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Refining the Influence of Language on National Attachment: Exploring Linguistic Threat Perceptions in Quebec

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Fears related to a group's culture can negatively impact national attachment. This article brings new insight into minority groups' national attachment by empirically exploring the influence of language threat perceptions on it. Quebec is used as a case because of its longstanding tensions with Canada. The results of the analyses not only demonstrate that perceiving French as threatened positively influences Quebecers' support for independence and negatively impacts their feelings towards Canada, but the findings also permit the conclusion that it is an individual's linguistic perceptions that directly determine their national attachment rather than simply their linguistic group membership.

INTRODUCTION

Multinational countries are often forced to confront important social difficulties. Chief amongst them is fostering an attachment to the country from its various communities. Specifically, for minority groups to develop positive relations with their state they must feel secure.¹ Seeing as fears related to the survival of a group foster the inception of ethnic tensions, securing the “distinctiveness” of the minority is a main condition in positive relations with minorities.² Fears that a minority might have towards their persistence,

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therefore, cannot be ignored by countries that seek stable and peaceful social conditions.

Multilingual countries often face the risks posed by the collective insecurities of their linguistic minorities. This is evident by the fact that a large majority of national conflicts are divided along linguistic lines.³ Linguistic groups have also been shown to be sensitive to threats posed to their community.⁴ Specifically, linguistic factors are likely to play a role in linguistic groups' feelings towards their country. Studies have presented the fate of a group's language as being able to mobilize the members of the group.⁵ There is a dearth of empirical research, however, investigating how language might actually impact attitudes toward national attachment among minority groups. There exists a gap in the scholarship, therefore, as to the actual influence of language on attitudes towards one's country.

Canada is often cited in the social research seeking to understand social phenomena in multilingual societies. Language has played a prominent role in the country's major sociopolitical debates for, at the very least, half a century. While Canada's linguistic cleavage highlights the division between Francophones and Anglophones, it has in fact mainly opposed Francophone Quebec to the mostly Anglophone Rest of Canada (RoC). While federal government policies have even been presented as contributing to the resentment felt by Franco-Quebecers towards Canada,⁶ very little empirical research has actually been undertaken to investigate what lies at the heart of Francophone Quebecers' acrimony towards their country.

Empirical studies into the sociopolitical attitudes of linguistic minorities do not completely discount the importance of language. For example, in Canadian political scholarship, language often has been a present factor in empirical research, especially for studies that have explored Quebec. These empirical studies, however, only tend to adjust for individuals' linguistic categorization (generally through mother tongue). This empirical framework is prone to the fallacy of composition: attributing to a group a characteristic that is true only for some of its individual members.⁷ This analytical strategy thus lacks the refinement needed to properly understand the influence of language on attitudes.

This article tackles these issues by empirically exploring the influence of linguistic threat perceptions on national attachment. This is done by examining support for secession and feelings towards Canada among Quebecers. The article aims to, first, contribute to the understanding of factors that impact national attachment among national linguistic minorities and to, second, underline the research potential of linguistic perceptions on sociopolitical attitudes.

The results of empirical analyses, using data from the 2015 Canadian Election Study (CES), not only demonstrate that perceiving French to be threatened positively impacts Quebecers' support for Quebec independence as well as negatively influences their sentiments towards Canada, they also

support a mediation sequence that shows that it is linguistic perceptions that directly determine national attachment rather than simple linguistic group membership. In addition to underscoring the quintessential role that cultural threat can have on a minority group's sociopolitical attitudes, therefore, the findings support the view that academic research on intergroup sociopolitical phenomena should explore beyond simplistic group categories and concentrate on the attitudes of group members.

