signaled one's compassion for African Americans and support for racial equality. Thus, we see that dress can shape the nature of intergroup relations positively or negatively.

As these examples illustrate, intergroup boundaries in communication are regularly crossed by adopting language and symbols of a relevant outgroup. However, the scope and meaning of such appropriation varies greatly, including the attainment of upward mobility, the mitigation of derogatory language, and the expression of solidarity with the outgroup.

Future Agenda

This review portrays a lively and expanding field of inquiry, which, however, leaves space for both theoretical and methodological refinement (see, e.g., recent avenues proposed by Clément, Bielajew, & Sampasivam, 2016; Stohl, Giles, & Maass, 2016). Overall, interest in intergroup communication and language use has increased steadily over the past 20 years and research has become more diverse, focusing on broader and more varied intergroup settings (such as health care facilities, computer-mediated communication, conflict situations), but at times at the expense of general theoretical development. Indeed, a PsychInfo search using “communication OR language” AND “intergroup” as keywords appearing in the title revealed an increase of 18% when comparing the 5 years preceding 1989 and the last 5 years. In comparison, the same search for “interpersonal” rather than intergroup was 11% during the same time period. In what follows, we highlight, parsimoniously, a few issues that we believe constitute important ingredients for future research.

First, our analysis shows that the same social aims may be achieved through a range of linguistic or symbolic tools, from very subtle and indirect to very blatant forms. Yet, many language features or symbols have received little or no

attention at all. For instance, relatively little is known about the role of phonetics in intergroup communication and category labeling. There is ample evidence that speech sound is systematically linked to meaning, but the role of speech sound in intergroup communication remains underinvestigated. The few existing studies on masculine versus feminine and on straight versus gay sounding voice are promising as they suggest a powerful influence of sound on categorization and on stereotypical inferences. Similarly, recent findings suggest that metaphors play a central role in intergroup communication, whereas very little is known about other figures of speech. Time may be ripe to develop a complete classification system outlining ways in which social identities are expressed and in which outgroups are labeled and addressed.

Second, research on communication in intergroup relations has developed in relative isolation with respect to other lines of intergroup research (Taylor, King, & Osborne, 2010). One notable exception is Giles's (2016) communication accommodation theory that is intrinsically linked to social identity theory. However, intersections with other social-psychological theories have not been explored systematically. For instance, language is clearly implicated in system justification (van der Toorn & Jost, 2014), possibly through a mutual influence process between language use and system-justifying ideologies (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). Similarly, Schaller and colleagues' social evolutionary model (e.g., Schaller & Neuberg, 2012) identifies a series of ingroup threats (e.g., threats of violence; contagion) that trigger specific negative reactions towards outgroups; these threats may well be reflected in and sustained by specific language biases. To cite a third example, terror management theory predicts changes in intergroup relations under mortality salience (Jonas & Fritzsche, 2013) that may be closely linked to death-relevant narratives. Thus, it may be worthwhile to pay closer attention to the interface between language and specific social psychological theories, investigating the role language plays in the psychological mechanisms at the heart of each theory.

In conclusion, our approach has been unique by not simply highlighting the many complex social functions of situated language use and communicative practices to create, regulate, and forge change in intergroup relations and contact, but by doing so in parallel with other compelling symbols, such as clothing and appearance. How these symbolic systems interact in different intergroup settings is an exciting challenge for future research and theorizing.

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