



## General threat leading to defensive reactions: A field experiment on linguistic features

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Supported by several theoretical perspectives on motivation, we based an experiment on the idea that threat motivates people to become defensive and to choose that which is familiar and unequivocal in a given situation. The present field experiment confirmed that a general relevant threat can motivate people in a linguistic multicultural to conform more rigidly to their own language, and hence accentuate their own linguistic singularity. In addition, an exploratory analysis of tolerance towards the competing language revealed that non-threatened people tended to open up toward the other language. A dual-motive model that accounts for opening-up versus defensive reactions is proposed.

It has frequently been observed that threat motivates people to become self-protective or defensive, and results in a narrowing of facets of the self. These and related observations surface in Adorno, Frenkel- Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950), Rokeach (1960), in certain cognitive consistency theories (e.g. Steele, 1988), and in defensiveness in attribution (Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1976) or person-perception (Shaver, 1975; Wicklund, 1999).

More specifically, the work of Adorno *et al.* (1950) proposes that threat results in defensive, protective reactions. The authors argue that status anxiety of the parents sets off an authoritarian discipline within the family. Parents who are anxious about their status will react firmly against weakness and irresponsibility. This produces repression of faults and shortcomings as well as suppression of aggression against authority. Suppressed aggression is then displaced from authority and directed against minorities and outsiders. The Adorno *et al.* thesis then implies glorifying the ingroup, sticking rigidly to that which is close to the ingroup, submitting to the authority of the ingroup, and rejecting deviates.

Another conception, following a similar chain of reasoning, can be found in the tradition of terror management theory (for an overview, see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, 1997). According to this theory, humans experience ever-present existential threat and anxiety, owing to their capacity to reflect upon their own death and possible annihilation. If people are reminded of their own mortality, they need a mechanism to repress this fear of death, otherwise they would not be able to function.

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Greenberg *et al.* (1997) hypothesize that immersion in a cultural worldview serves an anxiety-buffering function. Those who meet the prescribed standards or values, and who believe that they are living up to those standards, gain a subjective feeling of safety and death transcendence. The reaction to terror then typifies the narrowing-of-self process: people behave as if there were one, true, correct attitude or morality.

More recently, Wicklund (1999) has discussed a similar process in the context of person perception. He proposes that active contact with heterogeneous social contexts is basic to employing multiple perspectives; that is, to recognize that an event may be viewed, defined, or perceived in more than one manner, through several social focal points. However, to be placed in a threatening situation, or even to experience strong need states, will motivate people to focus on and pursue univocality in the course of human relations.

### **A broadened conception of threat in intergroup relations**

Some of the research on intergroup relations addresses a similar kind of process (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Based on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, researchers propose that through processes of social categorization and social comparison, a person forms a social identity. Intergroup bias can then result from the need to achieve or maintain a positive social identity. It follows that finding oneself in a low-status group, receiving negative feedback from the ingroup, discovering that one is insufficiently distinctive from other comparison groups or receiving a direct threat from a salient outgroup, all constitute social identity threats (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). This threat will then motivate people, for example, to display outgroup derogation, to perceive their ingroup as more homogeneous, and to stress unique personal qualities. In other words, they become oriented toward defending and reaffirming what lies close to them, namely their own group or selves.

Recent theoretical work by Mullin and Hogg (1998) discusses the motivational influences that are responsible for the ingroup bias effect in the minimal group paradigm. They propose that increased subjective uncertainty, being an aversive state, leads to a stronger ingroup identification and ingroup bias. By this analysis, the need for positive self-esteem is not the primary motivation underlying group behaviour. Further, social categorization may be a necessary condition for discrimination, but is not sufficient *per se*. Instead, *subjective uncertainty* is said to be the motivational force behind discriminative behaviours. This opens up the scope of describable situations in which discrimination could occur and identifies a more general force that underlies ingroup bias.

A recent finding from research informed by terror management theory adds to this idea. Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and Simon (1996) found that mortality salience increases intergroup bias between minimal groups. Given that such terror-management effects are based in the mediating factor of threat to self-esteem, the study suggests an expansion of social identity theory in line with the notions of Mullin and Hogg (1998).

