

# Language competence as a moderator of ethnolinguistic identity gratifications among three language minorities in Europe



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 September 2014

Accepted 23 February 2015

### Keywords:

Television

Ethnolinguistic identity

Minority languages

German in South-Tyrol

Hungarian in Transylvania

Swedish in Finland

## ABSTRACT

Using a social identity gratifications framework (Harwood, 1997, 1999), this paper examines the role of ethnolinguistic identity and language competence in influencing television viewing among three language minorities in Europe: the German minority in South-Tyrol, Italy; the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, Romania; and the Swedish minority in Southern Finland. Self-report questionnaire data were collected among secondary school students ( $N = 1443$ ) in 2010. The results indicated that in settings where preference for, or consumption of, minority language media was relatively low, effects of identity on minority television language preferences were strongest for those who were least bilingual. In contrast, in settings where minority language television preferences were relatively high, the effects were stronger for more bilingual audience members. Findings and implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the social identity gratifications perspective (Harwood, 1997, 1999), social group identity can be a motivational factor for seeking out specific media content, and, reciprocally, media can support or reinforce particular social identities. Several recent studies have supported this notion, demonstrating the role of social identities such as age (Harwood, 1997, 1999; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010), gender (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Trepte, 2004), race (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008) and ethnicity (Abrams, 2010; Abrams & Giles, 2007, 2009) in media selection.

Memberships in language groups can be important social identities (Giles & Johnson, 1981, 1987), and language can be a prevailing determinant of media consumption. In linguistically diverse environments where media landscapes as well as audiences are linguistically divided, ethnolinguistic identity can motivate media use, and media can, in turn, support or reinforce ethnolinguistic identity. The positive relationship between ethnolinguistic identity and media use has been demonstrated among Estonian-speakers and Russian-speakers in Estonia (Brady & Kaplan, 2000), Swedish-speakers in Finland (Sundback, 1994),

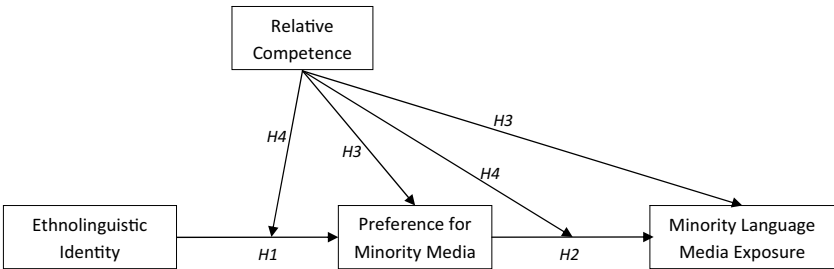
Hungarian-speakers in Slovakia (Vincze & Harwood, 2012) and French-speakers in Canada (Clément, Baker, Josephson, & Noels, 2005; Gaudet & Clément, 2005). These investigations demonstrated that higher identification with a language was associated with more use of the media in that language.

While gratifying age, gender and other social identities by media use does not require any additional “skills” or conditions, ethnolinguistic media use is intrinsically tied to language competence. The “ability to speak or at least understand the language of a broadcast, is an important ingredient in audiences’ selection of a program and their enjoyment of it” (Straubhaar, 2003, p. 82; see also Anashin, 2000; Bochmann, 1993). Reviewing studies conducted among Latinos in the USA, Subervi-Velez (1986) demonstrated that higher competence in English was accompanied by greater preference for and exposure to English language media. Similarly, Ksiazek and Webster (2008) found that monolingual Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Americans consumed media products overwhelmingly in their own language, but language played a smaller role in the media consumption of those who had greater bilingual competence.

