



Do birds singing the same song flock together? A mixed-method study on language as a tool for changing social homophily in primary schools in Flanders (Belgium)



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 February 2015

Received in revised form

13 September 2015

Accepted 4 October 2015

Available online 9 November 2015

Keywords:

Social homophily

Cross-ethnic friendship

Intergroup relation

Multilingualism

School effects research

School composition

ABSTRACT

The characteristics of a school's pupil population determine the boundaries within which friendships can grow at school, as pupils tend to develop friendships with others that are similar to them. This is an example of social homophily. Since language is an indicator of social status and identity, we aim at finding out whether it is a basis for social homophily. This study investigates what the effects of linguistic diversity on same-language friendships are for both multilingual pupils and pupils from Dutch-only homes and whether tolerant practices towards multilingualism impact friendship patterns. To get a deeper understanding of the context in which friendships develop, we examine pupils' perception of the language hierarchies in their school as well. We use a mixed-method design. The quantitative data analyzed in this article originate from a teacher and pupil survey in 67 primary schools in three highly diverse regions in Flanders during the 2012–2013 school year. The qualitative data have been gathered in two focus groups in which 24 pupils of the same school participated. Stepwise multilevel modeling showed that for multilingual pupils, a negative effect of tolerant practices towards multilingualism on same-language friendships existed, while linguistic diversity was of lesser importance. For pupils from Dutch-only homes, linguistic diversity had a negative effect on the number of same-language friendships and tolerance did not matter for friendship patterns. The insignificant effect of tolerance in pupils from Dutch-only homes can be explained by the strong dominance of Dutch, which the qualitative analysis also revealed.

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1. Introduction

Societies have become increasingly diverse due to migration and globalization (Vertovec, 2007). In schools, consequently, pupil populations have become very heterogeneous. Still, friendship relationships between pupils are not as diverse as would be expected from the mixed pupil populations in schools (e.g., Moody, 2001). This can be explained by social homophily. Social homophily is defined as “the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p. 416). In this article, social homophily thus means that social relations follow this homophily principle.

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Gender, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status (SES) are extensively studied as motives for homophilic relationships between people (McPherson et al., 2001; Shrum, Cheek, & Hunter, 1988). Social homophily mediated by language; however, has not yet been examined in depth (for an exception see Aboud & Sankar, 2007), although it has been stated that the thorough knowledge of a common language is an important aspect in friendship relations (Dirim & Hieronymus, 2003; Gareis, 1995).

In this study we focus on friendships between pupils who differ in the languages they speak at home. The setting of this study is Flanders—the Dutch speaking, Northern part of Belgium. In Flanders, the proportion of multilingual pupils in schools is rapidly increasing. More than 16% of the primary school pupils speak at home a language other than the dominant language in society (personal communication, Agentschap voor Onderwijsdiensten, October 26, 2012). Most of the non-native pupils in primary schools are second- or third generation-immigrants who were born and raised in Belgium. In essence, all pupils in our study have a language in common, namely Dutch, the language of instruction, but multilingual pupils might be more fluent and at ease in the language they use in the home context, making that home language more suitable to build a friendship upon. We want to investigate whether and how a school's linguistic composition influences interlinguistic friendships. Since no extensive literature on language-mediated social homophily exists, we draw upon theories about interethnic contact to predict interlinguistic friendships, namely the opportunity structure theory (Blau, 1977) and the group threat theory (Blalock, 1967). Next to finding out whether a school's pupil composition influences interlinguistic friendships, we are interested in exploring how a school's stance towards multilingualism might influence friendship patterns. We use Flanders as the setting of this study, where most schools have adopted a strong monolingual policy that bans pupils' home languages from the mainstream classroom (Van den Branden & Verhelst, 2007). However, many pupils in Flemish schools grow up with a different language than the one used at school (personal communication, Agentschap voor Onderwijsdiensten, October 26, 2012). Some schools are starting to allow a minimal usage of multilingualism in the school context (Van Der Wildt, Van Avermaet, Van Houtte, 2013). These tolerant practices towards multilingualism might have an influence on patterns of language-mediated homophily. By welcoming different home languages to the classroom, teachers raise the status of these languages and make them more visible for other pupils (e.g., Aboud & Sankar, 2007). Therefore, it might be that patterns of same- and cross-language friendships shift.

This article extends research on social homophily by adding a linguistic perspective. It is one of the very few studies that looks at the influence of school composition factors on interlinguistic friendship and it is innovative in estimating the extent to which the relationship between a school's pupil population and friendship relationships is mediated by tolerant practices towards multilingualism.

1.1. Social homophily

People prefer similar people as their friends. This process is called social homophily. McPherson et al. (2001, p. 416) defines social homophily as “the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people”. In this article, social homophily is thus conceptualized as homophily in social relations rather than homophily due to socioeconomic status. Two processes are at work in social homophily: baseline homophily and inbreeding homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). Baseline homophily refers to the “homophily effects that are created by the demography of the potential tie pool” (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 419). This means that the composition of someone's group of friends matches the composition of the people physically surrounding that person. Inbreeding homophily, on the other hand, is “homophily measured as explicitly over and above the opportunity” (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 419). This would indicate that even when there are equal opportunities to meet different people, someone has a certain preference for some people over others.

Social homophily occurs based on similarities in ethnical origin (e.g., Shrum et al., 1988) as well as on the basis of gender. Girls tend to relate more to girls in friendships, while boys mainly have male friends (Shrum et al., 1988). Age is also an important factor in social homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). Likewise, people with the same educational or occupational background cluster together (McPherson et al., 2001). However, all these factors do not operate in isolation from each other; they may be linked. Especially ethnic origin and social background are often found to be related (e.g., Heath & Cheung, 2007; Verhaeghe, 2012 for the Flemish context), both of which are also related to the linguistic repertoires people use (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Bernstein, 1973; Bourdieu, 1992; Janssens, 2013). Due to this interdependent relationship, very strong processes of social homophily can be expected (Blau, 1977). Since similar people have similar jobs, similar career paths and similar hobbies, they meet each other more easily (Heath & Cheung, 2007).

Although a common language is important for friendship relations to evolve (Gareis, 1995), language is less often studied as a mediator of social homophily (for an exception see Aboud & Sankar, 2007).

1.2. The importance of language for friendship

The importance of language for friendships is threefold. Languages are important in order to facilitate communication between friends and are also influential as indicators of identity and status. Communication between two people is a prerequisite for friendship. Even though a society might have a common dominant language, people who have grown up in a different language than the dominant language might prefer friendships in which they are able to use that language (Gareis, 1995). They might be more fluent and at ease in the language they use in the home context, making the home language more suitable to establish a friendship in. For profound friendships, a deep knowledge of a common language is important,

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