The Importance of Language

The Relationship between Linguistic Vitality and Conflict Intensity

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Abstract

Intergroup ethnic conflicts represent a risk of death and destruction. Understanding the reasons that push group members to adopt a certain level of conflict intensity is of the utmost importance. In the hope of shedding new light upon this phenomenon, this paper explores how ethnic conflict intensity may be influenced by linguistic vitality, a measure of the ability to use a language. The paper presents a theoretical model in which low and high levels of linguistic vitality are presented as being linked to lower conflict intensity than moderate vitality levels. The results lend support to this hypothesis, explaining in an accurate manner the conflict intensity of language-based ethnic conflicts in a general context and, more precisely, within countries.
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1. Introduction

Interethnic tensions represent a cause for grave concern. These apprehensions can be explained by three simple reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, they hold a potential for violence and death (Kegley & Wittkopf 1995; Ellingsen 2000; Huth & Valentino 2008). There are scores of cases in which ethnic tensions have led to terrorist attacks or full-scale warfare. Secondly, their frequency has also increased in recent decades, becoming the premier form of civil strife (Wallensteen & Sollenberg 1997; Ramsbotham et al. 2005; Hewitt et al. 2008). Finally, these worries culminate with the fact that most countries are heterogeneous (Ellingsen 2000; Duffy Toft 2002/3). In others words, the vast majority of the world’s states are in fact multi-ethnic and, hence, can potentially be the stage for violent ethnic conflicts. Therefore, due to their destructive potential, their increased occurrence and their quasi-universal prospective, ethnic conflicts represent an undoubted cause for concern.

The traditional reasons to explain the motives which push ethnic group members to enter into conflict or not, as well as the level of intensity they choose to adopt, have centred on economic inequalities and political differences (see, notably, Gurr 1968; Walter 2006). However, the magnification of these two major grievances has led other factors specific to ethnic groups to be somewhat overlooked.

The ethnic lines which divide groups can be based on evident social markers such as religion, language or race; or they can also be defined by less evident social demarcations such as tribe and clan membership. Yet, although ethnic social cleavages are centred on a variety of ethnic markers, sometimes even on multiple ethnic distinctions, one ethnic division stands out. When carefully examined, results reveal that the overwhelming majority of ethnic conflicts possess a linguistic difference between the conflicting parties (Medeiros 2010). This suggests that linguistic factors might be an important element in interethnic tensions.

Furthermore, the widespread occurrence of language-based ethnic conflicts has led them from being far from uniform. They involve movements that vary greatly in their demands. They range from the simple desire to protect group language, as with the Frisians in the Netherlands, to the will to form an independent country, as in the case of Catalans in Catalonia. They also have a high
degree of variance in their intensity. Some linguistic groups use peaceful means in order to have their demands acquiesced, such as South Tyroleans in Italy, while others take up arms and resort to violence, a deadly situation exemplified by Karen in Burma. Thus, ethnic conflicts based on language vary significantly in the demands that fuel them as well as their intensity.

Yet, despite the fact that most ethnic conflicts have a linguistic distinction amongst the conflicting groups and that such conflicts have an important variance in terms of intensity, the role of linguistic factors in intergroup conflicts has been underexplored by scholarly research. One reason for this neglect is due to the fact that research in political science and sociolinguistics, two sciences which explore such conflicts, remains disjointed. This situation impedes the understanding of language-based ethnic conflicts; but it has fittingly led to a call for more collaboration between these different fields (Phillipson 1999).

By taking up such a challenge, political science might find a more comprehensive insight into the dynamics of language-based ethnic conflicts. One novel link between political science and sociolinguistics may come from the study and utilization of the concept of linguistic vitality. Referring to the ability for individuals to use a language, usually in a specific geographical area, in everyday life, linguistic vitality is a variable commonly employed in sociolinguistic research; but which political scientists have overlooked. Linguistic vitality is a varying linguistic social factor, which may help to explain the variation in the levels of conflict intensity between groups divided by language. Thus, linguistic vitality might permit researchers to better understand intensity levels in language-based ethnic conflicts.

