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### Refining the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality

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## Refining the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality

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The paper argues that the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality has been used ambiguously in the vitality theory, denoting three distinct theoretical concepts: sustainability (Su), strength (S) and vitality (V). It is hypothesised that sustainability is a group's ability to continue existing as a group while vitality is its ability to act as a collective entity and strength is its durability in demographic, economic, institutional and cultural terms. It is argued that the sustainability of an ethnolinguistic group is the function of the group's strength and vitality in dealing with the challenges (E) that the natural and social environment of the group poses. According to this model, the crucial factor in this equation is vitality which is the potential for collective action to safeguard the group from environmental challenges. It is further argued that vitality depends directly on social psychological factors that influence the group's shared perception of the interethnic situation. A model is proposed where vitality depends on the perception of the ingroup strength in comparison with outgroups (perceived strength differential), the commitment of its members to the maintenance of the heritage values (U), their cultural distinctiveness and closedness of their social networks ( $r$ ) as well as the level of perceived intergroup discordance (D).

**Keywords:** language maintenance; language status; minority languages; language attitudes

### Introduction

Over 30 years have passed since the introduction of the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality. During this time a large body of research has accumulated, though the vitality framework has not yet managed to establish itself as a genuine field of study bridging socio-linguistics, cultural studies and social psychology (see Hogg, 2006; Taylor & Osborne, 2007). At least partly, this is due to the vast complexity of the phenomenon, which has made it hard to provide a fully satisfactory account of the processes of language and identity shift (Clyne, 2003, p. 21).

The present paper analyses the weaknesses of the vitality theory, with the aim of elaborating it to provide a more exact and reliable tool for vitality assessment. As vitality is one of the key variables affecting language shift, a more accurate assessment of vitality would be beneficial to language maintenance research and for planning revitalisation activities.

The first section presents an analysis of the main concepts of the vitality theory. Traditionally, vitality is defined as a group's ability to act as a collective entity, and it

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is assumed that the higher vitality is the more likely is this group to maintain its identity and language. The first section argues that a group's ability to act as a collective entity is not a sufficient condition for its sustained existence. For this reason, vitality as a group's potential for collective action needs to be distinguished from sustainability, which is a group's ability to maintain its existence as a collective entity with a distinctive identity and language.

The second section outlines the relationships between vitality and sustainability, arguing that while vitality certainly contributes to sustainability, the latter is also influenced by the strength of the group in demographic, economic, institutional and cultural terms; and by the challenges that the natural and social environment of the group poses to its sustained functioning. It is proposed that the key factor in responding to threatening changes in the environment is vitality.

The last section concentrates on refining the notion of vitality by outlining its components and their internal relations. It is hypothesised that vitality depends on the perception of the ingroup strength in comparison with outgroups, the commitment of its members to the maintenance of the heritage values, their cultural distinctiveness and closedness of their social networks as well as the level of perceived intergroup discordance.

### **Analysis of the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality**

According to Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977, p. 308), 'the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations'. They suggested that groups that have little vitality are likely to cease to exist as distinctive collectives, while those that have high vitality are likely to survive; and proposed three structural variables that are likely to influence ethnolinguistic vitality: demographic, institutional support and status factors (Giles et al., 1977, pp. 208–209).

Another central hypothesis in the vitality theory is that 'group members' subjective assessment of ingroup/outgroup vitality may be as important in determining socio-linguistic and interethnic behaviour as the group's objective vitality' (Harwood, Giles, & Bourhis, 1994, p. 175). On this basis, the notion of vitality has been divided into objective and subjective vitality (see Bourhis, Giles, & Rosenthal, 1981). As both objective and subjective vitality were considered to contribute to group vitality, the term overall vitality is occasionally used to include both its aspects. However, just plain vitality is often used variably to denote either overall vitality or objective vitality.

The concept and dimensions of ethnolinguistic vitality were strongly criticised by Husband and Saifullah Khan (1982) as having flaws in specification of the concept and for being 'gross and inexact tools of analysis' (p. 193). This criticism was bluntly rejected by Johnson, Giles, and Bourhis (1983). Despite the criticism, the basic concept and the core of the theory have remained quite intact in subsequent work within this paradigm.

