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### Understanding and forecasting Ethnolinguistic Vitality

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## Understanding and forecasting Ethnolinguistic Vitality

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*(Final version received 17 November 2010)*

Forecasting of ethnolinguistic vitality can only be done within a well-functioning descriptive and explanatory model of the dynamics of language stability and shift. It is proposed that the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift, used with a taxonomy of language shift motivations, provides that model. The model, based on individual language choice decisions which are motivated by the speaker's perceived personal benefit, is first explained. The model is then validated through case studies by demonstrating how the motivators which were present in the past would have predicted the language vitality scenarios that actually developed. The possibility of extending the change model beyond language choice is examined. The effectiveness of the model points to observable language use and language attitude patterns as the most important predictors of ethnolinguistic vitality.

**Keywords:** shift; motivations; perceived benefit; code choice; language use

### Introduction

Assessing ethnolinguistic vitality is an intrinsically complicated task. Ethnolinguistic vitality is directly tied to language shift, or rather to the absence of language shift. Language shift occurs when a community is in the process of using more and more of a particular language at the expense of another language. History has repeatedly demonstrated that 'language shift is the rule, not the exception' (Edwards 1985, 96).

Language shift has been studied at the macro-societal level and at the micro-societal level. Fasold (1984) provided an early example of a macro-societal study of language shift, where community factors such as industrialisation, urbanisation, migration, proletarianisation, and government policies were examined in order to shed light on language shift. In that study, he stated that there has been 'very little success in using any combination of [these factors] to predict when language shift will occur' (Fasold 1984, 217).

Edwards (1985) provided an early example of language shift viewed from the micro-societal level. He didn't deal with macro-societal factors such as industrialisation and urbanisation, rather he dealt with factors that are directly related to individuals' motivations and goals.

Edwards attributed code choice, and ultimately language shift, to 'pragmatic decisions in which another variety is seen as more important for the future' (1985, 71). He stated that 'pragmatic considerations' such as power, social access, and material advancement are what need to be studied in understanding language use

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and shift patterns. He also maintained that in any language planning activity, these pragmatic considerations are the major determinants of success (1985, 94). Edwards summarised his statements by saying that the only way to influence language shift is to alter the entire social fabric of the language community (1985, 98).

Karan (2001, 26), in summarising an overview of different approaches to language shift, notes that 'It is evident . . . that those who approached language shift from the individual motivation perspective, in general, were much less pessimistic about the current state of the field than those who approached language shift from a macro-societal level'.

Language shift and ethnolinguistic vitality need to be addressed from the micro-societal view, where individual motivations are key, and where language shift is viewed as the compilation of individuals' daily decisions concerning language use. But as the values which are behind individual motivations are best understood, and even perhaps influenced, when they are treated as belonging to the society, and not the individual, language shift and ethnolinguistic vitality also need to be studied from the macro-societal view. Ethnolinguistic vitality then is best studied and understood through a combined micro- and macro-societal view.

As ethnolinguistic vitality is intrinsically complicated, assessing ethnolinguistic vitality is an intrinsically complicated task. It is akin to predicting the outcome of a team sports match; it forecasts the results of a future contest that has many different and varied influencing factors. Competing languages are the 'teams' in this contest, and the societal and individual values and motivations are the players, the many different and varied influencing factors. This being the case, 'forecasting' or 'predicting' correlates much better with ethnolinguistic vitality than does 'assessing', 'determining' or 'measuring'.

### Variation

As one would need a good understanding of a game and of the individual assets of the players (among other things) in order to attempt to predict the outcome of a match, a forecasting of ethnolinguistic vitality can only be done within a well-functioning descriptive and explanatory model of the dynamics of language stability and shift.

An important step towards understanding the dynamics of language stability and shift was described in *The dynamics of Sango language spread* (Karan 2001) where, through a substantial quantitative study of language spread in Central Africa ( $n = 706$ ), it was observed that the same patterns of variation that are found in language change studies are also found in language shift studies. As a terminology reminder, *language change* refers to a language changing internally over time (phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, or semantically), and *language shift* refers to a speech community using less and less of one language and more and more of a different language.