This paper takes up the challenge to address this gap and to incorporate linguistic social factors into the study of ethnic conflicts by examining the relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity. More specifically, this study seeks to answer an important question: How does linguistic vitality influence conflict intensity?

In order to answer this question, a rational choice perspective is used to develop a theory which connects the macro-social variables of linguistic vitality and conflict intensity through a sequence of micro-level sociopsychological mechanisms. The reasoning behind this process is that linguistic vitality influences perceptions of linguistic vitality and in-group saliency in linguistic minority group members, which, subsequently, impacts their perceptions of in-group threat, resulting, in turn, in
the adoption of positive or negative attitudes towards the out-group and, ultimately, through an aggregation of these individual attitudes, in peace or conflict.

This paper explores this theory through the analysis of linguistic vitality data from the UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (2009) as well as conflict intensity data from the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project (2005). The results not only support a theoretical model which explains the relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity in a general manner for language-based ethnic conflicts, but also show that this model is more robust in countries affected by multiple language-based ethnic conflicts in which linguistic groups differ in vitality levels.

2. The Rationality of Grievances

An attempt to identify a particular key variable which would explain conflict intensity would prove to be an impossible task. This impracticality stems from the fact that conflicts cannot normally be associated with one single causal variable (Sorokin 1962; Gilliland 1995). Consequently, in analyzing the factors which influence group conflicts, it is important to keep in mind the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon. This perspective allows us to appreciate that the psychological process which determines decision-making in an individual is influenced by several motivational factors. Seeing that groups, as Allport (1924) defined it, are fallacies in which only its individual members are real, it is therefore essential to examine the individual members’ perceptions which influence intergroup attitudes and behaviour. While traditionally two grievance factors have been at the forefront in conflict literature, this paper presents another type of grievance which is directly associated to ethnicity.

2.1 Two Traditional Group Grievances

There have been many attempts to understand the factors which motivate groups, and more specifically the members who compose them, to react in a certain manner in an intergroup conflict. This rational choice perspective – in which individual motivations of group members helps to explain conflict – has often been presented in the literature as either a choice between greed or grievance; and often, it is the *homo economicus* aspect of the former which has been highlighted. Paul Collier (2000) points out that economists are somewhat dismissive of grievance as a factor in
conflict because it is seen as a public good; whereas individual greed is much closer to an economic rational choice motivation in decision-making. Thus, greed would be a much more individualistic element and grievance would be more of a collective factor. Greed would hence motivate individuals to act in self-interest whereas actions inspired by grievances would be for the so-called greater good; rendering the former, in a pure rational choice perspective, a stronger determinant of conflict. This is the conclusion which has been advocated by seminal articles which have examined the influence of greed and grievance on civil conflicts (see, notably, Collier & Hoeffler 2000;Fearon & Laitin 2003).

However, Nicholas Sambanis (2004, 260) points out that the distinction between greed and grievance is ‘illusory, because greed and grievance are usually shades of the same problem’.1 It is in the presence of economic differences that individuals who are fuelled by greed have the best chances of being successful in their struggle. Following this perspective, several studies have concluded that conflicts are formed and fuelled by both greed and grievance (Berdal & Keen 1997; Kalyvas 2003; Murshed 2008). Even Collier (2000) acknowledged the fact that even in cases in which rebellions are not directly caused by grievances, they play a quintessential role in the conflict. Therefore, greed and grievance should not be seen as two entirely distinct motivational factor but, rather, as part of the same phenomenon which incites individual to act or not.

The impact of grievance on group conflict has been primarily examined through two types of intergroup differences: economic and political. According to Sambanis (2002, 223), rational choice theories of civil strife portray intergroup conflict as being ‘explained as a way to redress grievance, and grievance may be due to either political or economic factors, or both’. In the case of economic inequalities, the difference in available economic resources has been shown as accentuating civil strife (Sigelman & Simpson 1977; Muller & Seligson 1987; Lu & Thies 2011). Complementing to the grievances caused by economic inequalities has been those conjured by political discrimination. Differences in the access to political resources have also been presented as positively influencing conflict intensity (Gurr 1968; Regan & Norton 2005; Walter 2006). In both cases, intergroup dis-

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1 This ‘illusion’ might be fuelled by a reliance on a *homo economicus* interpretation of rational choice. Dennis C. Mueller (2003) recommends going beyond the pure economic model of rational choice in order to get a more realistic understanding of rational decision-making process in individuals.
parities lead to more serious conflicts. These two group-based grievances are undoubtedly important factors in the decision-making process of an individual. Yet, grievance factors specifically related to ethnicity might shine new light into the influence of grievance on conflict intensity.