Although the theory of ethnolinguistic vitality has shown some vitality in surviving criticism, the following analysis intends to demonstrate how a refinement of the core notion and the variables would make it a more exact and verifiable theory. At present the vitality theory aims to explain the phenomenon of ethnic group maintenance by the level of the group's vitality. The analysis that follows challenges

this assumption showing that there are also other factors that affect a group's maintenance than just its ability to act collectively in intergroup situations.

### ***Vitality and sustainability***

First, the notion of vitality needs to be systematically distinguished from that of sustainability. This can be clarified by the case of the Melians (Athens and Melos, 2005).

In an episode in the Peloponnesian Wars, an Athenian naval group attacked the little island of Melos in the summer of 416 BCE. The Athenians gave an ultimatum to the Melians to surrender their sovereignty. The Melians appealed on the basis of justice and their neutrality in the Peloponnesian wars and pleaded with the Athenians to leave. The Athenians replied that the acceptance of the argument of the Melians would be internationally interpreted as a sign of Athens' weakness. Thus, if the Melians resisted, the Athenians would have no choice but to exterminate them, in order to prevent rebellion elsewhere. Even under the threat of destruction, Melians refused to cooperate, and the city came under siege. Eventually, the Melians could not hold out and surrendered unconditionally. Then, according to the contemporary historian Thucydides, the Athenians 'killed all of the adult Melian men whom they had captured and enslaved the children and women. They settled the place themselves, subsequently sending out five hundred colonists' (Strassler, 1996, p. 357).

Following the definition that vitality is what makes a group behave as a distinctive collective entity in intergroup encounters, there is no doubt that the Melos community had a high ethnolinguistic vitality: the vast majority of its members did not choose individual strategies to save their lives such as non-action, hiding from, or cooperation with Athenians, but acted collectively to stand against the intruders. Yet they did not survive as a collective entity. Thus, one must theoretically distinguish between the notions of vitality and sustainability. Vitality is the ability of a community to act as a collective entity, while sustainability is the ability to continue existing as a group.

As the above example shows, vitality is no guarantee of sustainability: there are conditions far less extreme than the above that affect a group's sustainability, but need not affect its vitality. Let us take the Estonian diaspora as an example: before the end of WWII, around 70,000 Estonians left their homes to escape the communist occupation and settled in communities with a population of over 10,000 in the US, Canada, Sweden and Australia. The diaspora, organised very quickly on local, regional and global levels, established its schools, churches and organisations. For nearly 50 years these communities acted at all political levels to pressure Western countries to end the Soviet annexation. Even after the regaining of the independence of Estonia, they kept up their cultural activities. Yet, as the communities are small, there has been a high level of exogamic marriage which has led to the assimilation of the youngest generations to the mainstream society. Thus, although the vitality of the communities has remained quite high thanks to the active older generations, the communities could not be considered sustainable because of the breakdown of intergenerational transmission of language and culture.

What these examples indicate is that no conclusions can be drawn from the data of vitality in relation to the sustainability of the group. Although the claim that vitality is the critical indicator of group sustainability is not made directly in the vitality literature, there is still a frequent allusion that 'ethnolinguistic minorities that

have little or no group vitality would eventually cease to exist as distinctive groups. Conversely, the more vitality a linguistic group has, the more likely it will survive' (Giles et al., 1977, p. 308). There is no doubt that vitality contributes to sustainability, but the nature of this relationship has remained largely unspecified in the vitality literature. In order to further specify the relations between vitality and sustainability, a systematic distinction between a group's vitality and its strength must be established.

### *Vitality and strength*

Returning to the case of Melians, it might be useful to imagine what else besides vitality they would have needed in order to remain sustainable in the given socio-historical conditions. Perhaps if their population were 30,000 instead of 3000 that would have made a difference, or if they had developed a vastly superior technology, i.e. defence capabilities. In a word, if Melians were stronger as a group, their sustainability chances would have been better.

Thus, it would be theoretically useful to distinguish a group's strength from its vitality. Strength would derive from a group's size, economic wealth, level of technological advancement and the effectiveness of social institutions, such as administration, education, church and family. This list overlaps largely with the factors specified under 'objective vitality'. Yet it would be advisable not to call this set of factors vitality.

The reason for this comes from the fact that a group's strength does not determine its ability to act as a collective entity. Prime examples to illustrate this point would come from all national awakening movements. National awakening is, by definition, a phenomenon where a group mobilises itself to enhance its chances of survival. A successful national awakening movement will also significantly strengthen the group by obtaining more control over the economy, creating social institutions necessary for the functioning of group, and even deliberately enhancing its demographic characteristics. For example, Giles et al. (1977, p. 314) describe how French Canadians in the nineteenth century had a purposeful tactic of having large families in order to counter the flow of English immigrants.