THE (PERCEIVED) DANGER OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY

The rise of the nation-state in the 19th century led ethnic diversity to be perceived as a threat to the national unity of countries.⁸ The potential dangers of ethnic heterogeneity have been supported by empirical studies that have concluded that diversity can negatively impact social relations in a country.⁹ In terms of linguistic diversity, it has also been presented as being a potential hurdle to a serene national social environment.¹⁰ Furthermore, the recognition of cultural diversity, through rights and institutional autonomy, is often portrayed as a slippery slope that leads to the detachment of minority group members with the country and ultimately to secession.¹¹ These fears help to explain why in many countries—for example, France and Turkey—the ethnic diversity of their population is still regarded as a social taboo.¹²

The risks to a country associated with a pluralistic ethnic population are contested. Scholarship also suggests that the mere existence of ethnic heterogeneity is not by itself a threat to national unity.¹³ In terms of linguistic diversity, research has similarly demonstrated that societal factors—such as economic and political discrimination—pose greater risks to serene national relations than the mere presence of linguistic minorities.¹⁴ Moreover, cultural grievances have also been presented as negatively affecting the relationship between minorities and their country. More precisely, perceptions of discrimination by minority group members would account for negative feelings towards their country.¹⁵

Empirical studies that explore national attachment amongst linguistic minorities, however, tend not to account for this interindividual heterogeneity. Rather, the language of the individual—most often based on mother tongue—is almost always the only linguistic variable that is employed to explore the possible influence of language on sociopolitical attitudes. Thus, for example, Francophones in Quebec are often described as being more likely to support independence as well as having more negative feelings towards Canada.¹⁶ Hence, research into the relations between national minorities and their country incurs the risk of falling into a fallacy of composition: “when one makes the mistake of attributing to a group (or a whole) some characteristic that is true only of its individual members (or its parts), and then makes inferences based on that mistake.”¹⁷ To avoid this interpretative error,

research needs to explore micro-level variables that account for interindividual heterogeneity and can therefore better explain minorities' attitudes toward their country. The entire group might not be the issue but instead a national attachment dilemma could be associated with the perceptions held by certain members of the group.

INGROUP THREAT AND NATIONAL ATTACHMENT

Fear has been shown to play an important role in the shaping of sociopolitical attitudes.¹⁸ Specifically relating to collective fears, ingroup anxieties have been demonstrated to negatively impact intergroup social relations.¹⁹ Furthermore, seeing that economic and security powers are almost always ultimately in the hands of majorities, fears have a greater existentialist impulse amongst minority groups.²⁰

The scholarship has highlighted the influence of ingroup threat on the national attachment of minority groups. The fears of minorities have been shown to weaken attachment to their country, as well as lead to greater support for secession.²¹ These collective fears are often portrayed as originating from risks associated with collective economic and political resource threats.²² Fears directly associated with the cultural markers that distinguishes the group, however, have also been highlighted as engendering negative sociopolitical attitudes.²³ Exploring the threats posed to a group's distinctive cultural characteristic, therefore, could bring important insight into understanding national attachment among minority group members.

Although groups can be differentiated by many different types of social markers, one stands out. Not only are the majority of countries multilingual, but the overwhelming bulk of groups in conflict are separated along linguistic lines.²⁴ Furthermore, individuals' sensitivity towards their language has been shown to negatively impact attitudes towards outgroups, including national majorities.²⁵ Considering that countries are intrinsically associated with the dominant group, it is reasonable to assume that perceived linguistic threat would also negatively impact national attachment among linguistic minorities.²⁶

Could fears related to a minority's language, therefore, rather than simple membership to the group, be a key determinant of national attachment?

The present article explores this question. To do so, it relies on a case with longstanding traditions of linguistic and political tensions: Quebec.

QUEBEC AND CANADA: POLITICS DEFINED BY LANGUAGE

The Canadian linguistic cleavage is frequently presented as a divide between a Francophone Quebec and an Anglophone RoC, two groups with differing social and political interests.²⁷ The proportion of Francophones in Canada

has been declining for decades.²⁸ In the 2016 census, French as a mother tongue accounted for 21.4% of the population, whereas French as a language spoken at home represented 23.4%. Although the share of Francophones in Quebec has slowly been declining, it nevertheless was a mother tongue of 79.1% and spoken at home by 87.1%. In terms of English in Quebec, it was the mother tongue of 8.9% of Quebecers and 19.2% spoke it at home.