2.2 A New Group-Based Grievance

Economic and political intergroup differences have been taken from the general notion of civil conflicts and applied to the more specific category of ethnic conflicts (Gurr 1993; Cetinyan 2002; Caprioli & Trumbore 2003; Kaufman 2005). However, few studies have examined group-based grievances specific to ethnicity. Such novel factors could possibly allow for an improved comprehension of intergroup conflicts and could also lead to a more accurate understanding of current explanatory variables.²

Ethnic divisions can be based on the most obvious ethnic markers which are religion, language or race; as well as less noticeable differences such as tribe or clan membership. However, when ethnic conflicts are carefully examined, one ethnic division stands out. A classification of ethnic conflicts reveals that the vast majority of their incidences imply a linguistic difference amongst the protagonists (Medeiros 2010). Therefore, given that linguistic difference is present in the overwhelming majority of ethnic conflicts, language may play a key role in such conflicts. For example, linguistic grievances might be fuelled by language barriers which keep economic and political resources out of the reach of ethnolinguistic group members and/or they might be kindled by the symbolism of linguistic, and hence group, inequality. In any case, an examination of grievance factors specifically related to language is warranted.

Although linguistic difference has been previously presented as an important divisive factor leading to intergroup tensions (Gupta 1970; Isaacs 1975; Harrell 1995), the literature that specifically applies to conflicts involving linguistic groups is quite scarce. The impact of linguistic characteristics on conflict intensity has only been examined through linguistic diversity; either using a dichotomous homogeneity/heterogeneity dimension (McRae 1983; Fishman 1989) or a fractionalization

² Explanatory models of ethnic conflicts which include economic and political discrimination, as well as many other variables, usually only account for a relatively small amount of the variance of the conflict variable (for examples, see Gurr 1993; Cetinyan 2002).
scale (Hibbs 1973; Reilly 2000/1; Liu 2011). Nonetheless, it has to be pointed out that these studies utilize linguistic variables which are only applied at the polity level.

The polity is an important factor in ethnic conflicts studies. The vast majority of the ethnic conflict literature has placed its emphasis on the country level. Yet, when examining conflicts which part of the literature presents as being caused by linguistic group incompatibility, it is curious that the phenomenon has lacked an exploration of group-level factors. Furthermore, examining language in a more elaborate manner would represent a major contribution to ethnic conflict studies in general and more precisely to the understanding of linguistic factors’ influence on conflict intensity.

Sociolinguistics, and the sub-field of social psychology associated to it, examines language on a more intricate level. The major contribution, as our subject of interest is concerned, of this academic current concerns the concept of linguistic vitality. The notion of ethnolinguistic vitality, first suggested by Giles et al. (1977), refers to the general health of a language. It is the overall ability to utilize the language in everyday life, what is also referred to as objective vitality (OV). As originally put forward by Giles et al. (1977), and subsequently further explored, OV is determined by three major variables: group status (Landry & Bourhis 1997; Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), demographic realities (Stevens 1992; Coupland et al. 2005), and institutional support and opportunity (Harwood et al. 1994; Yagmur & Kroon 2003). These factors merge to determine the ease at which ethnolinguistic group members can use their group language in social situations. However, linguistic vitality can also be understood as relating to the perceived language vitality of ethnolinguistic group members, referred to as subjective ethnolinguistic vitality (SEV) (Bourhis et al. 1981). The actual ability to use a language and the perceived facility of using that language can be completely different. Therefore, a distinction between both types of vitality is, evidently, quite important.