Labov (1965) demonstrated how individuals' choice of speech style is influenced by different individual, social and situational factors, such as participants in the conversation, location, degree of formality, and any social aspirations or motivations of the speaker. Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968) demonstrated that all language change (the process of a language evolving over time) involves variation. Different speakers adopt individual sound, lexical, or syntactic changes at different stages of the change process. And this variation can be statistically correlated with different

social factors such as age, education, social class, occupation, wealth, gender, and place on the urban–rural continuum. For example, women and the young are usually more at the forefront of change than are men or the old. Change diffuses from larger population centres to other large population centres, and then only later to smaller population centres (Trudgill 1974). This non-random, quantitatively observable variability was shown to be the synchronic manifestation of diachronic language change. A language's changes over time could be observed in the present through quantitative studies. Regular significant patterns of social subgroups of the population having tendencies to adopt changes before other subgroups were observed. Gal (1979) and many others later verified these hypotheses.

Based on this understanding of how a language's change over time can be observed in the here-and-now through correlating the population's social factors with the different variants of an item undergoing change, much progress and understanding about the dynamics of the change process were brought about. For example, the role of change innovators, and the importance of the social networks were revealed (Milroy and Milroy 1985). Labov (2001) described the social function and location of leaders and innovators of change.

When it became evident that the change processes in language change and the change processes in language shift were one and the same (because they quantitatively correlated with social factors in the same way), it was possible to combine the insights gained from studies of the dynamics of language change with insights gained from studies of language shift. Karan noticed that a common factor in all was motivation of the speakers to seek their own perceived good in all their language-related choices (language code or change variant). From this, he developed and proposed the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift (Karan 2001).

### **The Perceived Benefit Model of Language (Stability and) Shift**

Based on the similarities between the mechanisms of language change and language shift, and building on Bourdieu (1982) and Edwards (1985), Karan introduced the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift (2001). In this model of shift and stability, individuals select from their linguistic repertoire the language variety or varieties (languages) that will best serve their interests, in particular speech environments or domains. Individuals' linguistic repertoires include the languages that people have at their disposition. Societal language shift is the result of many individual language choice decisions, with those individually made decisions based on motivations having to do with what will benefit the people making the decisions. When the motivations to use a new or different language variety in a particular speech environment or domain outweigh the motivations to use the variety normally used in that domain, language shift happens. And when it happens, the vitality of the language that people are deciding not to use lessens.

In this Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift, individuals also seek to increase their linguistic repertoire with language varieties they think will well serve their interests. People will generally learn and then use the languages that they think will profit them. The opposite also happens. When individuals perceive that the use of, or association with, a language is toxic to their personal good, they will not only stop using that language, they will also often cognitively, socially and emotively distance themselves from that language so that it becomes less and less part of their linguistic repertoire.

The language choice decisions (as well as language acquisition/repertoire decisions) that are at the heart of the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift are based upon a limited and fairly standard set of motivations. Financial well-being and social prestige are motivations that are often found in language shift situations, but the entire gamut of motivations goes well beyond those two. The motivations behind the decisions that make up language shift were classified by Karan (2001, 97–9) as communicative, economic, social (solidarity or prestige), and religious. Later, in the interest of being able to better understand and discuss these motivations, he expanded that simple classification into a basic taxonomy of motivations that influence language shift (Karan 2008).

### **Taxonomy of motivations influencing language (stability and) shift**

Taxonomies organise sets of information for particular purposes. They are useful to discuss and better understand related phenomena. The taxonomy of motivations influencing language shift was expanded and discussed in Karan (2008) and is presented below. The motivations that are implicit in language shift situations, and the facility to well discuss and understand them, are crucial in assessing or predicting future ethnolinguistic vitality.

Language choice motivations are often combined motivations. For example, when there is financial motivation to use a specific language, social prestige motivations to use the same language are also often present. The taxonomy of motivations presents the different individual motivations with the understanding that motivations are often complex and combined.

#### ***Communicative motivations***

As language is communicative and cooperative, people will make both language use and language acquisition choices that best facilitate communication. This is exemplified by an immigrant learning the languages of his or her new location. And this is also exemplified by the use of Swahili in East Africa, where people from many different language groups use Swahili for daily inter-ethnic group communication.

People normally choose to use a language understood by their interlocutors. This pattern is a basic example of communicative motivations influencing language use decisions.

People who speak minority languages often choose to learn and use the language of wider communication. This pattern is a basic example of communicative motivations influencing language acquisition decisions.