Quebec is not only the lone majority French-speaking province in Canada, it is also where the vast majority of Franco-Canadians reside. It is described, therefore, as the natural “homeland” of Canadian Francophones.²⁹ It hence plays a quintessential part in Canadian sociopolitical debates surrounding language.³⁰ Different visions regarding the multinational nature of Canada, however, have historically led to tensions between Canada and Quebec Francophones.³¹

Francophones in Quebec have since the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s been drifting away from Canada and have even developed a certain hostility towards it.³² The feelings towards Canada by Francophone Quebecers have been shown to be considerably more negative than their linguistic brethren elsewhere in Canada.³³ Franco-Quebecers’ attitudes towards Canada have multifaceted origins; one determining force is language. The federal government’s attempts to implement bilingualism in Canada has led it to promote and protect French outside Quebec; however, it is forced to be fair and thus also defend and support English services in Quebec. Although the federal government is a lifeline for French outside Quebec, its language policies are portrayed as a barrier to the progression of French inside Quebec.³⁴

The involvement of the federal government in Quebec’s linguistic scenery by supporting English has led many Francophones in that province to perceive French’s social dominance as being threatened in Quebec.³⁵ Although the Quiet Revolution led Quebec towards an “institutional completeness” that permitted social interactions to take place in French, non-Francophones have to nevertheless be attracted towards joining the Francophone community to cement its dominant social status.³⁶ Seeing as English institutions and services are protected by the Canadian constitution and supported by the federal government, a large portion of immigrants and their children continue to integrate into Quebec’s Anglophone community rather than its Francophone counterpart (as the data presented at the beginning of this section indicate).³⁷

The linguistic tensions between Francophones in Quebec and the RoC have clearly affected national attachment. This dynamic particularly plays out in the debate surrounding secession, which has defined the political context in the province since the 1960s. Scholarship has demonstrated a relationship between Quebecers’ perception of French in Quebec and their support for secession.³⁸ These empirical studies explore the prospective measure of French’s vitality, however, rather than investigate the effect of current linguistic threat perceptions. A review of the literature shows that only Elisabeth Gidengil and colleagues used the latter variable to investigate the impact

of linguistic threat on support for Quebec independence.³⁹ Still, the authors only present correlations between perceiving French to be threatened and support for secession. Feelings towards the country is a more direct measure of national attachment. A review of the scholarship, however, reveals that no empirical study has so far explored the influence of perceived linguistic threat on sentiments towards one's country.

A scholarly gap also exists, therefore, regarding the impact of perceived linguistic threat on national attachment in Canada, as well as to a more refined vision of the relationship between language and politics in Quebec.

DATA

To refine the understanding of national attachment and address the gaps highlighted in the literature, data from the 2015 CES were used.

The 2015 federal election campaign was arguably an exciting one and resulted in substantial changes to the partisan composition of the House of Commons.⁴⁰ Several issues that can be described as important for Quebec were prominent during the campaign. For instance, both the Liberals and New Democrats promised to shore up the use of French in the public service as well as increase public spending on Francophone cultural programs. These policy proposals contrasted with the conservative government's arguably weak promotion of bilingualism and its budgetary cuts to cultural initiatives. The independence of Quebec was also a campaign issue because parties were pressed on how they would deal with a hypothetical (and unlikely) referendum on secession. Language and independence, however, were overshadowed during the campaign in Quebec by issues related to religious diversity and immigrant integration.⁴¹

The CES provides a wide range of sociodemographic variables as well as sociopolitical attitudes that allow for the comprehensive empirical analyses of the sociopolitical relationships to be investigated.⁴² The data allow to explore two different dimensions of national attachment: support for independence and feelings towards Canada. Although the desire to leave a country and the feelings that one holds towards it have been shown to be independent from each other,⁴³ these two attitudes will understandably impact a minority's relationship with its country. Exploring these two dimensions, therefore, provides a more refined impression of national attachment. Support for independence was operationalized through a question asking respondents on a four-point scale how favorable they were to Quebec sovereignty, specifying that sovereignty refers to "Quebec is no longer part of Canada." As for feelings towards Canada, they were grasped through a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 (dislike) to 100 (like).