This academic trend has primarily been concerned with linguistic vitality’s influence on in-group members. It has shown that OV seems to be positively related to group identification (Landry & Allard 1994). The easier a language is to use in society the more positive individuals view it. This

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3 A group’s language can be considered safe, demonstrate positive trends in all sociolinguistic variables (group status demographic realities and institutional support and opportunity) and still be perceived by it members as being threatened. A good example of such a disconnect between OV and SEV relates to the case of French in Quebec (for specific details, please see Levine 1991; Gidengil et al. 2004).
The influence of linguistic vitality on conflict intensity has been a topic of scholarly research with varying degrees of focus. However, the relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity has not received much attention in previous studies. Nevertheless, the variable of linguistic vitality might improve our understanding of language-based ethnic conflicts. In this section, we will explore the effects of linguistic social factors on individuals and how they influence conflict intensity.

### 3. The Influence of Linguistic Vitality on Conflict Intensity

Scholarly research has not focused much attention on the relationship between linguistic vitality and group conflict. Yet, this variable might improve our understanding of language-based ethnic
conflicts. But how exactly does linguistic vitality effect conflict intensity, what are the mechanisms which constitute this relationship, remains, for the most part, unknown.

Linguistic vitality could help to explain why and how linguistic minorities react against national majorities. The grievances related to language might constitute motivations for linguistic group members to choose to enter into conflict and why, thereafter, they chose to engage in more pronounced forms of conflict. Seeing that linguistic vitality and conflict intensity are both macro-level variables, it is important to explore intermediary sociopsychological mechanisms which form the rational choice decision-making process. In other words, the macro-level social phenomena of OV and conflict intensity might be connected by a sequence of micro-level sociopsychological mechanisms.

The abovementioned empirical findings in sociolinguistics and my deductive reasoning suggest a theoretical sequence in which perceptions and intergroup attitudes link linguistic vitality to conflict. This paper thus theorizes that OV levels influence identity preference among individuals, specifically impacting their ethnocentric tendencies. The identity preference among individuals consequently determines perceptions of SEV in individual group members. The subjective evaluation by individuals of the health of their minority’s language afterwards would affect perceptions of in-group threat; the more one believes that one’s language is important, yet weak, the more one will feel threatened about the survival of that language and of the group it represents. It is put forward that the level of threat that an individual feels about their language will establish, in turn, positive or negative attitudes towards out-groups. This sequence of sociopsychological mechanisms among individuals, when taken in an aggregate manner, should ultimately determine whether there is conflict or not between linguistic groups.

Therefore, according to this theory, attitudes towards out-groups are the major connection between OV and conflict intensity. This might be seen as a somewhat evident assertion because it would be the sociopsychological mechanism immediately before conflict. Hence, out-group attitudes determine whether one chooses to engage in conflict or not with the out-group and also, if the former option is selected, the intensity of that conflictual engagement. Yet, the perception of vitality plays an important role in the type of attitudes that are held towards out-groups. In other words, the belief that one’s language is threatened or not determines the way that linguistic mi-
minority group members feel about out-groups. This is so because, in this case, out-groups are majorities with more political, economic and social power, and they can thus be seen as being responsible for the situation of the minority language.\(^4\) Therefore, the perceived weakness and threat of an individual’s language, and the responsibility for this situation applied to the out-group, could push an individual from a linguistic minority to enter into conflict with the majority group in order to improve their situation.\(^5\)

The basic relationship, however, between the two social factors, the first and last variables of the sequence, should be non-linear. Giles & Johnson (1987) suggest that very weak vitality eliminates the desire of group members to act as a collective. Individuals do not seem to have enough motivation to fight for a language which is perceived to be socially unimportant (Sorens 2005). Furthermore, due to the great effort required to improve a disadvantaged linguistic situation, dire linguistic situations might not even warrant the formation of serious linguistic grievances. Hence, low levels of OV should render language unimportant to group members and should generate low levels of tension towards out-groups. On the other hand, if the language has a very strong vitality, the members of the group should not feel very threatened and should thus express less negative attitudes towards out-groups. Group members in this position have a language which is safe; therefore, there would be less linguistic grievances and, subsequently, less to fight for than linguistic groups in a more vulnerable position. However, in the former situation, the tensions should never fully be extinguished; when language becomes important it should push minority group members to always have certain demands, just not at the level of groups in poorer linguistic situations. Therefore, linguistic vitality is expected to lead to more intense conflicts when language has a significant level of vitality but not such that the members of the group no longer perceive themselves as threatened.

