

**An Analytical Discussion of the Main Factors Affecting
the Vitality of a Minority Language within a Political
Bilingual or Multilingual Context**

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INTRODUCTION

The number of world languages has declined rapidly over the past 500 years. While approximately 14,000 different languages were spoken around the world at the beginning of the 16th century, today there are only around 7,000 world languages. (Graddol, 2006) Alarming, Graddol (2006) predicts that by 2200, there will only be a few hundred languages left due to increased mobility and language contact. The decline of world languages has prompted scholars to begin exploring the concept of language vitality and its relationship to language maintenance as well as language shift.

One of the earliest and most-cited theoretical models of language vitality (also called ethnolinguistic vitality) was introduced by Giles, Bourhis & Taylor in 1977. According to the authors, "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." (Giles et al., 1977, p.308) Giles and his colleagues proposed that groups with weak vitality are likely to perish as distinct communities with distinct languages, whereas groups with high vitality are likely to survive as distinctive collective entities. The concept of language vitality has gained prominence in recent decades due to rising globalization and its effect on the dynamics of different ethnic and linguistic groups. Since the introduction of the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality by Giles et al. (1977), various scholars have presented their own, improved typologies of language vitality with distinct, yet in some ways, similar factors that are suggested to affect the vitality of a minority

language (Edwards, 1992, Ehala, 2011, Harrmann, 1986, Hyltenstam & Stroud, 1996).

The purpose of this assignment is to discuss analytically the main factors that can ensure or undermine the vitality of a minority language within a political bilingual or multilingual context. In the next section, a brief overview of five frequently cited language vitality typologies is provided. Similarities and differences between the different frameworks are highlighted. The following section focuses on discussing the main factors that affect language vitality of minority groups based on the various frameworks presented in the earlier section. Finally, suggestions for future theoretical development in the area of language vitality are offered in the conclusion.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE VITALITY FRAMEWORKS

Numerous frameworks of language vitality with factors that are suggested to affect language maintenance and shift have been introduced over the years. This section provides a brief overview of five different, yet in some ways quite similar, frameworks of language vitality. Although they stem from various scientific fields such as psychology, sociolinguistics, or language ecology, there is a considerable overlap between the different typologies. The frameworks are briefly described, compared and contrasted on the following pages.

Giles, Bourhis & Taylor's Framework (1977)

Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) were the first ones to present a framework of 'ethnolinguistic vitality' based on the complexity of intergroup relations between different linguistic groups. Using a social-psychological approach, they proposed that three broad factors influence ethnolinguistic vitality; namely status factors, demographic factors, and institutional support factors.