A vivid example that strength and vitality are independent is provided by the Welsh. In 1870, the Parliament Education Act prohibited the use of Welsh as a medium for teaching in schools. More or less at the same time, the process of industrialisation accelerated the depopulation of rural areas. For a Welsh person, these conditions strengthened individual social mobility as the best strategy to enhance one's life conditions and social identity. This led to a gradual weakening of the Welsh as a group. Yet, despite this, the 1960s saw a remarkable rise of Welsh activism – Welsh names were taken back, Welsh societies and a separatist party were established (see Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Chapman, Smith, & Foot, 1977), i.e. suddenly the Welsh people started to act as a distinctive collective entity, despite the fact that in the 1960s they were much weaker as a group than half a century earlier. If strength positively correlated with vitality, no rise in Welsh vitality would have been expected after half a century of decline in its strength.

What the Welsh example points to is that no conclusions can be drawn from the data indicating the strength of a group in relation to its ethnolinguistic vitality, i.e. the ability to act as a distinctive collective entity. In the outline of their theory, Giles et al. (1977) state that the factors of objective vitality (i.e. strength) are 'most likely to

influence' (p. 309) vitality, and in later studies it is also stressed that these factors may affect vitality. While it is true that the strength of the group may influence vitality, the latter is by no means determined by the strength. Being indifferent to this fact seriously weakens the usefulness of the theory of ethnolinguistic vitality.

To conclude this analysis, one gets the impression from the way the theory of ethnolinguistic vitality is presented that it aims to be a theory of ethnolinguistic sustainability, i.e. a theory which aims to explain what makes a group to maintain its identity, language and culture. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the term *overall vitality* is used more or less in the meaning of sustainability, and that the terms *sustainability* and *survival* are often used as direct outcomes of vitality. Yet, when one looks at the definition of vitality, it is given in much more narrow terms, not as a group's sustainability, nor even as its strength, but as its ability to act collectively. While it is clear that the ability to act collectively is a necessary condition for a group's sustainability, it is by no means a sufficient condition. As the relationships between sustainability, vitality and strength are not explicitly stated, the theory is not able to provide a fully satisfactory account of any of them.

In order to refine the theory, two tasks need to be undertaken: first, to specify how vitality and strength are related to sustainability; and second, within this broader framework of sustainability, what are the factors that affect vitality.

### **The dynamics of ethnolinguistic sustainability**

The world's ethnolinguistic diversity has developed over tens of thousand of years, and although the age of any particular group might not be traceable over that time span, there is no doubt that most of the ethnic groups at present have been sustainable for a very long period of time. On this basis, it could be argued that ethnolinguistic groups are autopoietic in their nature, i.e. they strive towards sustainability by their very nature. If they were not, the existence of ethnic diversity would be rather exceptional, and not as great a general human condition as it is.

If one assumes that ethnolinguistic groups strive for sustainability, it is necessary to specify how this is achieved. Obviously, the strength of the group is an important factor that supports sustainability: the larger the group and the more resources it controls, the better chances of survival it has. On the other hand, there is a strong reason to believe that the loss of sustainability is caused mainly by changes in the external environment of a group, such as loss of natural resources, increased presence of outgroups, immigration, emergence of effective road system enabling emigration, economic modernisation, etc. (Mufwene, 2000). However, this does not amount to saying that a group's sustainability is solely at the mercy of the group's natural and social environment. To some extent, ethnolinguistic communities are able to affect their environment and their own strength in order to safeguard themselves from harmful changes in the environment. Whether a group is able to mobilise itself for this depends on its ability to act as a collective entity, i.e. its ethnolinguistic vitality. Thus, the general conditions for sustainability could be expressed by the following formula:

$$Su = (S + V) - E \quad (1)$$

where  $Su$  is sustainability,  $S$  is strength of the group,  $V$  is vitality and  $E$  represents the challenges posed by the environmental setting in a particular historical time period. Thus, a group remains sustainable if its strength and vitality combined are enough to

cope with the challenges that are posed to it by its environment. Let us look at these variables more closely.