Accordingly, and in line with the reasoning of Wicklund (1999), it seems fair to assume that any relevant threatening situation will motivate people to protect themselves and choose that which is familiar and unequivocal for them in the given situation. The unambiguous direction then chosen represents a narrowing of the self in

insisting implicitly that only one facet can be correct. Although different kinds of threat can elicit specific reactions, the result can always be conceived as a narrowing of the latitude that one is willing to represent.

### **A field experiment on linguistic features**

Language, given its distinctly human character, is often the major embodiment of one's ethnicity and, as such, a suitable dependent variable in the present theoretical context. In the realm of communication accommodation theory (Giles & Coupland, 1991) people have been shown to restore their threatened identities linguistically, for example, by using vocal strategies of psycholinguistic distinctiveness. Bourhis and Giles (1977), and later Bourhis, Giles, Leyens, and Tajfel (1979), found that, in Welsh and also Belgian multilingual settings, ingroup members make themselves psycholinguistically distinct when they are ethnically threatened by an outgroup speaker. This means that members of the ingroup emphasize their own accents or even talk to members of the outgroup in ways that can scarcely be understood. These findings illustrate the idea that in threatening situations, people will stick to what lies close to them, in particular to their own language or accent.

However, Giles and Coupland (1991) recognize alternative processes in which a speaker wants to associate him/herself with another person. In this vein, considerable research has investigated the phenomenon of convergence. This refers to a process whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviours in terms of a wide range of linguistic features. Researchers propose that speech convergence reflects a speaker's or a group's need for social integration or identification with others. In line with this thinking, the theory relies heavily on notions of similarity-attraction (Byrne, 1971). As one person becomes more similar to another, the likelihood increases that both will like each other more. Convergence through speech and non-verbal behaviours is central to this process.

Based on the foregoing arguments, we derive the following hypothesis. Among respondents living in a linguistic multicultural, those who are threatened in a general, culture-relevant manner will come to narrow the culture that they are willing to represent. More specifically, they should become intolerant of other linguistic forms, abide more by their own language, and hence accentuate their linguistic singularity. To test this notion, we made use of the unique and complex language situation in Norway.

### **Background**

At present Norway has two standard languages: Bokmål (literally translated as 'book language') and Nynorsk (literally translated as 'New Norwegian'). The former language is chiefly derived from written Danish, whereas the latter is based on an accumulation and integration of numerous Norwegian dialects, created by Ivar Aasen, a master in language planning, in 1853. Although both languages have been granted equality by the Parliament since 1885, and even though Nynorsk is the dominant language in certain parts of the country, the present reality in Norway is rather different. Bokmål can be considered Norway's primary language, as more than 80% of the population uses Bokmål rather than Nynorsk. The major daily newspapers appear in Bokmål, and only some parts of them are published in Nynorsk. Post offices and other governmental services are supposed to provide forms in both languages; however, forms in Nynorsk are not always available. Both languages must be represented in television broadcasting, but Bokmål accounts for approximately 75% of the programming.

Nynorsk is often underplayed. When foreigners come to Norway and want to learn the language, they are offered Bokmål in almost all cases, without instruction in Nynorsk. Thus, it can be concluded that Nynorsk is a minority language (Ofte dal, 1981).

Moreover, the opposition between the language groups is still strong. This opposition became part of the difference between the rural (Nynorsk) and urban (Bokmål) culture. It is often presumed that supporters of Nynorsk are also followers of the use of folk costumes, folk music and traditional food. This is still largely so, and most Norwegians identify themselves with one of the two languages (Ofte dal, 1981).

The two languages have many similarities. It is largely expected that native Norwegians can communicate in, or at least understand, both languages. Furthermore, it is part of the school curriculum to teach both Bokmål and Nynorsk in the public schools. Thus a basic knowledge of both languages can generally be presumed among all Norwegians.

### **The hypothesis**

Concretely, the hypothesis is as follows: given that every participant was a Bokmål-speaking native (the study took place in a city), we expect that when threatened in their general ethnicity as a Norwegian (not as a Bokmål native), they will be inclined to use more Bokmål and to show less willingness to use Nynorsk than people whose cultural values are supported.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A random group of 18 men and 24 women were chosen either at shopping malls or at the railway station in a west Norwegian city. All subjects were sitting alone and were ostensibly older than 18 years old. Relevant characteristics recorded were sex, age (divided into three major categories: younger than 30, between 30 and 50, and older than 50; these categories were judged on sight), and the participant's primary language (Bokmål or Nynorsk). Respondents were assigned randomly to one of the two experimental conditions.