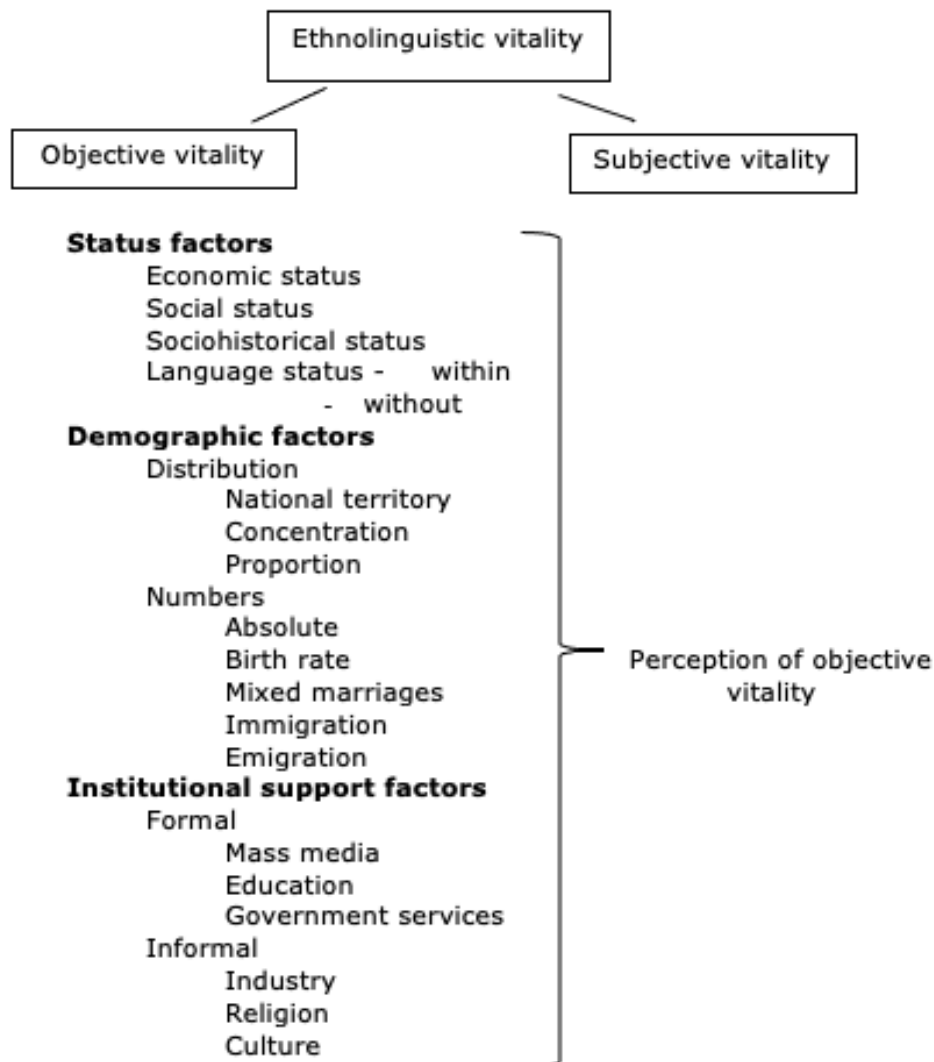


Figure 1: Framework of Ethnolinguistic vitality by Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977)

Each factor includes a number of variables. Status factors comprise economic, social, sociohistorical and language attributes. Demographic factors refer to the distribution, concentration and proportion of an ethnolinguistic group as well as the absolute number of speakers, birth rate, number of mixed marriages and level of migration. Finally, institutional support factors include both formal and informal representation in mass media, education, government, industry, religion and culture.

It is important to note that Giles et al. (1977) defined ethnolinguistic vitality as an open and non-exhaustive framework, suggesting there may be other factors that play a role in language vitality. In addition, they emphasized the importance of examining both objective and subjective vitality. In other words, they argued that a minority group's status, demography and institutional support should be evaluated by both statistics and people's perceptions. This part of the model is closely related to the accommodation theory, according to which speakers' attitudes towards each other define whether they accommodate to each other's way of speaking (language shift) or whether they distance themselves (language maintenance). To emphasize the importance of subjective vitality, Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal (1981) developed the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire, which is a 22-item assessment tool directly related to the three-factor framework.

Giles et al.'s (1977) ethnolinguistic vitality framework has been criticized for being too general as well as conceptually ambiguous. (Edwards, 1992, Haarmann, 1986, Husband & Khan, 1982) Edwards (1992)

argues that some essential matters were neglected when developing the framework. In addition, the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire has been considered overly simplistic due to the assessment of complex historical, economic, religious, political and educational factors with only one question each. Husband & Khan (1982, p. 193) labeled it as a “gross and inexact tool of analysis” due to the fact that no provision was made for differential weighing of different items in the questionnaire. According to Ehala (2011, p. 187) subjective ethnolinguistic vitality is “not a reliable indicator of actual vitality.” He argues that the concept is more affected by social structural factors and by minority group members’ motivations rather than by their subjective perceptions. (Ehala, 2011)

Although Giles et al.’s (1977) framework of ethnolinguistic vitality has been criticized for its lack of detail and specification, it is argued in this assignment that it provided a solid foundation for further exploration as well as refinement of the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality in later years, and is, therefore, valuable.