### ***Environmental factors***

By and large, three major environmental factors can be distinguished that affect the sustainability of groups: isolation of its geographic location, availability of resources and the presence of outgroups. These three factors are heavily interrelated. For example, geographic isolation reduces the impact of outgroups, yet the outgroups can reduce the isolation by establishing roads and other communications. Whether this happens or not is influenced by the available resources at this location. Also, a lack of resources may lead to the emigration of ingroup members, the availability of resources may lead to the immigration of outgroup members, etc. Changes in the combination of these environmental factors are the main reasons why a previously sustainable community may cease to exist.

### ***Strength***

The strength of a community coincides more or less with what is known in the vitality theory as objective vitality. In fact, objective vitality is quite often used as a synonym of strength (see Abrams, Barker, & Giles, 2009, p. 61; Harwood et al., 1994, p. 171). Yet there are reasons not to use the objective vitality factors wholesale to define group strength.

The main reason for this is the fact that the list of objective vitality factors were initially defined as an open and possibly non-exhaustive taxonomy of features the choice of which was not theoretically motivated (see Giles et al., 1977, p. 310). Thirty years of work on ethnolinguistic vitality has not changed or amended this taxonomy. Still today, the objective vitality is assumed to be influenced by status factors, demographic factors and institutional support factors. Thus, the question remains why just this set of features happens to be crucial for assessing group strength. Therefore, it would be wise to follow a theoretical principle in determining the set of factors that define the strength of a group.

One possible way to give a theoretical foundation to the variables defining a group's strength is to follow the assumption that ethnolinguistic groups are autopoietic, i.e. their goal is to function as self sustainable social units – in an ideal case in the form of a society. There is a general consensus in the social sciences that there are at least five social institutions that exist in every society: economy, government, education, family and religion (Schaefer, 2008). Thus, the strength of any particular community could be better assessed by looking at whether it has managed to establish these institutions and, if so, to what extent they are elaborated.

Bearing this in mind, it is clear that demographic and institutional support factors pertain to the characteristics of various social institutions. Thus, they can be taken as a basis for measuring group strength. The third set (status factors) is different – status is a shared perception of the relative standing of a group in relation to relevant outgroups. It certainly characterises the strength of a group, but not as an objective measure, but as a subjective judgement.

While researchers could objectively measure the level of elaboration of social institutions, there is no way that researchers' 'objective' measurement of status will have relevance if this judgement is not shared by the group itself. For example,

‘objectively’ Roma communities have a low status in many societies. However, for Roma people, it is the mainstream society that has a low status. What matters (more) for the sustainability of Roma, is how they see their status, not what some external observers think of it.

Thus, for assessing group strength, status must be excluded, as it does not characterise objective empirical characteristics of a group and its social institutions, but a shared perception of the group’s strength and standing relative to prominent outgroups. Because status is exclusively subjective and open to ingroup manipulation, it is better conceptualised as a component of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality rather than strength.

### ***Vitality***

By definition, vitality is a group’s ability to act as a collective identity. This ability is formed in the interaction of several factors, the precise characterisation of which is outlined in the last section of the paper. In broad terms, the stronger a group perceives itself relative to the outgroups (i.e. the higher its status) and the harder it is for its members to use social mobility to improve their status, the more disposed they will be to act collectively to enhance the ingroup standing relative to outgroups and by this to secure its sustainability.

For example, a coloured Muslim community in Western Europe is likely to have a relatively high potential to act collectively, as it is hard for its members to become accepted by the mainstream society as ingroup members. Yet the size of the community might be large enough to make a collective action worthwhile. Such tendency has been confirmed by Klandermans, van der Toorn, and van Stekelenburg (2008), who found that Muslim immigrants who are well embedded in ethnic networks, display dual identity, but have a high perception of societal unfairness because of their ethnic and religious background are very likely to engage in collective action.

On the other hand, white immigrants from the Baltic countries are more likely to prefer social mobility as there is little racial, cultural or religious differences hindering assimilation, and little possibility that their communities would ever be large enough for a successful collective action.

What is particularly important about vitality is the fact that it is based on a shared perception of reality. Such perception is by necessity subjective and manipulated. This fact is well known to political entrepreneurs who try to mobilise the group for collective action. Quite often a perception of ingroup weakness or threat is discursively exaggerated to mobilise the group, or the group boundaries sharpened by stressing the differences between ingroup and outgroups. But it can also happen that the shared perception of weakness emerges even though the actual situation is not that hopeless.