The influence of two main independent variables is examined. First, perceived language threat was constructed through a dichotomous question

gauging if the respondents believed French was threatened in Quebec. Second, linguistic group membership was ascertained through mother tongue (the first language learned by the respondents and that they still understand). A three-option categorical variable was created: French, English, and all other languages.

Two series of control variables were used to better determine the specific influence of the linguistic variables on the dependent variables. The first series is composed of classic individual-level sociodemographic controls: gender, age, and education. The age of the respondents was divided into 11 ranked groups to form an 11-point continuous variable. As for education, the CES question ascertains respondents' highest completed level of education on an 11-point continuous scale.

The second series of controls are attitudinal variables. The ideological preferences of linguistic group members have been demonstrated to impact their sociopolitical attitudes.⁴⁴ Instead of utilizing a unidimensional left-right scale, however, research has shown that a multidimensional approach to ideology provides greater insight, notably in the Quebec political context.⁴⁵ Social and economic dimensions, therefore, are explored separately. The social dimension is created by combining two questions. The first one is a dichotomous question that asks respondents if abortion should be banned. The second one is also a dichotomous question that gauges whether respondents favor or oppose same-sex marriage. Before creating the scale, its validity and reliability were tested. Principal component analysis showed that the variables were part of a single factor, thus confirming that they relate to a common dimension. In terms of reliability, the Cronbach α score is 0.73. As for the economic dimension, no variables were shown to combine into a single factor and result in a Cronbach α score above 0.7. A question gauging respondents' attitudes towards government intervention in the economy, therefore, is used as a proxy for this ideological dimension.

Research has demonstrated the important role that identity plays for sociopolitical attitudes among minority groups, especially regarding support for secessionism.⁴⁶ Identification with Quebec was ascertained from a four-point scale. Finally, evaluations of a country's democracy and its economy have been shown to influence attitudes towards the state.⁴⁷ Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Canada was ascertained on a four-point scale, whereas satisfaction with the economy—grasped through perceptions of how the economy in Canada has done in the last year—was on a three-point scale.

For greater detail on the CES questions used to construct the variables utilized in the analyses, please consult the [Appendix](#).

To facilitate the interpretation of the results, all scales were made to run on a negative to positive range. "Don't know," "Refuses," or "Left Blank" answer choices were coded as missing. All continuous variables were converted into a 0 to 1 scale.

RESULTS

The results of OLS regressions, in Table 1, support the proposed theory that states that perceived cultural threat has a greater impact on attitudes towards a country than simple group membership.

In terms of support for Quebec independence, Model 1 unsurprisingly demonstrates that being a Francophone, compared with an Anglophone, has a strong and significant, at $p < 0.01$, influence on supporting Quebec independence. When perceived threat to French is integrated into the regression (Model 2), however, the influence of being a mother tongue Francophone on support for secession no longer shows a statistical impact. Rather, it is the perceptions of cultural threat that now display a strong positive and significant, at $p < 0.01$, influence on supporting Quebec independence. Quebecers

TABLE 1 Determinants of National Attachment in Quebec

	Support for Quebec Independence		Feelings towards Canada	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Perceived Threat to French		0.32** (0.05)		-0.08** (0.03)
Anglophone (ref.)	—	—	—	—
Francophone	0.29** (0.11)	0.10 (0.10)	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.07 (0.06)
Allophone	0.12 (0.13)	0.08 (0.12)	< -0.00 (0.07)	0.01 (0.07)
Gender (Women)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.07** (0.03)	0.07** (0.02)
Age	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.16* (0.08)	0.06 (0.05)	0.07 (0.04)
Education	0.03 (0.13)	0.11 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)
Social Ideology	-0.30* (0.12)	-0.25* (0.11)	<0.00 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)
Gov. Intervention in Economy	-0.10 (0.12)	-0.08 (0.11)	0.15* (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)
Identification with Quebec	0.29** (0.11)	0.23* (0.10)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)
Satisfaction with Democracy	-0.37** (0.10)	-0.29** (0.09)	0.11* (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)
Evaluation of Canadian Economy	0.10 (0.10)	0.10 (0.09)	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)
Constant	0.23	0.17	0.83**	0.85**
N	197	197	202	202
R²-squared	0.25	0.38	0.17	0.20

Numbers reported are unstandardized OLS coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.