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\(^4\) This theoretical statement is heavily based on social psychological studies which have explored intergroup attitudes and found that individual are predisposed to place blame for being in a negative situation on out-groups (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Dustin & Davis 1970; Brewer 1979; Bettencourt et al. 1992). It is also inspired by Sidanius & Pratto’s (1999) social dominance theory which states that societal groups seek to dominate by imposing inequalities on other groups, a social power systems in which members from the different groups are aware of who holds power and dominates.

\(^5\) Social psychology research has also revealed that individuals do not appreciate being in a disadvantage position and will seek to remediate the situation (see, notably, Tajfel 1978; Sidanius & Pratto 1999)
Consequently, it would be in the middle range of vitality that conflict intensity would be at its optimum. This prediction is in line with Giles & Johnson’s (1987) observation that it is before a language attains a weak level of vitality that the perception of linguistic endangerment might stimulate efforts to protect the language. Yet the reason as to why the middle range of OV should be emphasized has to do with grievances. It is in the middle level of OV that minorities would have the most grievances against the majority, because it is at this level that the language has major weaknesses, but is still socially important. Hence, the middle range of OV should be where linguistic minorities would have realistically the most to fight for and, consequently, the most motivation to fight. Thus, the relationship between OV and conflict intensity is expected to reveal an inverted U-shape curve. Figure 1 illustrates the expected relationship between OV and conflict intensity.

![Figure 1. Hypothesized Relationship between Objective Vitality and Conflict Intensity](image)

These theoretical considerations about the sociopsychological connection between OV and conflict intensity allow us to suggest a major hypothesis:

H1: OV and conflict intensity have an inverted U-shape relationship in which there always remain a certain, though lower, level of conflict intensity in high OV levels.

4. Data

The hypothesis suggested above is composed of two main variables: objective linguistic vitality and conflict intensity. The OV variable, labelled Vitality, was operationalized through UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger (2009). This dataset determines the OV of linguistic groups, through the strength of languages in each country, by means of a measure composed of
nine societal factors. Its mission is to determine the viability of all the different languages in every country; thus, basically allowing for the classification of vitality levels for all linguistic groups in the world. The UNESCO data only expressively indicates values for languages judged to be in danger; thus, their classification ranges from extinct to vulnerable. All languages excluded from the classification were classified as safe. The OV of the groups in the cases selected for analysis ranged from severely endangered to safe; no group’s language was coded as critically endangered or extinct.

As for conflict intensity, the data was ascertained from the Minorities at Risk (MAR) project (2005).\(^6\) MAR is a dataset that monitors the conflicts of politically active ethnic groups in all countries with a population of at least 500,000 inhabitants. The project is designed to provide information in a standardized format, through composite indexes, for comparative research. Two different MAR conflict intensity measures were selected, its protest and rebellion variables; respectively, the project’s PROT and REB variables. The former assesses more peaceful demonstrations of group tensions, whereas the latter appraises violence. Following Regan & Norton’s (2005) example, the conflict intensity variable, labelled Intensity, was constructed by joining both of the MAR intensity variables into a 12-point ordinal scale, which is believed to capture a continuum in the level of conflict intensity. The OV of the linguistic minorities was ascertained for the latest year in which data was available for each of the groups in the MAR dataset.\(^7\)

The MAR dataset includes 289 groups in conflicts (Medeiros 2010). In order to isolate the language-based ethnic conflicts in the dataset, the Different Language variable (CULDIFX2) was utilized; conflicts coded as having ‘No differential’ or with ‘No basis for judgment’ were excluded from the analyses.\(^8\) Furthermore, two additional conditions were added to retain groups in the analyses. Firstly, seeing that immigrant groups possess different characteristics than those of traditional territorial ethnic groups (Fuchs 1993; Sanders 2002), minorities coded as having immigrated mainly since 1945 in the MAR dataset’s Length of Group’s Residence in Country variable

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\(^6\) It is important to note that this study used phase IV of the MAR dataset, released in February 2005, and not the 2009 MAR update. This decision was taken due to major issues, at the time that this study was conducted, with the update’s data.