A vivid example of such social engineering is provided by the struggle over the removal of the Bronze Soldier statue in Tallinn, Estonia. Threatened by the blurring boundaries between ethnic Estonians and Russians in Estonia, both the Estonian and local Russian conservative nationalists used the statue to invoke ethnic mobilisation. Tired of provocations, the Estonian government eventually relocated the statue, which triggered ethnic riots by Russian youth which in turn lead to a heightened social mobilisation amongst ethnic Estonians. As a result, the vitality of both groups was enhanced considerably (Ehala, 2009).



Thus, although vitality depends on the strength of the community (i.e. its ‘objective vitality’), as Giles et al. (1977) claim, it never depends on it directly, but through a shared perception (i.e. subjective vitality). As this perception may over- or underestimate the actual strength, vitality is to a certain degree independent on the strength of the group. In other words (using the traditional terminology), a groups ability to act as a collective entity depends directly on its subjective vitality, objective vitality affects this ability only as much as it affects subjective vitality.

### *Interaction of sustainability factors*

The interaction of sustainability factors is best summarised graphically (see Figure 1). Central to this graph is the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality, because this is the only force that the community has for responding to the changes in the environment in order to maintain its sustainability. Two factors influence vitality: (1) the perception of the external environment, i.e. the challenges and opportunities it provides; and (2) the perception of the group’s internal environment, i.e. its strength.

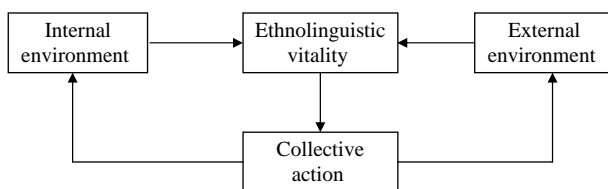


Figure 1. Interaction of sustainability factors.

Ethnolinguistic vitality is the basis of collective actions that can be directed to modify the external environment – in the case of minority groups, this would mean a fight to change legislation, increase their rights, etc. More sovereign groups may wish to limit immigration, increase defence capabilities and secure energy resources. Collective action can also be directed towards elaborating social institutions in order to strengthen the community: establishing self-governing bodies and societies, e.g. setting up schools and churches. It can also be used in establishing a social norm – a moral ban on emigration, the tradition of having large families or just a strong sense of community solidarity. In fact, most successful nation-building enterprises provide ample evidence of how collective action is used to secure sustainability.

It is hoped that within these lines a broad framework of ethnolinguistic sustainability can be developed that would be exact enough to assess the survival chances of any ethnolinguistic group in their immediate environment. However, this paper sets the narrower goal of refining the notion of vitality which is the key component in the framework of ethnolinguistic sustainability.

### **Ethnolinguistic vitality refined**

#### *The nature of ethnolinguistic vitality*

Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that group behaviour can be modelled on a continuum which has social change at one extreme and social mobility at the other. Social mobility is a belief system that, in a society, people can cross group boundaries if they wish to improve their social status; social change is a belief system that the

group boundaries are impermeable and the only way to enhance one's status is to mobilise as a group in order to change status relations. These two types of behaviour are causally connected to one's social identity: social mobility would, by necessity, mean identity shift, while social change would mean identity maintenance. As ethnolinguistic vitality is the ability to behave in group terms, i.e. on the social change side of the continuum, it is also connected with one's social identity.

According to Tajfel (1978), social identity is 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (p. 63), i.e. social identity has a cognitive, evaluative and emotional component. Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) have shown that these three components of social identity – cognitive, evaluative and emotional – are conceptually distinct aspects of identity; but only 'group commitment appears to be the key aspect of social identity which drives the tendency for people to behave in terms of their group membership' (p. 386). This seems to suggest that affective commitment is one of the core elements of vitality.

Although emotional attachment may be at the core of vitality, it is hardly the only component that determines whether individuals prefer collective action or social mobility in striving for a better life. It is probable that people make quite a rational calculation as to which of the strategies is likely to be more successful. This comparison would necessarily involve assessing the strength of the ingroup against the strengths of the most relevant outgroups. Let us call it the perceived strength differential (PSD): if the strength differential allows one to hope that one can achieve one's goals by contributing to the goals of the ingroup, collective action is supported; if the ingroup appears too weak for this, social mobility is preferred.