#### ***Economic motivations***

With economic motivations, the prospects of financial advancement or profit are in focus. Economic motivations for language use and acquisition can be job-related, trade-related or network-related.

#### ***Job-related***

Job-related economic motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to obtain or maintain employment.

*Trade-related*

Trade-related economic motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to facilitate or improve the success of their trade.

*Network-related*

Network-related economic motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to create or maintain networks that will be financially beneficial to them.

***Social identity motivations***

Social identity motivations are in effect when people want to be, or to not be, identified with a group or individual. Social identity motivations for language use and acquisition can be prestige group -related, solidarity-related, distance-related or hero/villain-related.

*Prestige group -related*

Prestige-related social identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to associate themselves with a prestige group who normally uses that language variety. They are also present when people choose to not use or not acquire a language variety in order to disassociate themselves with a low prestige group who normally uses that language variety.

*Solidarity-related*

Solidarity-related social identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to create or maintain a solidarity bond with an individual, group, culture or subculture.

*Distance-related*

Distance-related social identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to create or maintain a distance between themselves and an individual, group, culture or subculture. This is connected to Goffman's (1967) concept of negative face: a person's desire to remain autonomous.

*Hero/Villain-related*

Hero/Villain-related social identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety in order to associate themselves with a well known individual who normally uses that form. They are also present when people choose to not use or not acquire a language variety in order to disassociate themselves with a well known individual who normally uses that form.

***Language power and prestige motivations***

Language power and prestige motivations have to do with cases where languages or dialects themselves are associated with power and prestige, or lack of power and prestige.

Language power and prestige motivations differ from social identity, prestige group-related motivations in that with language power and prestige motivations, the prestige or power is perceived to be in the language variety itself. In social identity, prestige-related motivations, the prestige, or lack of prestige is found in the group normally speaking the language variety.

A good argument could be made for collapsing these language power and prestige motivations with social identity, prestige group motivations, as in most cases prestigious and powerful languages or dialects are associated with prestigious and powerful groups who use those language varieties. The rationale for not collapsing these types of motivations is the conviction that certain societies do in fact attribute or associate power and prestige, or the lack of power and prestige, to certain language varieties.

***High language forms***

Some languages, such as the high languages in diglossic situations, are accorded prestige by the societies using the languages. Language power and prestige motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language form accorded this kind of power and prestige in order to gain power or prestige.

***Low language forms***

Language power and prestige motivations are also evident when people avoid using or acquiring a language form that is non-prestigious and non-powerful, in order to not be associated with that lack of power and prestige.

***Nationalistic and political motivations***

When language choice is influenced by the association between a nation and a language, nationalistic motivations are in effect. Sometimes language choice is a declaration of national affinity or pride. In some places and cases, certain language choices are advantageous in order for the locator to be perceived as being a good citizen.

In the 1990s in the Central African Republic, Sango was associated with national good and being a good citizen, and with anti-tribalism. Thus people regularly over-reported their ability in Sango in censuses and multilingualism surveys. To say, 'no, I don't speak Sango' was somewhat culturally analogous to saying 'I'm not a good citizen. I support tribalism'.

There can also be associations between language forms and political camps or parties. Thus language choice, and even language acquisition, can be motivated by political motivations.

**Religious motivations**

When language choice is influenced by the association between a greater being and a language, or a religion and a language, religious motivations are in effect. This can be manifested in several ways:

*Pleasing or appeasing a greater being*

Language code choice can be influenced by a belief that a greater being has certain linguistic preferences.

*Language designated as sacred*

Some religions have special places for certain languages. Languages themselves are seen as special or sacred. Supporters of the religions then make language code choices based on these associations.

*Access sacred writings*

People choose to acquire and use languages in which their sacred writings are available.

*Religious communication (proselytising) purposes*

Desires or directives to communicate religious ideas can influence language use and acquisition choices.

