

Communication Gaps and Integration: A Study of the Theory of Culturally Accommodating Communication in Korean Automotive Companies in Jakarta

Ade Mahendra

Institut Bisnis dan Komunikasi LSPR Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: ademahendra@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of Korean automotive companies into Indonesia has created an intensive environment for cross-cultural communication between Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees. This study addressed the urgency of understanding communication dilemmas arising from hierarchical organizational structures and differing cultural expectations. Using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as the theoretical framework, this research explored how communication strategies, including convergence, divergence, maintenance, and overaccommodation, shaped daily workplace interactions. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving purposive sampling of Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and company document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that convergence fostered relational solidarity but also placed psychological burdens on local employees; divergence reinforced authority but reduced employee participation; maintenance supported operational efficiency but created perceptions of indifference; and overaccommodation reduced motivation by being perceived as patronizing. These findings highlight that organizational effectiveness is not determined solely by structural efficiency but also by the quality of balanced intercultural communication. The novelty of this study lies in integrating Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) with the paradoxes of communication within hierarchical multicultural organizations, providing theoretical contributions to cross-cultural communication studies and practical implications for developing inclusive leadership approaches and intercultural training programs. Future research may extend this framework to other multinational sectors to further examine the adaptability of CAT across diverse cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Korean automotive companies into Indonesia over the past two decades has created an increasingly intensive environment for cross-cultural interaction. Thousands of Indonesian workers now work alongside Korean expatriates within organizational structures characterized by strong hierarchies, formal communication patterns, and a production-efficiency orientation. This phenomenon represents more than a simple encounter between two cultures; it constitutes an organizational context in which differences in values, norms, and communication styles may generate communication gaps. Park, Hwang, and Harrison (1996) affirmed that “communication problems in foreign subsidiaries are not only linguistic but also cultural, leading to reduced organizational effectiveness” (p. 80). This perspective highlights

that cross-cultural communication within multinational companies is not neutral but is shaped by underlying cultural values and social expectations.

In the automotive industry context, communication dilemmas emerge when Korean expatriates maintain a communication style characterized by authority and hierarchical distance, while Indonesian employees may expect greater convergence toward participatory and inclusive communication practices (Dwiyanti, 2025). Li and Kleiner (2001) emphasized that “the quality of expatriate-local relationships directly influences organizational effectiveness” (p. 50). Therefore, the success of multinational organizations depends not only on business strategies but also on expatriates’ ability to establish constructive relationships with local employees. Positive expatriate–local relationships facilitate cooperation, improve communication effectiveness, strengthen mutual trust, and ultimately contribute to organizational performance (Faller et al., 2026; Wyant & Cionea, 2024).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles, provides an important framework for understanding this phenomenon. CAT explains how individuals adjust their communication styles through strategies such as convergence (adapting communication behaviors to reduce social distance) and divergence (emphasizing differences to maintain identity). Giles, Edwards, and Walther (2023) highlighted that communication accommodation is a dynamic strategic process in which adjustments in communication styles function to manage social differences, reinforce identities, and develop relational solidarity.

Williams (1999) provided empirical support for CAT by demonstrating that communication accommodation may create dilemmas and potential miscommunication. Williams emphasized that successful accommodation depends on communicators’ awareness of cultural differences and the perceptions of their interaction partners. When individuals fail to recognize the implications of convergence or divergence strategies, accommodation efforts may unintentionally intensify communication barriers.

CAT explains that individuals employ specific strategies when interacting with others to either adapt their communication styles or maintain social distance. The four primary strategies within CAT include convergence, divergence, maintenance, and overaccommodation.

First, convergence occurs when individuals modify their communication style to become more similar to that of their interlocutor through adjustments in language, intonation, speaking speed, or topic selection. The purpose of convergence is to reduce differences, create interpersonal closeness, and improve mutual understanding. For example, Korean expatriates may use simplified Indonesian language to facilitate communication with local workers.