\(^7\) The UNESCO data fluctuates slightly in terms of the year the OV was estimated. Careful research was undertaken to ensure that vitality levels used for each case corresponded accurately to the OV situation for the year matched to the MAR dataset.

\(^8\) Minorities in which qualitative analyses revealed were not actually linguistically different, not a minority or too linguistically ambiguous were also excluded for the analyses.
(TRADITN) were also excluded for the analyses.\(^9\) Secondly, due to the nature of our vitality variable, groups who are linguistically diverse, which have more than one language associated to them, were also excluded. This filtering process, and the available data on conflict intensity, led to the retention of 176 cases for the study.

In order to isolate the influence of linguistic grievances on conflict intensity which my theory puts forward, economic and political differences, both ascertained from the MAR dataset, were also included in the analyses as control variables; respectively, the Economic Differentials Index (EC-DIFXX) and the Political Differentials Index (POLDIFXX) were utilized to form the Economic Strength and Political Strength variables. Controlling for these group-based grievances allowed for the relationship between OV and conflict intensity to be seen clearer.

The vitality variable was converted into a three-point ordinal scale (endangered, vulnerable, and safe). All other variables were converted into a 0 to 1 scale; the Economic Differentials and the Political Differentials were also inverted to demonstrate greater strength as the scales increase.

5. Results

The abovementioned theory suggests that the relationship between OV and conflict intensity should be curvilinear. The results tend to support the proposed relationship between these two variables.

The mean scores for the three levels of vitality, presented in Figure 2, reflect a curvilinear trend in relation to conflict intensity. The conflict intensity mean score of groups in which there language is judged to be vulnerable is 15 per cent greater than groups whose language is endangered, and 9 per cent greater than groups in which their language has a safe level. Therefore, the conflict intensity mean scores fit the predicted model quite well; especially seeing that intensity for groups with a safe language have a slightly higher mean, 6 per cent, than groups with an endangered language, as the model predicts. The figure does not, however, show significant differences between the vulnerable category and the two other OV levels; though, significance is nearly reached at \(p < 0.1\)

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\(^9\) There were four exceptions to this exclusionary rule. Europeans in Zimbabwe were left in because MAR qualitative data states that they were in that country prior to the 1950s. Also, Russians in Estonia and in Latvia and Slavs in Moldova were not excluded because they, unlike the other groups coded in this manner, are mostly geographically concentrated.
in the difference between the means for the endangered and the vulnerable categories. Nonetheless, with the small numbers of cases, 176 linguistic groups, the lack of significance is not so surprising.

The expected curvilinear relationship between OV and conflict intensity was further confirmed through OLS regressions. The results, in Table 1, show a significant, at p < 0.01, 20 per cent increase in intensity for groups with a vulnerable language compared to those with endangered languages. Whereas, although having a significantly, at p < 0.1, greater intensity that the endangered category, groups’ whose language is judged to be safe have a 7 per cent, using standardized coefficients (not reported), weaker intensity than vulnerable linguistic groups. As for the control variables, economic strength is shown, as expected, to have a strong negative significant, at p < 0.01, influence on conflict intensity. However, political strength only shows a slight negative influence on intensity without reaching any level of significance.

These results are concordant with an analysis of the means using an ANOVA followed by Tukey’s test (not reported).

While the results on the influence of political discrimination are in line with those found by Fox (2000), thus contradicting Regan & Norton (2005) and Walter (2006), they also go against Gurr’s (1993) findings that political discrimination is associated with less rather than more conflict. The weakness of political discrimination’s influence on conflict intensity might be due to the fact that it is so intertwined with economic inequalities and that it is the economic grievance variable which might account for variance in conflict levels.
Thus, these results, along with the others which have been presented so far, give credence to the proposed model which expected a generalized curvilinear relationship between OV and conflict intensity in linguistic ethnic conflicts.