**The perceived benefit model of change**

The dynamics and motivators of language shift presented in this paper extend beyond language choice and subsequent language shift. As discussed above, they are most probably the same dynamics and motivators that are involved in internal language change. In that realm, the individual decisions made for the individual perceived good would be not of languages, but of words, pronunciations, and styles

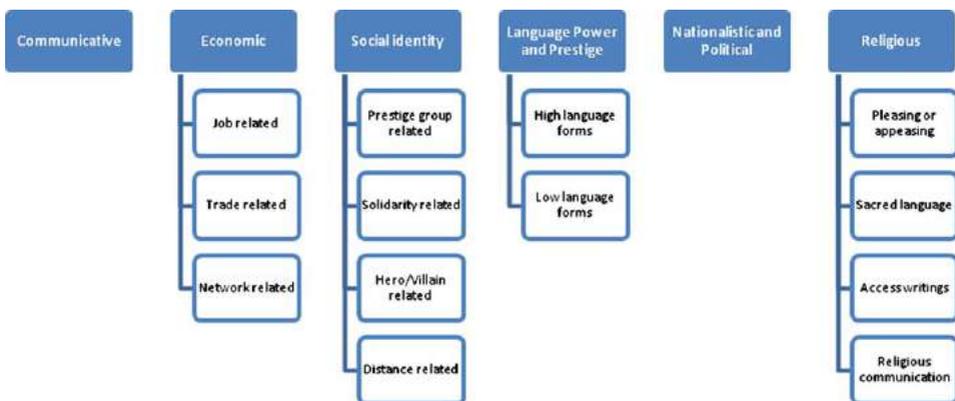


Figure 1. Summary of language choice motivations.

of speech. The linguistic repertoires that people exploit, modify and expand to gain perceived benefit not only include languages, but also dialects, styles, registers, sets of (new) vocabulary, and ways of pronunciation. Thus, *The perceived benefit model of language shift* might be better named *The perceived benefit model of language choice*.

Going further, the dynamics and motivators of language choice discussed above are likely the same dynamics and motivators that are present in many aspects of human behaviour. People not only seek their perceived economic, social, communicative, etc. benefit in what they say, but also in how they dress, what they buy, and how they act. For example, extending the dynamics and motivators discussed above into areas such as why people choose the clothing and automobile styles that they choose, it quickly becomes evident that the understanding of, and communication about, changes in fashion and purchase pattern behaviours are greatly facilitated. Perhaps the model should be named *The perceived benefit model of change*.

### **Predicting ethnolinguistic vitality**

#### ***Language use***

Patterns of language use in a speech community are some of the most important areas to research when predicting future ethnolinguistic vitality. These patterns can be observed through participant observation, and researched through self-report techniques. Sampling a speech community with a self-report sociolinguistic questionnaire, which includes language use questions, is often the best way of getting a clear picture of the community's language use patterns. A combination of observation and speech community and self-report is recommended, because occasionally self-report on language will be influenced by perceptions of relative prestige of the languages in question.

Edwards (1985, 67) said that the best predictor of language shift is the past language shift history of the speech community. I maintain that evidence of present language shift in the speech community is a better predictor of future language shift. This evidence of present language shift can be found in the patterns of social variation a speech community will have in their language use. The most straightforward of these is the age factor. If there is a difference between the use patterns of the old and the young, it is often the case, but not always, that a shift is in progress, with the direction of the shift shown by what the young are doing. Other social factors pertinent to variation in language use often include class, education, wealth, gender, occupation, and place on the urban-rural continuum.

We can expect typical patterns of variation to help us see where language use is going in the future. Thus variation in language use can help us predict future use. The language use of the subsectors of the society that are at the forefront of change-in-progress are indicative of future use patterns.

Sampling a speech community with a self-report sociolinguistic questionnaire, which includes language use questions and social information on the subject, can provide valuable data on the socially defined language-use variation present in the speech community (providing the sample is large enough). Evidence of present language shift in a speech community can often be found in the conscious knowledge of the members of the speech community, because, in general, people are aware of language shift. Change in progress is a good predictor of future change. Present shift

often predicts future shift. The lessening of ethnolinguistic vitality often predicts future loss of ethnolinguistic vitality.

### ***Motivations***

Although a history of past language shift is a good predictor of future ethnolinguistic vitality, and present language shift is an even better predictor of future ethnolinguistic vitality, the best predictor of future ethnolinguistic vitality lies in the area of motivations. Motivations determine use. Language use has to do with actions, actions are the results of decisions, and decisions are shaped by values and motivations. Thus motivations are key in understanding and predicting ethnolinguistic vitality. When a community has a motivational fabric in favour of a particular language, they will act on it unless that motivational fabric is changed. They will make the many individual language choice decisions that will result in increased ethnolinguistic vitality of that language. And the natural result of that will be the lessening of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the other language(s) in the community.