Second, divergence refers to the intentional emphasis of communicative differences to maintain identity or reinforce social boundaries. This strategy may involve maintaining one’s native language, accent, dialect, or communication style. In Korean–Indonesian workplace interactions, divergence may occur when Korean expatriates continue using Korean language or hierarchical communication patterns to maintain authority.

Third, maintenance (or underaccommodation) refers to the continuation of an individual’s original communication style without adapting to the communication needs of the interlocutor. Although not always intentional, this strategy may create perceptions of limited responsiveness or lack of consideration toward others.

Fourth, overaccommodation refers to excessive adaptation that may be perceived as patronizing or condescending. This may occur when individuals speak excessively slowly,

simplify messages unnecessarily, or adjust their communication in ways that unintentionally undermine the competence of their interlocutors.

Williams (1999) noted that “miscommunication often arises when communicators are unaware of their accommodative adjustments or fail to recognize those of others” (p. 152). In the Korean–Indonesian workplace context, accommodation dilemmas occur when expatriates must balance maintaining their cultural identity with adapting to local communication expectations. Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) further emphasized that “anxiety and uncertainty are central to intercultural communication effectiveness” (p. 56), indicating that effective communication requires the ability to manage cultural differences and interpersonal expectations.

Several studies have examined cross-cultural communication dynamics within multinational corporations. Black and Gregersen (1999) demonstrated that expatriate assignment failure is not primarily caused by technical limitations but is more frequently associated with insufficient cross-cultural competencies and ineffective communication with local employees. Their findings indicated that expatriate adjustment difficulties often result from dissatisfaction and challenges in adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments. Furthermore, expatriates who complete assignments may still experience performance difficulties, and some eventually leave organizations after repatriation due to adjustment-related challenges.

Black and Mendenhall (2010) emphasized that cross-cultural training is an important factor in supporting successful expatriate adaptation, stating that “cross-cultural training is effective when it reduces uncertainty and increases confidence in communication” (p. 115). Brew and Cairns (2004) demonstrated that preferences for direct or indirect communication styles are influenced by cultural backgrounds and conflict situations. Arseneault (2020) found that Korean expatriates experienced significant adaptation challenges in Canada, emphasizing that “bidirectional adjustment is necessary for both expatriates and locals to achieve effective communication” (p. 10). Similarly, Choi (2001) affirmed that “American workers tend to expect egalitarian communication, while Korean workers emphasize hierarchical adaptation” (p. 39).

Astorne-Figari and Lee (2018) highlighted expatriate-based knowledge transfer as an important mechanism in multinational corporations, stating that “expatriates are deployed more heavily when communication costs between headquarters and host countries are high” (p. 782). Ahmad (2009) added that “leadership and motivation are deeply influenced by cultural values, which shape communication patterns in organizations” (p. 74). Ahmad and Saidalavi (2019) further emphasized that “cultural intelligence is a critical predictor of leadership effectiveness in diverse workplaces” (p. 3).

Gudykunst (1997) emphasized that “cultural variability in communication is a fundamental determinant of how messages are interpreted” (p. 328), highlighting differences between high-context cultures, such as Indonesian and Japanese cultures, where meaning is strongly influenced by contextual and nonverbal cues, and low-context cultures, such as American and German cultures, where communication tends to be explicit and direct. Kim and Tung (2013) further examined challenges faced by Korean expatriates in India, noting that “emerging markets present both opportunities and challenges for expatriates, particularly in communication and adaptation” (p. 1032).

Several research gaps remain evident. First, empirical studies examining communication accommodation dilemmas between Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees in the automotive sector remain limited. Second, few studies have integrated CAT with issues of inclusive leadership and organizational cultural paradoxes in hierarchical multicultural organizations. Third, research-based guidance for Indonesian employees navigating Korean organizational culture remains insufficient. Fourth, limited attention has been given to the social implications of communication gaps on the psychological well-being and workplace experiences of local employees.