Haarmann’s Framework (1986)

In 1986, Harald Haarmann presented a framework of ethnolinguistic vitality based on language ecology. Due to considering all possible factors that could directly as well as indirectly affect the choice of language and behavior in situations of language contact, Haarmann’s typology is fairly comprehensive, with seven main variables and 35 sub-variables. The main ones include ethnodemographic, ethnosociological, ethnopolitical,

ethnocultural, ethnopsychological, interactional, and ethnolinguistic variables. The sub-variables are presented in Figure 2 below.

- 1. Ethnodemographic variables**
 - a. Size of ethnic group
 - b. Concentration vs. dispersion as features of settlement
 - c. Monoethnic vs. polyethnic area of settlement
 - d. Urban vs. rural settlement within an ethnic group
 - e. Static settlement vs. migration movement in an ethnic group
- 2. Ethnosociological variables**
 - a. Stability vs. dynamic change
 - b. Distribution by sex
 - c. Age-group distinctions
 - d. Social stratification
 - e. Family relations (endo vs. exogamy)
- 3. Ethnopolitical variables**
 - a. Ethno-state relation
 - b. Speaker-language-state relation
 - c. Institutional status of the community's language
 - d. Reproduction potential of a community's language
 - e. Characteristics of the division of labor
- 4. Ethnocultural variables**
 - a. Ancestry as a criterion of group solidarity
 - b. Ethnocultural patterns vs. social distance
 - c. Relevance of cultural/political organizations for the promotion of a community's interests
 - d. Relevance of a language's ausbau status
 - e. Specifics of a language's sociocultural potential
- 5. Ethnopsychological variables**
 - a. Relevance of enculturation for ethnic identification
 - b. Relevance of self-categorization among members of a community
 - c. Language maintenance as a measure of ethnic identity
 - d. Attitude towards interaction with members of contacting ethnic groups
- 6. Interactional variables**
 - a. Communicational mobility
 - b. Interactional determination in the use of communicational means
 - c. Intra- and interethnic role relations for interaction
 - d. Degree of routine interaction with members of other ethnic groups
 - e. Degree of publicity of speech settings
 - f. Topics for intra- and intergroup interactions
- 7. Ethnolinguistic variables**
 - a. Linguistic distance between contact languages
 - b. Ethnically specific pragmatic strategies of verbal interaction
 - c. Role of grammatical determinism
 - d. Characteristics of language contacts with respect to the sociocultural status of the contacting languages

Figure 2: Ecological variables of language vitality by Haarmann (1986)

While, at first sight, Haarmann's variables may seem different from the ones in the framework of Giles et al. (1977), there are some commonalities. For instance, ethnodemographic and ethnosociological variables in Haarmann's framework correspond with the demographic factors presented by Giles et al. (1977). Also, some of the ethnopolitical and ethnopsychological variables resemble factors in the framework of Giles et al. (1977). However, one could argue that Haarmann's (1986) framework also includes several different variables, including characteristics of the written language, the language-identity relationship as well as linguistic distance between contact languages. These variables are pointed out here because they are present in some of the other frameworks reviewed for this assignment. It is also important to note that just like Giles et al.'s framework, Haarmann's framework of ethnolinguistic vitality was described as non-exhaustive, and therefore, there may be additional variables of language vitality not listed above.

According to Edwards (1992, p.44), Haarmann's framework is "the most methodological and systematic attempt to enlarge upon the language-ecology motif." However, despite its fairly comprehensive nature, Edwards (1992) describes Haarmann's typology as quite general. For instance, a few of the sub-variables such as group-state relations, group attitudes as well as institutional status require a more detailed breakdown according to Edwards (1992). In addition, there seems to be overlap among the ethnosociological, ethnopolitical and ethnocultural variables. Finally,

Edwards (1992) points out that other important variables related to geography and history are missing from the framework completely.