However, the research fails to clarify mechanisms by which these two facets of the linguistic self (identity and competence: Liebkind, 1995) work simultaneously in media use. Specifically, we argue that these two facets of the linguistic self are not only important components of media consumption, but they *interact* when predicting media preferences and exposure. In other words, we maintain that in bilingual contexts neither identity nor competence

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**Fig. 1.** A model of the associations between identity, competence, preference for minority media and minority language media exposure. Hypotheses are indicated on the appropriate paths in the model.

can provide sufficient explanation for the linguistic patterns of media behavior; rather, it is their combined effect that counts. Hence, our goal here is to integrate two rather separate lines of research; one concerned with affective (identity) influences on media use, and one concerned with cognitive/pragmatic influences (linguistic competence). We believe that such integration will both improve our ability to predict media use among minority populations, and speak more generally to the boundary conditions for identity's influence: we endorse the general idea that identity influences behavior, but suggest here that its influence is moderated by pragmatic concerns that identity scholars sometimes ignore.

Against this background, we examine the distinct and combined effect of ethnolinguistic identity and language competence on *preference* for minority language television use and *actual exposure* to minority/majority language television among minority language group young media users. We examine the German minority in South-Tyrol, Italy, the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, Romania and the Swedish minority in Southern Finland. Of course, young people use many media other than television, however we focus on television because it remains a ubiquitous medium (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and because we believe that the language of television use is indicative of the language of other media use.

1.1. Hypotheses

We begin by providing our definitions of four key concepts, building on the previous literature. Ethnolinguistic identity and language competence are the two facets of the linguistic self, the former referring to the description of self as belonging to a group and the value associated with that membership, and the latter referring to actual linguistic ability. We also examine two ethnolinguistic facets of media use: Preference for minority language media use and the language of exposure. By *preference* we mean an expression of wanting or needing to consume media in the minority language. In contrast, *exposure* refers to the actual behavior of media use. We proposed the following hypotheses (depicted in Fig. 1). Consistent with the tenets and evidence surrounding social identity gratifications (Harwood, 1997, 1999), individuals who identify more with the minority language group will have a greater preference for minority language media (Hypothesis 1). Second, we expect that people who express a greater preference for minority language media use will consume more minority language media; thus, preference will mediate the impact of identity on minority language media exposure (Hypothesis 2).

Third, we predict that language competence will influence media preference and exposure. People who master both languages have a broader array of majority and minority language media to choose from, can easily shift from one to the other, and can meet many needs using media in either language. On the other hand, individuals with less majority language competence have less ability to gratify needs using majority media. Understanding majority

media is more effortful for these individuals, and hence presumably will only be attempted when either (a) minority language offerings are low interest, (b) language is relatively unimportant to comprehension (e.g. watching sporting events), or (c) information is being presented that is important and unavailable in the minority language. Hence, we present the relatively mundane prediction that individuals who have lower competence in the majority language will express higher preference for and expose themselves more to minority language media (Hypothesis 3).

Finally, we predict that language competence will moderate the links from identity to preference, and preference to exposure. Given the previously described flexibility enjoyed by bilingual individuals, their minority language media preference and consumption has greater scope to be influenced by identity than is the case for more monolingual minority language group members. For the monolingual, consumption patterns will be most strongly influenced by competence: even low-identifying people will consume mostly minority language media due to their relative inability to understand majority language media. On the other hand, bilingual individuals can be more selective, and hence low minority-identifying individuals might gravitate to heavier majority group consumption, while high minority-identifying individuals would prefer and expose themselves to minority language media whenever possible (Hypothesis 4).

1.2. The settings

Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) introduced the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality to analyze the sociostructural and cross-cultural variables affecting the social strength of languages in bilingual settings. The approach offers three factors to determine the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group: status, institutional support and demography. The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is defined as “that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and collective entity within the intergroup setting” (Giles et al., 1977, p. 308). Vitality is a pre-existing condition accounting for ethnolinguistic attitudes and behavior (Bourhis & Barrette, 2006), and also for ethnolinguistic identification and survival (Giles & Johnson, 1981). Below we overview the ethnolinguistic vitality of three minority language groups (see also Table 1).

**Table 1**  
Objective vitality of the minority languages and access to minority language TV channels.

|                       | South-Tyrol | Transylvania | Southern Finland |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|
| Demographic capital   | Strong      | Moderate     | Weak             |
| Status                | High        | Low          | High             |
| Institutional support | Strong      | Weak         | Strong           |
| Regional TV           | +           | —            | +                |
| Transfrontier TV      | +           | +            | —                |

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