This study aims to analyze communication accommodation patterns between Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees in automotive companies, identify communication dilemmas arising from cultural differences and organizational hierarchies, examine the impact of communication gaps on organizational effectiveness, and formulate CAT-based strategic recommendations for improving cross-cultural communication quality in Korean–Indonesian automotive companies. The practical benefits of this research include providing insights for Korean automotive companies in developing effective cross-cultural communication strategies and inclusive leadership training programs tailored to hierarchical multicultural environments. This study also serves as a reference for human resource practitioners in developing intercultural competency frameworks that balance authority and inclusion, while offering guidance for expatriates and local employees in managing communication dilemmas through appropriate accommodation strategies. Theoretically, this research contributes to the limited body of knowledge regarding Communication Accommodation Theory in Korean–Indonesian workplace interactions, particularly within the automotive sector, by expanding understanding of how convergence, divergence, maintenance, and overaccommodation strategies operate within hierarchical multicultural organizations and providing empirical evidence from the Indonesian context, which remains underexplored in cross-cultural communication research.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore cross-cultural communication dynamics between Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees in a Korean automotive company in Indonesia. The theoretical framework applied was Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which was used to examine how individuals adjusted or maintained their communication styles during intercultural interactions.

The research participants consisted of Indonesian employees and Korean expatriates working at a Korean automotive company in Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in daily workplace interactions relevant to cross-cultural communication dynamics.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and analysis of internal company documents. Semi-structured interview guidelines were used to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding intercultural communication practices. Observations were conducted in the workplace to capture communication patterns directly, while document analysis was used to complement the findings with information related to organizational policies and practices.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved transcription, coding, categorization, and interpretation based on the CAT framework. The credibility of the findings

was ensured through source triangulation involving interviews, observations, and documents, as well as member checking with participants and peer discussions with fellow researchers.

The researcher conducted fieldwork at the company site for approximately three months to observe and document cross-cultural communication dynamics. The researcher's presence facilitated direct observation and the development of trust with participants. The research was conducted in an industrial area in Jakarta and its surrounding areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the day-to-day interactions at Korean–Indonesian automotive companies, cross-cultural communication does not end at merely understanding words. It is a far more complex process: an arena in which workers and expatriates negotiate identity, assert authority, and simultaneously build or maintain social closeness. Language is the entry point, but behind it lie psychological and cultural dynamics that determine whether communication flows smoothly or instead creates distance.

Interview results with local workers show that the four main strategies in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) — convergence, divergence, maintenance, and overaccommodation — are not merely abstract concepts, but real practices that emerge in everyday conversations in meeting rooms, on production lines, and in informal interactions. Each strategy carries different consequences: some strengthen understanding and familiarity, some assert hierarchy, some maintain efficiency, and some — without conscious intent — reduce motivation.

Convergence is clearly visible when Indonesian workers adjust their language and speech speed to be more easily understood by their Korean counterparts. As expressed by Rifqi Saputra: *"I use simpler Indonesian and slow my speech speed so my message is clearer... As a result, communication becomes smoother, my Korean colleagues understand me more easily, and the working relationship feels more harmonious."* This adjustment makes communication more fluid; Korean colleagues become more open and even begin to engage in light banter. Giles, Edwards, & Walther (2023) affirm that convergence is a strategy for building relational solidarity, and interview findings show real-world evidence of this.

In contrast, **divergence** emerges when Korean expatriates deliberately maintain their native language and communication style to assert identity and authority. Lee Ho Gun states: *"In some formal meetings, I deliberately continue to use Korean... The purpose is to assert authority and maintain a clear working structure."* This strategy reinforces the working structure but creates social distance. Local colleagues become more passive out of concern about appearing disrespectful. Gudykunst (1997) explains that in a high-context culture such as Indonesia, a hierarchical style can reduce participation. Thus, divergence affirms identity but weakens inclusion.