Yet again, this depends on how hard it is to leave an ingroup and enter an outgroup, if it is possible at all. There are two factors that influence this: the perceived intergroup distance, and the intergroup discordance. If the ingroup is very distant from the outgroup in terms of racial, linguistic and cultural features, shifting identity might not be possible, even if one had such a wish. Similarly, if there is a high level of intergroup conflict, leaving one's group might be impossible even if the racial, linguistic and cultural features would make the identity shift relatively attainable.

### ***Interaction of vitality components***

#### *Perceived strength differential (PSD)*

Most researchers agree that language shift is often motivated by power differences between dominant and minority groups, and that language and identity maintenance depends on the opportunities and rewards, real or symbolic (including more positive social identity), that the two groups can provide to their members. The sum of these factors could be called the perceived strength of the group.

However, for group vitality, the crucial factor is not the perceived strength itself, but the differential of the perceived strengths of the ingroup and the most prominent outgroup. The reason is that groups exist in their socio-historic setting and the perception of one's ingroup strength depends on the relative strengths of the outgroups. In general, if the PSD is small, the benefits from shifting one's group membership would not outweigh the emotional and social costs. The larger the PSD is in favour of the outgroup, the more beneficial it would be to shift identity. Thus,

provided that the influence of all other factors is absent, the vitality (V) of the group would be equal to the differential of the perceived strength of the ingroup ( $S_1$ ) and the outgroup ( $S_2$ ). Mathematically it could be formalised as follows:

$$V = S_1 - S_2 \quad (2)$$

If  $V < 0$ , the group has low vitality (likely to opt for social mobility).

If  $V \geq 0$  the group is stable (not likely to opt for social mobility).

### *Intergroup distance*

Although the PSD is the rational motivating factor behind identity and language shift, it is hardly unaffected by other factors that either hinder or enhance this tendency. One such factor is intergroup distance ( $r$ ). This is a complex factor that refers to the extent of intergroup contact and the distinctiveness of features characterising the group.

The resistance to intergroup contact expresses a group's disposition to maintain its ingroup networks, while the environment offers opportunities for the development of a different network that unavoidably would weaken the heritage network (Landry, Allard, & Henry, 1996). Lesley Milroy (2001) has given evidence how close-knit social networks facilitate language maintenance and when they weaken, shift is likely to follow. Sanders (2002) refers to numerous cases where ethnic entrepreneurship was able to provide resources for the community, thus reducing the need for contacts with outside communities. Thus, a disposition to maintain segregative networks would enhance the vitality of the group despite a large negative PSD.

Network structure, in turn, is heavily related to language usage: as intergroup contact often involves two languages, the network structure will determine the language usage patterns. The more numerous are contacts with the dominant outgroup, the more the dominant language is used. This means that the language usage pattern is often a good indicator of the extent of intergroup contact. On the other hand, language is also a boundary feature for many groups (Barth, 1969; Fishman, 1977). Thus, the usage of one language or another is also an indicator of the cultural distinctiveness of the group, i.e. an indicator of intergroup distance.

Besides language, distinctiveness can also be marked by other features, such as religion and other cultural practices (Myhill, 2003). Some of these features are essentialist in nature, such as racial features; some are socially constructed, such as religion. While the latter features may be abandoned by group members, essential features may not. Sanders (2002, p. 342) refers to a number of studies indicating the inhibitory effect that individuals' distinctive racial features have on their choice of possible ethnic identities. For example, dark skinned West Indian people in the USA have little possibilities of not being identified as African Americans, despite their efforts of distinguishing themselves from African Americans. Language, although a constructed feature, has strong essentialist characteristics, as the native accent is hard to conceal. For this reason it is hard for ethnic Russians in Estonia to be accepted as ingroup members by Estonians to whom native proficiency is one of the most important ingroup boundary features.

Ultimately, intergroup distance is determined by symbolic and discursive factors that set the norms concerning the acceptability, extent and nature of intergroup contacts, as well as establishing a wish to maintain group distinctiveness. Hornsey and Hogg (2000, p. 147) argue that a perceived threat to identity caused by a gradual

increase in intergroup contact is likely to lead to symbolic actions to increase cultural differences in order to enhance entitativity.