Statistical significance:

* $p < 0.05$,

** $p < 0.01$.

who perceive French to be threatened have a 32-point stronger support for Quebec independence than their counterparts who do not perceive French to be vulnerable. This is the strongest substantive influence out of all the variables in the model. Furthermore, the integration of the cultural threat variable into the model strongly increases its coefficient of determination.⁴⁸

We find a relatively similar dynamic regarding feelings towards Canada. In Model 3, being a Francophone, compared with an Anglophone, has a significant, at $p < 0.05$, and negative influence on feelings towards Canada. This finding would commonly be expected. When perceived threat to French is added to the regression, however, Model 4, the impact of respondent's mother tongue on feelings towards Canada is no longer significant. On the other hand, perceiving French to be threatened in Quebec leads to a significant, at $p < 0.01$, and negative impact on feelings towards Canada. A Quebecer who perceives French as threatened has more negative feelings, by eight points, towards Canada than a counterpart who does not have such a negative linguistic perception.⁴⁹

These findings suggest a mediation sequence among linguistic group membership, linguistic threat perceptions, and the two dependent variables. The results of mediation analyses (not reported) do in fact support full mediation for both outcomes. The influence of linguistic group membership only indirectly influences support for Quebec secession and feelings towards Canada, and this indirect influence is fully mediated through individuals' linguistic threat perceptions.

As for the control variables, the analyses display some interesting findings. Women in Quebec are shown to have statistically more positive feelings towards Canada than men. Gender, however, does not demonstrate a significant impact on support for secession. Age has a negative statistical effect on support for sovereignty. Older Quebecers support secession less. Social ideology displays a negative and significant, at $p < 0.05$, influence on support for secession. The more socially conservative a Quebecer is, the less they support Quebec's independence. Social ideology, however, does not demonstrate a statistical impact on feelings towards Canada. The dynamic is reversed for the economic ideology proxy. Supporting government intervention in the economy leads to a significant, at $p < 0.05$, positive influence on feelings towards Canada. This variable, however, displays no statistical impact on support for Quebec independence. These findings, therefore, demonstrate the need for scholars to move away from a unidimensional conception of ideology because the different ideological dimensions can have independent determining impacts. Identification with Quebec, unsurprisingly, shows a positive and significant, at $p < 0.01$, relationship with support for secession. Still, identifying with Quebec has, unexpectedly, no relationship with feelings towards Canada. As for satisfaction with Canadian democracy, it demonstrates a strong negative and significant, at $p < 0.01$, relationship with support for secession. It also shows a positive

statistical, at $p < 0.05$, relationship with feelings towards Canada in Model 3. While satisfaction with Canadian democracy's influence does not cross the $p < 0.05$ statistical threshold in Model 4, it comes relatively close ($p = 0.065$). These findings further add to the importance of democratic institutions on national minorities' attitudes towards their country. Finally, the other control variables did not demonstrate a statistical impact on either outcome.

In a province in which language has historically played an important role—and continues to do so—on sociopolitical relations with Canada, it is interesting to note that it is not who Quebecers are linguistically but rather the beliefs that they hold regarding language that more accurately determines their attachment to Canada.

CONCLUSION

The fate of language(s) is an incontestably important factor in the sociopolitical debates that are undertaken in multilingual countries. Canada is a prime example of such political dynamics. Linguistic issues have for several decades—if not centuries—shaped the country's sociopolitical landscape. Empirical research, however, has not mirrored this reality. The importance of linguistic factors on the sociopolitical aspects of such countries, in general, has not received the required empirical attention.

This article seeks to address this void in the scholarship. Specifically, it does so by exploring the influence of perceived linguistic threat on national attachment. It therefore also contributes to the larger scholarship on the impact of cultural threat on group attitudes. These phenomena are explored by analyzing data from Quebec, a region in which attitudes towards Canada have traditionally posed difficulties for the central government.