Edwards' Framework (1992)

A few years after Haarmann, John Edwards (1992) developed another framework of language vitality, which includes two sets of categories with different variables. Variables in category A incorporate various perspectives including demography, sociology, linguistics, psychology, history, politics/law/government, geography, education, religion, economics and the media. Variables in category B include the speaker, language, and setting. Edwards combined the two categories to create a framework with 33 factors. In his work, he presented a sample question to enquire about each factor. (Edwards, 1992)

Category A	Category B		
	Speaker	Language	Setting
Demography			
Sociology			
Linguistics			
Psychology			
History			
Politics/law/government			
Geography			
Education			
Religion			
Economics			
Media			

Figure 3: A framework of language vitality by Edwards (1992)

As an example, Edwards (1992, p. 50) suggested the following three questions in relation to demography:

1. Numbers and concentrations of speakers?
2. Extent of the language?
3. Rural-urban nature of setting?

Visually, this framework looks very different from the previous two typologies of language vitality. However, there is some overlap in terms of certain demographic, institutional support, economic, language and attitudinal factors. While demography has its own category in this framework, it is quite underrepresented compared with the previous typologies. Demographic factors such as birth rates, mixed marriages, distributions by age and sex are not included here. It is important to note though that according to Edwards (1992), these categories are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, which means that they could be included. Interestingly, some of the institutional support factors in Edwards' framework include a greater level of detail than the previous two typologies reviewed in this assignment. For example, in terms of education, Edwards (1992) considers the minority language speakers' attitudes and involvement regarding education (at the speaker level), type of school support for language (language level) as well as the state of education in the area (setting).

Although Edwards (1992) used a slightly different approach when developing his framework, we can conclude that it is in many ways similar to the frameworks of Giles et al. and Haarmann (1986). The framework also has similar shortcomings in its simplistic nature and partial ambiguity.

Hyltenstam and Stroud's Framework (1996)

Upon reviewing various frameworks and studies on language maintenance as well as language shift, Hyltenstam & Stroud (1996) developed a highly detailed framework of language vitality, including factors at the societal, group, and individual level. While the structure and some of the wording of the factors are different from those of Giles et al. (1977) and Edwards (1992), many of the factors in all three typologies are essentially the same (e.g. demographic factors, institutional support factors, economic factors). Furthermore, Hyltenstam and Stroud's framework shares a similarity with the ecological framework of Haarmann (1986) in its hierarchical structure. Both frameworks consider factors at the individual, group and societal levels. Haarmann's (1986) framework also includes a fourth, state level.

The main difference between Hyltenstam and Stroud's (1996) and Giles et al.'s (1977) frameworks is that the former is more detailed than the latter. For example, Hyltenstam and Stroud (1996) specify age and sex distribution as part of demographic factors, which are factors that are not present in the framework of Giles et al. (1977). In addition, Hyltenstam and Stroud include a wide range of language characteristics, economic conditions as well as political-legal conditions, which is not the case in the framework of Giles et al. (1977). Building upon previous contributions of experts in the field of language vitality, Hyltenstam and Stroud were able to improve Giles et al.'s original framework of ethnolinguistic vitality by breaking down complex variables and incorporating a greater level of detail

than in the previous typologies. Although Hyltenstam and Stroud's typology of language vitality is not perfect, it represents a necessary step forward.