Gathering data on motivations is very similar to gathering data on attitudes. Henson, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon, in *How to measure attitudes* state that:

Self-report procedures represent the most direct type of attitude assessment and should probably be employed unless you have reason to believe that the people whose attitudes you are investigating are unable or unwilling to provide the necessary information...

If the people whose attitudes you are investigating are able to understand the questions and have sufficient self-awareness to provide you with the necessary information, and IF they are likely to answer honestly and not deliberately falsify their responses... use SELF-REPORT PROCEDURES. (1978, 21, 39)

Karan and Stalder (2000, 192), in their article 'Assessing motivations, techniques for researching the motivations behind language choice', recommend using certain 'guised' techniques to verify self-report data. Guised techniques, based on the matched guise technique introduced by Lambert (1967), are where people think they are evaluating something, but are really providing data on something else. Lambert asked subjects to evaluate people based solely on recordings of their voices, but he was really comparing the responses to the same bilingual speaker who made recording in two different languages, thus gathering language attitude data. An example Karan and Stalder (2000, 196) presented was where people thought they were comparing possible future husbands for a young lady, but what they were really revealing was their attitudes towards the languages those prospective marriage partners spoke.

The variation patterns that are typical of language change and language shift are also present in language motivation studies. For example the motivations of the subsectors of the society that are at the forefront of change-in-progress, the young and educated and urban and higher class, are most often closer to the motivations of the future than are the motivations of the older and less educated and rural and lower class. Thus we can in a way predict the trend, if not the future of the motivational fabric of a community. And motivations determine use. Thus if we are able to assess the language motivations of large enough samples of a community, we can observe the socially defined variation in the motivations, and be able to gauge the motivational

trends in the community. Gaining insight into the future motivational fabric of a community is of utmost importance for predicting ethnolinguistic vitality.

The actual dynamics of the language shift process involves language use and language motivations. Motivations influence use. Cross-time (diachronic) aspects of both language use and language motivations can be observed through social variation studies. Certain social segments have more advanced language use and language motivation patterns than other social segments. In order to accurately predict future language vitality, one must observe not only the present use and motivation patterns, one must also consider, through social variation studies, the predicted future use and motivation patterns.

### **In support of the model**

In 'The circumstances of language shift and death in Southern Africa', Batibo (2008) presents the endangerment and death of Khoesan languages during the Bantu expansion into Southern Africa. He mentions how the Bantu populations were demographically larger and had superior technology, were more socioeconomically sustainable, and more politically organised (2008, 53). The Khoesan groups became economically and politically subjugated to the Bantu groups.

'A system of serfdom and servitude, known as Bothanka, arose in which the Khoesan communities were under the economic control of the Bantu (Gadibolae 1999; Silberbauer and Kuper 1996)'. Consequently, many Khoesan languages became stigmatised, with their speakers shying away from them (Crawhall 2005; Vossen 1997). They easily lost self-esteem and started considering themselves as inferior. Situations of 'marked' or asymmetrical bilingualism (Batibo 2005, 103) arose in which most Khoesan groups became bilingual in Bantu languages, while the Bantu remained monolingual in their own languages. Gradually, this evolved into language shift at the expense of the Khoesan languages. (Batibo 2008, 53)

Here we have a case study where we can see the loss of ethnolinguistic vitality, and also see many of the factors involved. When we apply the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift to this case study, we can easily see how the Bantus' superior technology and demographic size contributed to the Bantu groups claiming and being accorded a higher social status than the Khoesan groups. This social status inequality would provide the background and rationale for the Khoesan groups having a social status motivation to use more and more of the Bantu languages. Similarly, the more advanced technology, such as iron-making (Inskeep 1979), and larger size of the Bantu groups would normally create a situation where there were economic and communicative motivations associated with learning and using the Bantu languages.

The Bantu groups also had more advanced centralised governance systems, which would give them advantages related to conquest and assure that the governance system of the joined Bantu and Khoesan groups was Bantu dominance and governance. This situation would provide the scenario for the power/prestige and political motivations that contributed to the loss of the Khoesan languages.

From the factors described by Batibo, the communicative, economic, social, language identity, power/prestige, and political motivations that were driving this language shift situation are readily seen. From the described situational factors, we can readily deduce the motivations, and thus we can validate the model in seeing how the motivators that were present in the past would have predicted the actual results.