The data from five participants were discarded. Three of them were native Nynorsk speakers. A fourth was not a native Norwegian, and the fifth refused to read the document that contained the manipulation.

### **Procedure**

The experimenter approached potential participants who sat alone in public places. These were the railway station and two shopping malls just outside the city. He played the role of a foreigner who had some relatives in Norway, and started his introduction as follows:

I'm sorry to disturb you, but maybe you can help me with something. I'm trying to write a small postcard to my cousin, who lives in Norway, but I have some difficulties with the language.

He always did this introduction in Norwegian, but then switched later to English. (The experimenter was perfectly capable of conducting the study in Norwegian, and this made it possible to include respondents who did not speak English.)

After the participants had indicated their willingness to help him, the experimenter confronted them first with a fax—the actual manipulation—that was said to be written by his Norwegian uncle. He said he wanted them to read the fax first because the postcard he wanted to write was meant to be an answer to it. The fax was a credible and stereotypical example of a message one gets from a relative when first in a foreign country, in the sense that it welcomed the experimenter to Norway, invited him for Christmas, and gave him some ideas about what to expect in Norway. It was typed and written in Nynorsk<sup>1</sup> and communicated either a supporting or a threatening point of view towards the Norwegian culture, depending on condition. Both faxes consisted of an introduction, the actual message, and an ending. The introduction welcomed the experimenter to Norway, and the ending referred to a visit the experimenter was going to make to this Norwegian family for Christmas. Both of these elements were constant for the two conditions. Only the actual message (in the middle) differed between conditions. The positive fax read,

You should know that we have beautiful and extraordinary nature here in Norway and that our educational system gives a lot of opportunities to students of your age. Our educational and ecological policies are very well organized and create endless possibilities, as you will notice. I'm sure they're going to make your stay in Norway comfortable and very interesting.

The threatening fax, however, read as follows:

You should know that we have some problems with our ecological policies and that our educational system isn't as good and well organized as it used to be. We should take the example of the Swedes concerning these problems. Their approach is the best and leads to the best results. You should definitely take that into consideration during your stay in Norway.

One can best describe the relationship between Norway and Sweden as one of love and hate. Norway was politically a part of Sweden from 1814 until 1905. Referring to the Swedes as having the best approach is therefore still a delicate issue and can definitely be seen as threatening towards the Norwegian culture.

After the respondent had read his uncle's fax, the experimenter showed them the postcard text he had tried to write, which was written to his cousin, the daughter of his uncle. A few deliberate mistakes could be found in the text, but the most remarkable thing about it was its total confusion of Nynorsk and Bokmål. To illustrate this, we can look at one of the sentences of the postcard text:

*Jeg har hittil hatt en ofseleg herleg tid her i Norge.*

(English translation: Up until now, I have had a very good time here in Norway.)

Some of the words are typically Bokmål whereas others are more used in Nynorsk. For example:

jeg: word for 'I' in Bokmål, Nynorsk equivalent is 'eg'  
ofseleg: word for 'very' in Nynorsk, Bokmål equivalent is 'veldig'  
herleg: word for 'good' in Nynorsk, Bokmål equivalent is 'fin'  
Norge: word for 'Norway' in Bokmål, Nynorsk equivalent is 'Noreg'

The other words in the sentence are used in both languages.

<sup>1</sup>Besides the fact that the fax was used to introduce the manipulation, it gave subjects an important clue as well. Since the participants were Bokmål natives, they would not have been inclined to use Nynorsk in a neutral situation. Pilot tests showed us that, without any pressure, Bokmål-speaking people did not use Nynorsk at all. Writing the fax in Nynorsk gave the subjects a certain direction in which to correct the text and increased the variance.