Factors at the Societal Level

- Political-legal conditions
- Ideology of the majority society
- Implementation
- Economic conditions
 - Industrialization/urbanization
 - Majority enterprises
 - Communications
 - Labor market
- Sociocultural norms
- Education

Factors at the Group Level

- Demography
 - Size
 - Geographical distribution
 - Migration
 - Age distribution
 - Sex distribution
 - Degree or endo-/exogamy
- Language characteristics
 - Official language
 - Official language in another country
 - Spoken in more than one country
 - Dialect- or language split
 - Standardization/modernization
 - Degree of bilingualism
 - Proficiencies in each language
 - View of language
- Heterogeneity/homogeneity
- Niches of subsistence/religion
- Type of ethnicity
- Internal organization
- Institutions
 - Education
 - Religion
 - Language planning
 - Research
 - Culture
- Media
- Culture

Factors at the Individual Level

- Language choice
- Socialization

Figure 4: Framework of language vitality by Hyltestam & Stroud (1996)

Ehala's Framework (2011)

Most recently, Ehala (2011) presented an improved framework of Giles et al.'s ethnolinguistic vitality with four interrelated dimensions, including group strength (synonymous with Giles et al.'s objective vitality factors), inter-ethnic discordance (the perception of the legitimacy and trust between members of a minority group), utilitarianism-traditionalism (the extent to which members of a minority group value their language, culture as well as traditions and are open to change), and inter-ethnic distance (perception of linguistic and cultural differences between members of the majority and minority groups).

Ehala's (2011) framework is by far the most comprehensive one of the five typologies reviewed for the purpose of this assignment. The first dimension of this framework visibly resembles the typology of Giles et al. (1977). One could argue that the dimension of utilitarianism-traditionalism as well as inter-ethnic distance are at least partially present in the framework of Haarmann (1986) and Hyltenstam & Stroud (1996). Further research is needed in order to determine whether or not Ehala's framework gains ground.

MAIN FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE VITALITY

Although every single language vitality framework reviewed above has faced some level of criticism, there seems to be consensus among researchers regarding certain factors that affect language vitality. While the

wording may not be exactly the same in each typology, at least four out of five frameworks include the following factors of language vitality:

- Demographic factors
- Institutional support factors
- Economic factors
- Sociohistorical factors
- Language characteristics
- Linguistic attitudes

Demographic Factors

All researchers in the field of language vitality include demographic factors in their frameworks. As a result, demographic factors are considered to be a key variable in language vitality. To be more specific, *the absolute number of speakers, proportion, birth rate, geographical distribution, migration, age and sex distribution* as well as the number of *mixed marriages* all have effects on the vitality of minority languages. Groups with promising demographic tendencies are more likely to survive as separate entities than those with less favorable demographic trends.

Institutional Support Factors

Similar to demographic factors, institutional support factors are part of every major framework of language vitality. These factors refer to the degree in which the minority language is represented in a variety of institutions such as mass media, education, research, government, religion

and culture. The greater the representation of a language in different institutions, the higher the vitality of the language is suggested to be. Members of minority language groups with weak representation in different formal and informal institutions may struggle to have enough quality exposure to their language. As a result, it may be necessary and more convenient for them to use the majority language. For example, Romansh speakers in Switzerland have no dedicated Romansh TV channel, a very small number of Romansh magazines, and only one daily newspaper in Romansh. Due to a lack of mass media in Romansh, many read newspapers and magazines in German, and watch TV stations in German for quality content. This obviously weakens the vitality of Romansh as a minority language.

Economic Factors

Most researchers in the field of language vitality consider economy to be an important indicator of language vitality. According to Edwards (1992, p. 40), "analyses of many language movements reveal a powerful economic element." In addition, Baker (2011) considers economic status of a minority language group to be a key factor in their language vitality. As an example, let's consider the role of economic factors in the context of continental Europeans who moved to North America soon after its colonization. Despite being bigger in size compared to Europeans of English-speaking background, continental Europeans ended up shifting to English partially

because it was the language of the economically more successful group and learning the language gave people better job and overall survival prospects.