Maintenance (or *underaccommodation*) is visible when a communicator continues to use their original communication style without adjustment. Lee Ho Gun recounts: *"I use full Korean with technical jargon... I am aware that local colleagues sometimes look confused or are hesitant to ask questions, so communication feels one-directional."* Colleagues respond passively, only listening without asking much. Rifqi Saputra even acknowledges: *"Some colleagues think I don't care... Some consider me unresponsive because I rarely give additional explanations."* This strategy maintains efficiency but creates a cold, distanced impression.

Ironically, **overaccommodation**, though intended to help, actually creates problems. A respondent revealed: *"At first I felt helped, but after a while I felt as if I were being considered less competent... excessive communication like that actually made me feel disrespected and lowered my motivation to work."* Williams (1999) affirms that communication accommodation can worsen miscommunication when communicators fail to recognize the perceptions of the other party.

Thus, the pattern of communication accommodation between Korean expatriates and local Indonesian workers reveals a characteristic dilemma. Convergence proves most effective in building closeness and understanding. Divergence asserts identity and authority but creates distance. Maintenance preserves efficiency but creates an impression of indifference. And overaccommodation, though intended to help, reduces motivation and self-confidence. Cross-cultural communication in this automotive company can be seen as a "dance of accommodation": sometimes drawing close for harmony, sometimes pulling away to assert the self, sometimes keeping to one's own rhythm for efficiency, and sometimes over-following until balance is lost.

Moving to identifying communication dilemmas arising from cultural differences and organizational hierarchy: from the interview results, it is clear that each communication strategy in CAT produces its own dilemma. Convergence strengthens closeness and understanding but demands that local workers continually adapt — which can create psychological burden. Divergence asserts the expatriate's identity and authority but risks creating social distance and reducing participation. Maintenance maintains efficiency but creates an impression of indifference and unresponsiveness. Overaccommodation, though intended to help, reduces motivation and self-confidence by feeling condescending.

These findings are reinforced by Horak, Jiang, & Festing (2025), who show that expatriates in European MNC subsidiaries in South Korea manage hierarchy through formal, informal, or hybrid approaches to improve organizational agility. The research of Lo & Nguyen (2023) further confirms that cross-cultural training plays an important role in improving expatriate performance and communication effectiveness. Lorenz, Ramsey, & Richey (2017) emphasize that metacognitive and cognitive cultural intelligence play important roles in expatriates' ability to recognize international opportunities and drive innovation.

Du-Babcock & Babcock (1996) identify patterns of expatriate–local communication in multinational companies where cultural and hierarchical differences often produce formal, distanced, or even miscommunicative interactions. Kim & Slocum (2008) affirm that individual differences — such as personality, motivation, and adaptability — significantly affect the effectiveness of expatriate assignments. Danisman (2014) shows that expatriates' attitudes toward culture often change between pre- and post-international assignment, affirming that communication dilemmas in CAT are dynamic.

Choi (2026) confirms that intercultural engagement is heavily influenced by communication accommodation strategies: convergence helps reduce social distance and increase engagement, while divergence reinforces group boundaries and reduces participation. Chen, Curtis, Gary, & Theisen (2026) add an important psychological dimension, showing that overaccommodation communication creates an "unseen divide" that reduces employees' sense of belonging and job satisfaction.

The communication gaps that arise from cultural differences and organizational hierarchy have a direct impact on organizational effectiveness. When communication is not balanced — for example through divergence or maintenance — working relationships become formal and distanced. This makes local workers more passive, less likely to share ideas, and more inclined to simply follow instructions. As a result, the potential for innovation and collaboration declines, even if the work structure continues to function.

Giles, Edwards, & Walther (2023) affirm that communication accommodation is not a spontaneous process but a strategy that must be managed carefully. When done correctly through convergence, communication can strengthen relational solidarity, build a sense of togetherness, and improve organizational effectiveness. However, when accommodation is done excessively (overaccommodation) or too rigidly (maintenance), the effect is counterproductive. Overaccommodation often creates a condescending impression, reducing workers' motivation and self-confidence. Maintenance, meanwhile, creates a cold, indifferent impression making local colleagues feel ignored.