**Table 1.** Mean frequencies of the number of corrections toward Bokmål made in the postcard text as a function of condition

Condition	Crossed out Nynorsk	Changes into Bokmål
Positive (N=18)	1.67	1.39
Threatening (N=19)	3.47	3.26

The postcard text was hand-written on a separate piece of paper to convince subjects that it was really a try-out, prior to writing the actual postcard. The six-line text was intended to congratulate the experimenter's cousin on her birthday. The future visit to the family was also mentioned. The participants then began to correct the text that was to become a postcard to the cousin. If they asked for a certain direction (Nynorsk or Bokmål) in which they had to correct the text, the experimenter tried to avoid the question by pretending that he did not know the difference. After the correction, the experimenter asked the participants where they came from and which of the two Norwegian languages they were used to or preferred to speak. He thanked them for their help and left. The procedure took between 5 and 10 min.

Directly after each session, the experimenter assigned the respondent to one of the age categories, recorded their sex and native language, and made notes of any aberrations that could have occurred during the experiment.

None of the participants knew or found out that they were part of an experiment, nor were they debriefed. The situation was harmless, and debriefing would have caused much more confusion among the participants (see Schuler, 1980).

## Results

### **Defensive reactions**

For each postcard text, the number of crossed out Nynorsk words and the number of changes into Bokmål were counted. These two sums gave us a measure for defensive behaviour. The mean scores are displayed in Table 1. The one-way ANOVA on this measure revealed a significant main effect for being threatened,  $F(1,35)=7.73, p<.01$ , for the former sum and  $F(1,35)=8.01, p<.01$  for the latter sum. Participants whose cultural values were threatened made more corrections in the direction of Bokmål (crossed out more Nynorsk and made more changes into Bokmål). The correlation between these two sums was, as expected, very high ( $r=.92, p<.01$ ). This showed that people who often crossed out Nynorsk also made numerous changes into Bokmål.

### **Exploratory analysis of tolerance towards the conservative Nynorsk terms**

The major analysis (see Table 1) began with the set of 12 Nynorsk terms that were used in the postcard text. These were classified as Nynorsk simply by dictionary definition. However, we thought it may be potentially interesting to focus the analysis on a small proportion of those 12, i.e. a set regarded by native speakers as unequivocally conservative<sup>2</sup> Nynorsk (see Oftedal, 1981). Seven native Norwegians, three of them

<sup>2</sup>In this context the word 'conservative' is not used only in the sense of 'old-fashioned'. Both standard languages underwent many reforms that resulted in different varieties of the present-day Bokmål and Nynorsk. One of those varieties is called conservative, since it has refused to accept the latest changes and has established conservative norms.

**Table 2.** Mean frequencies of the number of tolerated conservative Nynorsk words as a function of condition

Condition	Mean number of tolerated conservative Nynorsk words
Positive (N=18)	2.33
Threatening (N=19)	1.63

normally Nynorsk-speaking, were simply asked to write down from the text the most typical or conservative Nynorsk terms. A Nynorsk word was included in the analysis when it was picked out by at least five judges. This resulted in a sample of four words, which can be considered as highly typical within the Nynorsk language tradition, words with which Nynorsk-speaking people definitely identify their language or, maybe more accurately, words that would never occur in Bokmål. In that sense, it could be argued that Bokmål-speaking people would never identify themselves with these words and that a tolerant attitude towards them could be considered as a rather definite opening up towards the Nynorsk language. For every text, we counted the number of conservative Nynorsk words that were tolerated (scoring one point for every tolerated word). This measure of tolerance ranged from 0 (tolerated none of the four words) to 4 (tolerated all of the four words). A one-way ANOVA showed a marginally significant effect,  $F(1,35)=2.93, p=.096$ . The weakness of the effect results, no doubt, from the restricted range of the dependent variable. None the less, this gives us some indication that respondents in the positive condition showed more tolerance towards the Nynorsk language and accepted the presence of the other language, relative to respondents who felt threatened (see Table 2).

The above analyses revealed no significant effects for gender or age (all  $p_s > 0.2$ ).

## Discussion

The major part of the results, depicted in Table 1, corroborates the reasoning that a general cultural threat produces a defensive, narrowing reaction. The threat we used came from outside the country (Sweden) and was directed towards the Norwegian identity. This was a general affront to Norwegian society, in that no specific, threatening reference was made to Bokmål natives. The Bokmål-speaking subjects, so threatened, made themselves linguistically distinct from Nynorsk by emphasizing and insisting on their own language. When threatened, subjects crossed out more Nynorsk and made more changes into Bokmål than did subjects who read the culturally supportive communication.