Sociohistorical Factors

Sociohistorical factors refer to the importance of history of a group as a collective entity. Giles et al. (1977) and Edwards (1992) all argue that examining the historical or sociohistorical factors of language vitality is essential. Based on Giles et al. (1977), groups with a rich history as a collective entity tend to have great symbols (such as symbols of glory, struggle or oppression) that can in some cases mobilize the members of the group to contribute to their vitality. In other cases, negatively perceived symbols from history may encourage member of minority language groups to conceal or completely abandon their linguistic identity, which weakens the vitality of the group as a collective entity. As an example, Giles et al. (1977) point out that many Albanian immigrants in Greece chose to hide their Albanian identity, including their language, due to the potential association with a communist past.

Language Characteristics

Language characteristics are also considered to be key indicators of language vitality. They include attributes such as the language's official status in a particular territory, whether or not it is spoken in more than one country, its degree of standardization, as well as the minority people's degree of bilingualism. Using the example of Romansh in Switzerland again,

one can clearly see how the language characteristics of Romansh negatively affect the vitality of the language. For centuries, Romansh was not considered an official language in Switzerland. Even when it finally became an official language in 1938, it was just a symbolic recognition as Romansh continued not to be used for administrative or legal purposes. The fact that Romansh is not a well-known language that is only spoken in one other small area of the Italian Alps also does not help the vitality of the language. Regarding the degree of standardization, despite relatively recent attempts to unify Romansh speakers by creating one standardized language, Raetoromans continue to use five different dialects. Finally, there is a very high degree of Romansh-German bilingualism among Romansh speakers, which also undermines the vitality of the Romansh language.

Language Attitudes

Members of minority language groups are rarely impartial towards their own language. They may perceive it as key to their community and identity and, therefore, promote it. Alternatively, they may use the language without fostering it. They may also be ashamed of it and, as a result, not endorse it. Another possible scenario is that they may view it as a nuisance and actively avoid it. Positive attitudes towards a minority language help improve the minority language's vitality. In addition, negative attitudes towards a majority language also help with the vitality of the minority language. All five frameworks reviewed for this assignment

include language attitudes in some shape or form. This factor is, therefore, considered to be key in the vitality of a minority language.

Before concluding this section, it is important to note that this list of key factors may not apply to every single language community that is experiencing language contact. For example, in rural areas of developing countries with limited access to institutional support, the institutional support factors may not be as important as in most other contexts. Hyltenstam and Stroud (1996) also point out the importance of considering the relevance of the factors for specific language communities. They use the example of 'land-grabbing' as an important factor in the language shift of Saami in Australia and Hawaii. (Hyltenstam and Stroud, 1996) Since the concept of land-grabbing is non-existent in the European and American contexts, it has not been discussed or included in any major typology of language vitality. However, it is a relevant factor that deserves attention in this particular situation of language contact.

CONCLUSION

Although there are numerous theories of language vitality stemming from various scientific fields, all of the typologies reviewed in this assignment share a substantial level of overlap in the form of factors that have been found to affect language vitality. The shared factors that appear in each framework have been identified as key indicators of language vitality. They include: demographic factors (absolute number of speakers,

geographical distribution, proportion, migration, age distribution, sex distribution, degree of mixed marriages), institutional support factors (legal and governmental services, education, culture, religion, mass media), economic factors (level of industrialization, majority enterprises, economic status), language characteristics (standardization, modernization, degree of bilingualism, language status) and linguistic attitude factors. One must emphasize that this list is not exhaustive and may not apply to every single language community that is in a situation of language contact.

Despite decades of research, there is still no comprehensive theory of language vitality that would allow for diagnoses regarding the positions of minority languages on the continuum of language maintenance and language shift. According to Salikoko Mufwene, Professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago, "theoretical developments regarding language vitality lag far behind linguists' current investment in language advocacy." (Mufwene, 2017, p. e203), A general theory of language vitality that would permit experts to make predictions regarding the likelihood of a minority language community to maintain its language or eventually shift to another language is essential in order to avoid an even more rapid decrease of world languages in the next centuries. Future research should, therefore, focus on developing an accurate assessment of language vitality using a descriptive and explanatory model of the dynamics of language stability and shift.

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