This discussion clarifies that communication accommodation within the CAT framework must be understood as a strategic process demanding cultural sensitivity, balance in adjustment, and awareness of the interlocutor's perception. Appropriate convergence can serve as a means of building solidarity and organizational effectiveness, while overaccommodation and maintenance that are not properly managed can reduce motivation, self-confidence, and productivity.

Strategic Recommendations Based on CAT

Formulating CAT-based strategic recommendations to improve cross-cultural communication quality in Korean–Indonesian automotive companies means transforming research findings into practical steps that organizations can implement.

First, the strategy of **convergence** needs to be strengthened through cross-cultural communication training. Giles, Edwards, & Walther (2023) emphasize that convergence is not merely a technical adjustment but a strategic process for building relational solidarity. Interview findings show that when local workers adjust their language and speech speed, Korean colleagues more easily understand the message, making interaction more fluid and the working relationship feel more harmonious. Li & Kleiner (2001) confirm that the quality of the expatriate–local worker relationship directly influences organizational effectiveness.

Second, the strategy of **divergence**, which asserts identity and authority, needs to be managed carefully so as not to create social distance that damages working relationships. The strategic recommendation is to build multicultural leadership capable of balancing authority with inclusion (Barak, Luria, Brimhall, & Özbilgin, 2024). In practice, this can be done by opening a discussion space after instructions are given, inviting input from local workers, or providing informal forums for clarification. Multicultural leadership also demands high cultural intelligence.

Third, the strategy of **maintenance**, which maintains efficiency but creates an impression of indifference, needs to be balanced with more responsive and reflective communication. The practical recommendation is to develop internal communication policies that encourage two-way clarification — for example, providing brief Q&A sessions after technical meetings so local workers can confirm their understanding and raise questions.

Fourth, the strategy of **overaccommodation** — intended to help but actually reducing motivation — must be avoided because of its potential negative psychological effects. Williams (1999) affirms that miscommunication often arises when communicators fail to recognize the perceptions of the other party. The key is ensuring that adaptation is done proportionally and with respect — balanced communication will strengthen local workers' self-confidence and create a more inclusive and productive working relationship.

Cangara (2007) affirms that communication is not merely information transfer but a social process involving perception, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning. Cangara (2011) highlights that communication not only conveys messages but also asserts identity and authority within a social system. Cangara (2020) emphasizes that communication must be participatory, because without participation, it loses its meaning and legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study affirm that communication accommodation patterns between Korean expatriates and Indonesian employees in automotive companies create complex dilemmas, in which each strategy within Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) presents both advantages and limitations. Convergence strengthens mutual understanding and interpersonal closeness but may impose psychological burdens due to continuous adaptation demands. Divergence reinforces identity and authority but can create social distance and reduce employee participation. Maintenance preserves communication efficiency but may generate perceptions of indifference and one-way communication. Overaccommodation, although intended to facilitate understanding, may reduce motivation and self-confidence when perceived as patronizing. These findings demonstrate that organizational effectiveness is determined not only by organizational structures and operational systems but also by the quality of balanced cross-cultural communication.

The contribution of this study lies in integrating empirical findings with CAT and cross-cultural communication literature, including the perspectives of Cangara (2007; 2011; 2020), who emphasized that communication is a social, political, and developmental process requiring shared understanding and participation. This study confirms the relevance of CAT in hierarchical multicultural organizations while demonstrating that communication accommodation strategies do not always generate positive outcomes. The novelty of this research lies in highlighting the communication paradox within the Korean–Indonesian workplace context, where adaptation, authority, efficiency, and inclusion exist in continuous tension. Future research may use these findings as a reference for further evaluating CAT in similar organizational contexts and for assisting multinational companies in developing more inclusive and adaptive cross-cultural training programs and multicultural leadership strategies.

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