Another interesting case study is found in *Globalization and language vitality: Perspectives from Africa* (Mc Laughlin, 2008). In this article, Mc Laughlin discusses how Wolof 'emerged as an urban vernacular and national lingua franca' (2008, 144) of Senegal. She presents many different factors and circumstances that helped bring this to pass. Among these factors were the early military and political strength of the Wolof (Mc Laughlin 2008, 150), a Wolof-speaking influential métis society (Searing 2005), the peanut trade in the city of Dakar (Mc Laughlin 2008, 513), and the association of Wolof to a valued urban identity (Mc Laughlin 2001).

The early political and military strength of the Wolof would normally lead to the Wolof holding a higher social class, and thus the social status motivation to learn and use Wolof, the language of power and influence, would be established. Along with this would be communicative motivations to use Wolof. The Wolof speaking influential métis society which developed in later years would also normally lead to social status and communicative motivations to use Wolof. The peanut trade in Dakar would provide economic motivations to continue to use Wolof. And the valued Wolof urban identity would be the basis for solidarity-based social motivations to continue to use Wolof.

Mc Laughlin (2008, 150) considers the geographic location of the Wolof as a major factor leading to the emergence of Wolof as a lingua franca in precolonial times. She states: 'the Wolof occupied an extensive area at the centre, rather than the periphery, of the ethnolinguistic territory of Northern Senegal'. This central location would lead to communicative motivations for using Wolof.

Again, applying the model to the case study, the motivations that were active in the past can be easily seen from the description of different factors, and these motivators would have predicted the results that actually occurred.

In the Central African Republic, younger people and urban people used Sango more than older and rural people (Karan 2008). This social distribution indicated that the future trend is towards more Sango use. Not only do these younger and urban people use Sango more, but their motivation patterns towards Sango use are stronger than those of older and more rural people. Thus, this social distribution indicates that the future trend in motivation patterns is towards more motivation to use Sango. The trend in growing use of Sango, and the trend in growing motivation to use Sango, have been going on for decades, as has been the very dynamic shift to use more and more Sango. The trend of use and the pattern trend of motivations are continuing to predict the actual situation.

### **Extensibility of the model**

One last argument for the Perceived Benefit Model is how well other models can be discussed and compared by using this model. The model has strong descriptive and predictive efficacy. And strength of descriptive and predictive efficacy is often an indicator that the model and the actual dynamics of the process are very close.

As an example, Ehala and Zabrodska (2011, 122) demonstrate the impact of interethnic discordance on subjective ethnolinguistic vitality. They hypothesise that:

high perceived interethnic discordance may enhance group vitality by reducing permeability of group boundaries and strengthening emotional attachment to the group by inducing identity threat. If this is so, subjective vitality would not depend only

on strength, power and status perceptions measured by SVQ, but could be enhanced by the perception of discordance, too.

The Perceived Benefit Model would predict that discordance between populations representative of languages in the larger community's repertoire would indeed have different impacts on the language vitality and language shift situations. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) introduced the concept of bounded solidarity. Bounded solidarity is a feeling of unity that normally arises from threats (real or perceived) to the group. Bounded solidarity brings about an increase of trust among community members, and is brought about by the recognition of a common threat. A social identity (solidarity type) motivation such as this would encourage the choice of the in-group language.

Thus the model predicts that vitality is affected by discordance, and perceptions of discordance. When a group is at odds with another group that represents a L2 in the first group's repertoire, that first group will increase its use of its L1. Bounded solidarity motivations would contribute to this happening. Economic, communicative, and power/prestige motivations that had previously contributed to a shift towards the L2 would be drastically reduced during a time of strife, as the strife would naturally decrease the economic activity and social interaction. This too would help explain the impact that discord and strife would have on language vitality situations.

### Conclusion

As stated above, forecasting ethnolinguistic vitality can only be done within a well-functioning descriptive and explanatory model of the dynamics of language shift. The Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift, used with the taxonomy of language shift motivations, provides that model. In order to forecast ethnolinguistic vitality, it is crucial to understand the motivations that are behind the language choices that, when combined, make up language shift. The actual dynamics of the language shift process, and the corresponding model, point us to the observation that language use and language attitudes, and the social variation patterns of language use and language attitudes (language use motivations), are the most important data-sets needed in order to accurately forecast ethnolinguistic vitality.

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