Willingness to communicate in a second language:

Individual decision making in a social context.

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Note: Portions of this paper were presented in Barcelona (March, 2007) as part of the celebration for the establishment of the Linguamón-UOC Multilingualism Chair, an initiative by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Linguamón - Casa de les Llengües.
When presented with an opportunity to use their second language (L2), some people choose to speak up and others choose to remain silent. Even after studying a language for many years, many L2 learners will not become L2 speakers. The reasons for choosing to avoid using a second language are not straightforward or simple if one takes into consideration the various individual, social, linguistic, situational, and other factors that are relevant to the decision to speak in the L2. The paper I am presenting this evening outlines theory behind the central construct in our research, *Willingness to Communicate* (WTC). WTC represents the psychological preparedness to use the L2 when the opportunity arises. This requires a focus on the specific moment of decision where a L2 learner chooses to become a L2 speaker. It is suggested that the choice to initiate communication in a L2 is one of the primary facilitators of language use, and as such, may be an important predictor of language survival.

Previous research in second language acquisition (SLA) has not necessarily examined the convergence of psychological processes underlying communication at a specific moment. For example, there have been many studies that examine motivation for language learning (see Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2001) and studies that examine language anxiety (see Young’s 1999 volume); an experienced learner might show both high motivation for learning and high anxiety about communicating. Previous research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) shows consistently that as motivation increases and language anxiety decreases, performance in the L2 will improve. But at the specific moment in time when a motivated learner experiences high levels of anxiety about speaking, there is a decision to be made: will he or she decide to speak up or remain quiet? Will that person be willing to communicate? If not, under what conditions might willingness be increased?
The decision to speak or not, over time, exerts an impact on the person’s success at language learning. Yashima & Tanaka (2001) found that WTC affected the psychological adjustment of Japanese students who lived and studied in the United States for a time, because students who were more willing to speak to their host families learned more English, made more friends, and had a more positive experience than those with lower WTC. The concept of WTC, defined as the probability of speaking when free to do so (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998), helps to orient our focus toward a concern for “…microlevel processes and the sometimes rapid changes that promote or inhibit L2 communication” (MacIntyre, in press).

A second set of consequences of the decision to speak or not are the effects on the vitality of the language itself. Languages are learned by individuals operating in a social context. Therefore, both psychological and sociopolitical processes will be relevant to creating the willingness to communicate. From the perspective of the individual, thoughts and feelings drive behaviour that determines success at language learning. The social context plays a role in a variety of ways, including determining the languages that are spoken locally, the orientations individuals have toward those languages, the demographic and power relationships that exist among groups, and the ethnolinguistic vitality of the L1 and L2 (Bourhis, el-Geledi & Sachdev, 2007; Allard & Landry, 1994). Of course, individual and sociopolitical processes are interdependent, and one should always be aware that research questions can be approached from either perspective. However, by focusing on WTC, the present paper will examine social context as it is interpreted by the individual and as it affects her or his decision making. For example, learning the language of a majority group when one’s minority group L1 is threatened with extinction is very different psychologically from being a majority group member learning the language of a minority
group. It is the psychology of the learner, his or her state of mind, to which we turn our attention.

When we discuss opportunities for communication, we are considering specific moments in time when communication might be conducted in a second language. It is particularly interesting to consider those moments that are under volitional control, that is, moments when an individual has the choice to speak in the L2. A willingness to speak in the L2 at such moments conditions the social interactions among persons from differing language groups and in some respects reflects the success of the interlocutors’ language learning efforts. In order to set the context for the discussion to follow, let us first briefly examine the issue of time.

Time.

We often have a rather simple view of time: an activity begins, proceeds for a while, and then it ends. For example, a university examination might begin at 9:00 am, proceed for three hours, and end at noon. This linear notion of time, where there is a definite beginning, set duration, and recognizable end, applies to many of our daily activities (e.g., hours of work, holidays, television programs) and applies in many contexts. However, it is difficult to apply this notion of time to language learning. When does something as complex and multiply determined as language learning actually begin? Does it begin at birth? Probably not. If we consider the neural pathways and processes that set the foundation for language learning, the development of the capacity for language begins sometime in utero, before we are born. If we adopt the view that language learning is the process of acquiring specific vocabulary and grammar, then it probably begins sometime long after birth, but within the first year of life. One could also argue that it is not possible
to specify the point in time at which language learning begins. A similar difficulty emerges when we attempt to specify the end of language learning. When studying second language acquisition, it is troublesome to conceptualize time in a simple linear fashion, even when we consider the language learning of a single person.