Thus, all other factors being kept constant, the less there is intergroup contact and the more distinct the groups appear, i.e. the larger is the intergroup distance, the higher is the vitality of the group. Mathematically, the relation of intergroup distance to PSD could be expressed as in (3):

$$V = (S_1 - S_2)/r \quad (3)$$

Let us assume that the minimal value for  $r$  is 1. This would correspond to minimal intergroup distance, both in terms of social network and cultural distinctiveness. It would mean a very strong interconnectedness of social networks and a high cultural similarity. Such situation may be characteristic to dialect or regional language groups in relation to the standard language speakers (Ehala & Niglas, 2007). In such cases there is very easy to shift from one group to the other,  $r$  has no impact on the vitality  $V$ , which is determined only by the PSD. When  $r$  is larger than 1, it starts to reduce the negative value of  $V$ , because of the costs that are associated with the shift from one group to the other. The higher are the costs the less likely are the members of the low status group to opt for identity shift. Thus, the larger  $r$  gets, the closer  $V$  gets to zero, i.e. the point of ethnolinguistic stability. What is the maximal value for  $r$  is a question of fine tuning the model. This can be done on the basis of a large set of comparative studies using this model, by finding the best mathematical solution that would account for all cases in the comparison set.

### *Utilitarianism*

Utilitarianism is a broad discursive mindset that justifies pragmatic and economically beneficial courses of action. According to Scollon and Scollon (1995), the basic principles of utilitarian discourse are as follows: (1) humans are defined as rational economic entities; (2) 'good' is defined as that which will provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number; and (3) values are established by statistical (i.e. quantitative) means.

Each culture, though, functions as interplay of innovation and tradition, and the utilitarian principles are balanced by what could be called the traditionalist discourse: (1) the essence of humanity is emotional; (2) the notion of 'good' is set by the moral authority; and (3) values are defined by tradition. The traditionalist discourse expresses the group members' commitment to their cultural practices and values. In a balanced culture, the utilitarian values and the traditionalist values are in a modest conflict of innovation and tradition, which is a characteristic of many well-functioning societies. This opposition is well recognised by the major theories of human values, such as Schwartz's (1992, 2006), and Inglehart and Welzel's (2005), although all authors use their own terminology.

As the utilitarian principles are discursive, different groups may differ in respect to the salience of the utilitarian and traditionalist values in their culture. The less salient is utilitarianism, and the more salient traditionalism, the stronger is the group members' commitment to their social identity. For example, some religious groups (such as the Amish or Russian Old Believers) are so traditionalist that they almost do not assimilate at all, despite their supposedly large negative PSD with the mainstream society. This value configuration would support language and identity maintenance.

If the utilitarian values are highly salient and traditional values not at all, the group members are more predisposed to abandon heritage traditions as maintaining them seems costly, meaningless and/or backward. Such value configuration would reduce vitality. If the utilitarian and traditionalist values are well balanced, U does not have an effect on vitality. Given this, Utilitarianism could be included in the formula in the following way:

$$V = U(S_1 - S_2)/r. \quad (4)$$

This means that if the value of U is 1, its impact on V can be disregarded. This would correspond to the situation where utilitarian and traditionalist values are well balanced in a group's shared value system. If the value of U falls below 1, it starts to reduce the negative value of V. When U reaches 0, the whole equation becomes equal to 0, meaning that the group is ethnolinguistically stable, disregarding how large is its PSD with the outgroup (as is the case with several ethnoreligious groups). If the value of U is greater than 1, the effects of negative PSD get reinforced, causing the V value to drop. What is the maximal value for U is again the question of fine tuning the model.

### *Intergroup discordance*

Intergroup discordance, or D-factor, expresses the perceived illegitimacy of intergroup power relations as well as the distrust towards the outgroup. Although legitimacy and distrust are clearly distinct concepts, they are interrelated. It is well known that some low status groups show outgroup favouritism (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991), and that the perception of a powerful group is dependent on the degree of perceived legitimacy of their power (Zelditch, 2001). This would imply that the more legitimate the situation is perceived by a low status group, the more positive the perception of the high status outgroup. There is some empirical support for this hypothesis (Batalha, Akrami, & Ekehammar, 2007). There is also quite strong empirical evidence that the larger the perceived illegitimacy of the situation, the higher is the level of distrust towards the dominant outgroup: for the Swedish speaking community in Finland, the legitimacy perceptions were negatively correlated with perceived discrimination ( $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and negative intergroup attitudes ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Teräsaho, 2007); for the Russian community in Estonia, the correlation between perceptions of illegitimacy of the power position of Estonians and the extent of their dehumanisation have a fairly solid correlation  $r = 0.541$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) (Zabrodskaja, 2009). Thus, provided that there is typically a positive correlation between perceptions of illegitimacy and distrust, it would be reasonable to calculate the D-factor as the mean value of these two factors.