However, if OV really has such an effect on language-based ethnic conflicts, the relationship between both variables should be more evident in polities experiencing several of these conflicts. Examining countries with multiple language-based ethnic conflicts would allow to better understand the reasons behind why some minorities are more radicalized than others.

Out of the 47 countries in the dataset with multiple language-based ethnic conflicts, 20 countries possess conflicts with different levels of vitality. The dataset was filtered to isolate these countries, resulting in 61 cases being retained for analyses.

As in the case of all the language-based ethnic conflicts (Figure 2), the mean scores for the three levels of vitality, presented in Figure 3, presents a curvilinear pattern between vitality and intensity. The intensity mean score of groups with a vulnerable language is 19 per cent greater than groups with an endangered language and 12 per cent greater than groups with a safe language. The intensity mean score for groups with a safe language is 7 per cent greater than groups with an endangered language. As in the previous analysis, the means do not demonstrate significant differences between the vulnerable groups and the other two categories; although, significance was very nearly reached at p < 0.1 in the mean difference between endangered and the vulnerable
linguistic groups. Once again, these mean scores show a quite good concordance with our predicted model.

An examination of the relationship between Vitality and Intensity in these countries revealed that in three countries there was no difference in conflict intensity between the linguistic groups, and in another four countries the relationship was positive. Yet, in the overwhelming number of countries, 11, groups with a stronger linguistic vitality demonstrated weaker conflict intensity than compatriots with a weaker OV. For the remaining two countries, the only ones which possess cases in the three levels of vitality, the relationship was, as expected, curvilinear. In these two countries, Russia and Spain, the difference between the different linguistic minorities is as our model expected, curvilinear. Although these results are quite striking, it is important to note that countries without a vitality difference between its groups still often possessed differing conflict intensities. Yet, when there exist differences in vitality levels among groups in a country, more often than not, greater linguistic vitality concords with weaker conflict intensity.

12 These results are a match to an analysis of the means using an ANOVA followed by Tukey’s test (not reported).
Once more, OLS regressions reveal the expected curvilinear relationship between vitality and intensity. The results, in Table 2, show a significant, at p < 0.01, increase of 23 per cent in intensity for linguistically vulnerable groups compared to groups with endangered languages. However, an important difference from the previous results is that the greater intensity of groups with a safe language compared to those with an endangered language is not significant. Furthermore, standardized coefficients (not reported) demonstrate a 24 per cent weaker intensity for groups in the safe category compared to linguistically vulnerable ones. As for the control variables, both are shown to have a negative influence on conflict intensity, however without reaching any level of significance. It is worth noting that the level that intensity weakens from vulnerable language groups to safe language groups is actually greater than would result from an improvement in economic inequality (15 per cent). While very similar to the results for all the language-based ethnic conflicts, it can be argued that these results specifically for countries with multiple language-based ethnic conflicts possessing different linguistic vitality levels are even more in line with the proposed model because the weakening of the intensity from the vulnerable category to the safe one is stronger and there is no significant difference for conflict intensity between endangered and safe groups.

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Numbers reported are unstandardized OLS coefficients. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. In order to capture the curvilinear relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity in OLS regressions, the vitality variables was converted into dummy variables for each level of vitality.

Linguistic vitality thus seems to influence conflict intensity in a curvilinear manner. This verifies the hypothesis (H1).
Consequently, the results not only support the hypothesis which was put forward, they give credence to a model which seems to explain in an accurate manner the conflict intensity of language-based ethnic conflicts in a general context and, more precisely, within countries.  

6. Conclusion

Political instability and violence associated with ethnic conflicts makes such intergroup discord an important subject. Accordingly the ultimate goal of these investigations into ethnic conflict is to prevent or attenuate their negative social and political effects; as well as to contribute to the development of strategies to resolve, decrease or prevent contemporary intergroup tensions. Conflict resolution strategies attempt to get to the root of the problem and address the causes which generated the conflict or, at the very least, establish an environment that minimizes the chances of escalation (Burton 1990; Lund 1996). The present study was conducted in the hope of contributing to the understanding of these conflicts and to the elaboration of strategies to alleviate them.

