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Ethnolinguistic identity theory: a social psychological approach to language maintenance

HOWARD GILES / PATRICIA JOHNSON

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**Ethnolinguistic identity theory:
a social psychological approach
to language maintenance**

HOWARD GILES and PATRICIA JOHNSON

The study of language maintenance and erosion has traditionally been approached from a sociological perspective, and this is understandable given that data are invariably collected at a macrolevel in terms of group tendencies. At the same time, the people who constitute the collectivities examined have of necessity to make up their own minds regarding whether to maintain their ethnic tongue or let it erode. In other words, given that *personal* decisions are being made and *individual* strategies enacted (albeit they highly social), we feel that language-maintenance theory would be enriched by a social psychological input. As such, and in the context of language maintenance being an *inter-group* phenomenon to the extent that it is being fostered side by side or in conflict with another group's language, cognitive processes relating to social categorization, identity, comparison, attitude formation, attribution, and second-language acquisition (among many others) have an important part to play even at the macro-level. To this end, we argue that 'ethnolinguistic identity theory' can provide a valuable new direction for furthering our understanding of the variables and mechanisms involved in the maintenance of an ethnic language in different social settings.

This theory was originally formulated to address the issue of who in an ethnic group uses what language strategy, when, and why, in interethnic encounters. More specifically, we were concerned with explaining why it was that in certain situations some members of a group accentuate their ethnolinguistic characteristics (be it by dialect, language, or whatever) when conversing with outgroup speakers, while others converge toward them by attenuating their linguistic distinctiveness. Now, the former *divergent* act can be considered a special case of language maintenance (short-term) at the micro-level. Indeed, this type of face-to-face strategy may arguably be an instance of language maintenance *par excellence* in the sense that when an outgroup language is the societal norm, ethnolinguistic differentiation can invoke considerable social sanctions as a consequence. Moreover, in some situations, little cognitive effort may be involved in maintaining one's own dialect or language within the private and 'safe' confines of the home and

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