The relationship of the D-factor to the other components needs to be specified, too. As argued by Turner and Brown (1978), choosing the strategy of social change, i.e. manifesting high vitality, depends on whether there are cognitive alternatives for the existing intergroup power relations which depend on the perceived stability–instability and legitimacy–illegitimacy of the current situation. It would be reasonable to assume that the larger the negative PSD and the lower the value of D (i.e. the more legitimate the situation is considered, and the more trustful the attitudes towards the outgroup) the higher the perceived stability of the intergroup situation. In such a situation the low status group is unlikely to challenge the existing power relations as it feels itself too weak for this and its low status legitimate. The smaller the negative

PSD and/or higher D, the more unstable is the situation, as the low status group has both the motivation (establishing justice) and the perceived strength to change the power relations.

This could be illustrated by the case of Russian communities in the Baltic states. The Russian community is the smallest and weakest in Lithuania, on the other hand, Lithuania has given all ethnic Russians Lithuanian citizenship which has enhanced the perception of legitimacy of the interethnic situation. In Latvia, and to a lesser degree in Estonia, Russian communities are larger, and their members were not granted automatic citizenship and some democratic rights after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. As a result, the interethnic situation is less stable in Latvia and Estonia than it is in Lithuania (see also Hogan-Brun, Ozolins, Ramoniene, & Rannut, 2009).

When the D-factor is incorporated, the V formula obtains the following form:

$$V = U((S_1 - S_2) + D)/r \quad (5)$$

It is reasonable to assume that in the case when there is neither perceived discordance towards the outgroup nor perceived outgroup favouritism, the value of D would be equal to zero, i.e. it would not affect the value of V. The higher is the positive value of D, the more it will reduce the negative value of PSD, leading to higher values of V. If D has negative value (indicating outgroup favouritism), it will increase the negative value of PSD, leading to lower values of V.

In other words, the high vitality of the minority group depends on the perceived high instability of its low status (small negative PSD and high D) in the situation where the intergroup distance  $r$  is large (which makes the social mobility option costly or impossible) and the attitudes of the members of the group are traditional (low U value). The converse also holds: the more stable a group's low social standing is perceived (large negative PSD and low or even negative D value), the smaller is the intergroup distance from the high status outgroup (small  $r$  value), and the more utilitarian are the members of the ingroup (high U), the more likely they are to use social mobility strategy indicating low vitality.

### Summary and conclusions

This paper has presented an outline of a broader framework of ethnolinguistic sustainability in order to specify the nature of ethnolinguistic vitality and its contribution to sustainability. It was hypothesised that the sustainability (Su) of an ethnolinguistic group is the function of the group's strength (S) and vitality (V) in dealing with the challenges (E) that the natural and social environment poses. The crucial variable in this equation is V as it expresses the potential that group has for safeguarding itself from possible environmental hazards as well as responding to emergent threats. This relationship was mathematically expressed in (1), repeated below as (6a). It was further hypothesised that V depends on the perception of the ingroup strength in comparison with outgroups (PSD), the commitment of its members to the maintenance of the heritage values (U), their cultural distinctiveness and closedness of their social networks ( $r$ ) as well as the level of perceived intergroup discordance (D). These relations were mathematically expressed in (5), repeated here as (6b). The curly bracket indicates that V in (6b) is the elaboration of the variable V in (6a):

$$Su = (S + V) - E \quad (6a)$$

$$\overbrace{V = U((S_1 - S_2) + D)/r} \quad (6b)$$

It is likely that both S and E have at least the same level of complexity than V, but the precise formulation of their internal structure goes beyond the scope of the present article.

It is hoped that by this refinement of the notion of vitality and by the hypotheses made about the nature of the interaction of its subcomponents, the model has been made falsifiable by empirical testing. This would allow for systematic and cumulative refinement of the theory on the basis of real life data. At present, the model is fully operationalised, has passed its first empirical test on measuring the vitality of the Võro people in southern Estonia (Ehala & Niglas, 2007), and is currently being applied to Estonian–Russian intergroup settings. As more comparative evidence becomes available using this model and its corresponding methodology, it becomes easier to test the validity of hypotheses set forward as well as to fine tune the mathematical expression of the model.

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