This study used a rational choice perspective in which ethnic group grievances constitute motivational factors for group members. Grievances were presented as being the anchor in the decisional process that leads group members to choose which level of conflict intensity to adopt. It was shown that traditionally the literature on civil conflicts, both in general and specifically on ethnic conflicts, usually treats group grievances in two dimensions: economic inequalities and political discrimination. In the process, grievances specific to ethnic groups have been underexplored.

Seeing that the overwhelming majority of ethnic conflicts involve a linguistic difference between the groups in conflict and, moreover, there is a range in the demands and the intensity of language-based group conflicts, a factor specific to linguistic groups was presented as being able to add an important explanatory dimension to these conflicts. Linguistic vitality, a variable often utilized in sociolinguistics and which is specific to linguistic groups, was retained for this purpose. This paper, hence, presented the level of linguistic vitality as another form of group grievance capable

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\[13\] Regan & Norton (2005) conclude that different types of civil conflicts, protest or violent, are differently influenced by factors. All of the analyses were also undertaken with the protest and rebellion variables separately. The results for both variables were basically the same as for those conducted with our Intensity variable; except that in the former, the dummy variables in the OLS regressions did not attain any level of significance.
of impacting conflict intensity. Therefore, this study sought to examine the relationship between linguistic vitality and the intensity of ethnic conflicts.

The results of these analyses lend support to a hypothesized model in which low and high levels of linguistic vitality generate lower conflict intensity than moderate vitality levels. Thus, the results indicate an inverted U-shape curvilinear relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity. The results support the proposed theoretical model for language-based ethnic conflicts in general but even more so for countries with several conflicts involving groups with different linguistic vitality levels.

This study not only brings together two academic traditions that share common interests but which have been disjointed, political science and sociolinguistics, it also permits to contribute to the development of sound governmental policies towards linguistic minorities. All in all, the results indicate that aiming to strengthen minority groups’ language towards safe levels reduces considerably levels of conflicts intensity when compared to vulnerable groups.

Yet critics might point to the fact that the lowest levels of conflict intensity are found with groups in an endangered situation. Though endangered groups seem to be the least threatening to national majorities, a purposely implemented national policy to endanger a group’s language not only violates important international legal conventions regarding minority group rights as well as the current international trend in the treatment of national minorities, but it also may engender a new series of grievances which may negatively affect intergroup attitudes.

Theoretically it is much more rewarding to strengthen minority languages in an attempt to alleviate their perceived threat and, hence, positively influence majority/minority relations. Therefore, policies which would make it possible to strengthen the linguistic vitality of minority groups would more likely than not improve, if not avoid, conflict situations between linguistic minorities and national linguistic majorities.

14 It is important to note that the results are based on data for groups already considered to be in conflict. Due to limitation of the data, a comparison of linguistic minorities in conflicts with those considered not to be in conflict was not possible. Furthermore, seeing that cross-national linguistic vitality data is somewhat in its infancy, a large scale temporal analysis in order to examine changes in conflict intensity is at this time not a viable analytical option.
One final element from this study needs to be highlighted. Although the results of this research lend support to the explanatory theoretical model which was proposed, they only do so for the general relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity. At present, it is only the macro-social connection between both variables which can supported. These results are quite enlightening and may help to explain, for example, Linz & Stepan’s (1992) challenging findings which show Catalans as being much more attached to their Spanish identity than Basques, a discovery that the authors were unable to truly explain. Seeing that the data used in this study indicate that Basques have stronger conflict intensity than their Catalan counterparts; this conflictual discrepancy is theorized in this paper, and inferred from the results, to be linked to the fact the former group is in a vulnerable linguistic situation whereas the later one is in a safe position. Thus, Linz & Stepan’s mystery might be in fact linked to different levels of linguistic vitality. However, to thoroughly and accurately explain the relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity, further research needs to be undertaken on the individual level. The model presented above is based on sociopsychological mechanisms, which theoretically serve as the connections between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity; therefore, an exploration at the micro-level is an essential next step in order to test the explanatory ability of the theory as well as forming a more compelling understanding of the relationship between linguistic vitality and conflict intensity.
7. Bibliography