The theoretical framework proposed by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) probably has the greatest pertinence to this study. In their experiments (Bourhis, 1984; Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Bourhis *et al.*, 1979; Taylor & Royer, 1980), threat was always conceived of as a linguistic status differential between the two linguistic groups. In the Welsh study, the outgroup speaker called the Welsh language “a dying language which had a dismal future” (Bourhis & Giles, 1977, p. 125). Also, in the Belgian study, the threat was operationalized via an outgroup speaker who had unsympathetic attitudes toward the Flemish language. But in our experimental setting, a general threat, stemming from other than the difference or conflict between the two languages or

cultures involved, also motivated a narrowed linguistic reaction. This indicates that a broader-based threat can set a linguistic narrowing in motion, even if the threat is not based in the culture or language against which threatened participants eventually react.

However, this study does not delimit the broadness of the threat that will lead to a linguistically narrowed reaction. The threat manipulation and the measure of defensiveness we used were still closely related in such a way that the linguistic identity protected was a subgroup of the national Norwegian identity threatened. Because of this overlap, other conceptions of the results are conceivable. People could have endorsed Bokmål as a result of increased conformity to national group norms, arising from a threat to their national identity (Turner, Wetherell & Hogg, 1989). Bokmål is clearly the majority language of the country, and so participants could have protected the national identity rather than their own language identity, via conformity.

The inclusion of minority-language-speaking participants in future research would be helpful in this regard. If both language groups were to make corrections in the direction of Bokmål under threat to the national identity, the 'conformity-to-the-norm' explanation would be supported.

On the more general theoretical plane, future research is needed to address the precise connection between the type of threat and the variety of defensive reaction. For instance, is a direct threat to one's own language necessary in order to produce a defensive reaction with regard to that language? The present study would imply that the threat may have the same effect even if its origin is considerably broader than an attack on the language *per se*. This issue has been addressed in research on symbolic self-completion by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982). The research has shown that the threat, and the defensive reaction, must take place within the same sphere of identity commitment. For instance, a threat to one's intelligence in regard to legal matters should produce an inclination to prop up one's status symbols *vis-à-vis* one's identity as an attorney. But if the person's competence as a father is threatened, such attorney-relevant defensive reactions would not be expected (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). As regards the role of linguistic ego-involvements, future research can shed light on the character of threats that bring about a defensive reaction in terms of language or dialect.

### **Implications for future research on an opposing process**

At the same time, we took into consideration the appearance of the opposite force, namely, that of opening up towards the other language. In response to the Nynorsk cue offered in the fax from the uncle, an increment in the use of Nynorsk terms can be considered as an opening-up toward the outgroup language. Although neither the amount of crossed out Bokmål nor the number of changes into Nynorsk differed significantly ( $p > 0.1$ ) for our manipulation, the tolerance measure did marginally (Table 2). This measure showed the extent to which typical or conservative Nynorsk was tolerated. A high mean on this variable means that people open up towards another language, at least passively, without negating their own language. This tolerance measure relates to the work of Giles and Coupland (1991), in that it could be considered a measure of passive convergence. Participants did not use the other language actively, but were willing to accept the presence of some typical, conservative terms in their corrected version of the postcard text.

In an attempt to broaden the perspective on the motivations that underlie these opening-up versus defensive reactions, we would like to propose and apply a dual-



motive model. Recently, terror management theory has expanded its conceptualization to consider the role of expanding and enrichment motives in human behaviour, and to explore the interplay of such motives with the defensive and protective motives mentioned earlier (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995). While defensive motives operate in a drive-like manner, growth-enrichment motives are fuelled by feelings of mastery and pleasure that result from the development and maximal engagement of one's capacities (Greenberg *et al.*, 1995). As long as the components of the cultural anxiety-buffer are secure, individuals are likely to choose options that develop growth and enrichment. However, when one of those components is threatened or undermined, defensive concerns that restore and bolster one's cultural worldview should be dominant. We would like to argue that a more general state of security or safety is a necessary precondition for growth and self-enrichment processes. Up until this point, the theoretical statement states only that the non-threatened person is likely to open up (see Greenberg *et al.*, 1995). The further-reaching issue concerns social forces that actively encourage this self-expansion (Wicklund, 1999).

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