The results of empirical analyses demonstrate that perceiving French to be threatened leads to a greater support for the secession of Quebec from Canada. The findings also show that perceived linguistic threat has a negative influence on Quebecers' feelings towards Canada. While these two findings might be theoretically expected, this article provides much-needed empirical evidence for the influence of linguistic threat perceptions on national attachment.

The findings additionally demonstrate that the mother tongue of respondents does not have an independently significant impact on either national attachment outcome when perceived linguistic threat is included in the regression models. This is arguably the most interesting finding of the analyses. These results not only underscore the important role of perceptions related to cultural threat, they also highlight the greater explanatory power of subjective attitudes over objective group categories. The findings clearly demonstrate that it is not the linguistic group that an individual belongs to that determines their national attachment but rather it is the beliefs that they

hold about their language that impact their sociopolitical stances towards their country.

These empirical results also support Rogers Brubaker's argument to go beyond "groupism" and not simply perceive ethnic groups to be static entities.⁵⁰ The findings highlighting the importance of interindividual heterogeneity expand on—while somewhat diverging from—Brubaker's argument by emphasizing on the methodological need to focus on individual group members and their attitudes to thoroughly explore ethnic relations. This attitudinal aspect is important because it provides hope for the possibility of reversing negative sociopolitical attitudes held by minority group members. This is also an important methodological contribution because it demonstrates the need for survey research to account for cultural grievances.

To avoid problematic social tensions with the country, therefore, the linguistic fears of a group need to be addressed. Minorities must be able to be distinct in their country. The language policies adopted by the country play a key role in the reactions of linguistic minorities because the country (majority group, or both) can be supportive or restrictive.⁵¹ Trouble arises when a minority cannot find a secure place in its polity.⁵² The results, and the CES 2015 data, however, do not permit us to grasp the locus of the threat. Do Quebecers' linguistic fears arise from constraining institutional frameworks or demographic changes? If it is the latter, do Anglophones or immigrants pose a greater threat? To develop appropriate policies to address linguistic fears, further research is needed to properly understand the determinants of linguistic threat in Francophone Quebecers, as well as with other linguistic minorities.

This study underscores the quintessential impact that cultural threat can have on a minority group's national attachment. Essentially, fears for the survival of a group's cultural distinction lead to tensions in a multilingual country. The conclusions, however, should not be limited to linguistic minorities. The findings can easily—and conceivably—be extrapolated to groups that identify around other markers than language. Governments that seek serene relations with minorities need to address—or avoid the development of—cultural fears amongst their constituent groups.

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48. Seeing that the dependent variable only has four response choices, ordered logistic regressions were also performed. The results (not reported) are essentially the same as those presented in Models 1 and 2 in Table 1.

49. Models 3 and 4 were also performed with a relative feelings variable—created by subtracting feelings towards Quebec from feelings towards Canada—as the dependent variables. This was done to

control for the potential effect of individuals having different feeling baselines. The results (not reported) regarding perceived threat to French and mother tongue are essentially the same as those presented in Table 1, though there were differences in relation to the control variables.

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APPENDIX

Support for Quebec Independence

Are you very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat opposed, or very opposed to Quebec sovereignty, that is Quebec is no longer part of Canada?

Feelings towards Canada

How do you feel about Canada? Use any number from zero to one hundred. Zero means you really dislike Canada and one hundred means you really like Canada.

Perceived Threat to French

In your opinion, is the French language threatened in Quebec?

Language

What is the first language you learned and still understand?

Gender

What is your gender?

Age

In what year were you born?

Education

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

Social Ideology

Should abortion be banned?

Do you favour or oppose same-sex marriage, or do you have no opinion on this?

Government Intervention in the Economy

Do you think the government should spend much more, more, the same as now, less, or much less on business and industry?

Identification with Quebec

How much do you identify with your province?

Satisfaction with Democracy

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not satisfied at all with the way democracy works in Canada?

Satisfaction with Economy

Over the past year, has Canada's economy: gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

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