Therefore, for the purpose of our discussion this evening, let us consider another perspective on time. Rather than specifying a specific beginning and end, as if time were a straight line, let us imagine time as converging lines (see Figure 1). In this conceptualization, previous events in time are open ended. Distant influences, including broadly defined cultural development and human genetic endowment that have existed for centuries, have some impact on the present moment. These distal factors combine with more localized, situational features to affect any specific point in time. For example, at this particular moment, the reader’s ability to read this sentence is affected by immediate factors (e.g., the light in the room, interest in the topic, noise or distractions, etc.), longer term factors (e.g., experience with the language, vocabulary knowledge, reading ability, etc.), and very long term factors (e.g., human development of the capacity to read and write, etc.). These factors converge to affect what you, the reader are doing right now. For the purpose of the present discussion, it seems less useful to specify the point in time at which communication in a L2 begins or ends, but rather more useful to suggest that a variety of factors converge to affect any specific moment in time in which L2 communication might be possible.

The Pyramid Model of WTC

This convergence of factors affects the probability of choosing to communicate or not, when the opportunity arises. This is what the WTC concept captures. Originally
conceptualized by McCroskey and Baer (1985) as a sort of personality trait, WTC was re-conceptualized by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels (1998) as a situated construct reflecting the choice to speak at a specific moment in time with a specific person or group. The concept is supported by a pyramid-shaped organizational scheme that features the basic converging shape shown in Figure 1, and turns it on its side to form a pyramid shape. Within the model, constructs frequently employed in the SLA literature are organized according to a multi-layered proximal—distal continuum (see Figure 2). The model captures the notion of time with reference to enduring and situational factors, and the constructs represented within hold a distinctly intergroup flavour.

At the base of the pyramid are two wide-ranging sets of influences, intergroup climate and personality. The intergroup climate is defined by the broad social context in which various language groups operate. The relative ethnolinguistic vitalities (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977) of the language communities may be moderated by the interpersonal communication networks in which individuals participate. Languages with greater prestige will tend to attract more speakers, yet the close ties among languages and cultural identities in a person’s familial heritage provide a countervailing force that helps to promote and protect languages with relatively few speakers. Processes of acculturation and adaptation will play out differently in conditions of contact or isolation, harmony or prejudiced discrimination, and when groups perceive competition or disadvantage (Guimond & Tougas, 1994). The various tensions and attractions among language groups often predate current nation-states, making individual language learners tiny threads in a complex fabric of social relations. Within this context, individuals themselves differ significantly in their reaction to social situations, reactions that stem, in part, from basic personality traits (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), including sex differences (Lin & Rancer,
Evidence for the heritability of basic traits demonstrates that genetic endowment plays the key role in temperamental reactions, such as nervousness or shyness (Pedersen, Plomin, McClearn & Friberg, 1988). These basic personality temperaments predispose individuals to react with interest or fear to ‘foreign’ people and cultures. Given the interaction of basic personality traits with the social environment, the base of the pyramid is formed by long term individual differences operating within various social structures and networks, providing highly stable patterns that pre-date the individual.

Moving to a more proximal level, the next layer of the pyramid captures the individual’s typical affective and cognitive context. Setting the tone for motivation to learn the second language is the tension between a desire to approach the target language group and a sense of hesitation or fear of the implications of doing so. The evolution of Gardner and Lambert’s (1959) concept of integrative orientation into the more comprehensive integrative motive, as part of the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985), has captured for applied linguists the tendency for approach toward the other group. Tension within the self often is created with the L1 or heritage group as a learner begins adapting to a new group, and might perceive or be perceived as withdrawing from the L1 group. Therefore, L2 communication must take into account the predictable avoidance tendencies as reflected in the fear of assimilation (see Clément, 1986) and its conceptual cousin subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975). The motivations emerging from such tensions sustain or impair the action necessary to develop competencies in the L2 (Clément & Noels, 1991). It almost goes without saying that linguistic competence, knowledge of syntactic and morphological rules, lexical resources, and the phonological and orthographic systems needed for communication both spoken and written, are fundamental. Building upon the linguistic dimension are competencies to handle discourse appropriately, to accomplish
communicative actions, to deal with situational variation, and when all else fails, to strategically compensate for deficiencies in any of these areas. Such motives and competencies play out within social situations with an almost infinite number of permutations of participants, settings, purposes, topics, and channels of communication. The pyramid model is not so specific as to be formulaic in the application of these factors and it is understood that their operation in situ will depend on interactions with variables from other layers.

Moving to the last of the layers of enduring influences, we find highly specific motives and self-related cognition. Intergroup motives stem directly from membership in a particular social group and interpersonal motives stem from the social roles one plays within the group. Both intergroup and interpersonal motives arise from two classic sources: affiliation and control. Harmonious intergroup relations are a fundamental, explicit objective of supporters of intercultural communication (Kim, 1988) and a firmly established motive in the research literature. Control motives encompass L2 communicative behaviour aimed at limiting the freedom of the interlocutor. Taken broadly, this includes events such as directives from a supervisor, instruction from a teacher, and requests for assistance in the L2. Control motives capture occasions where power imbalance is more relevant than a continuing relationship between the interlocutors. The final set of influences at this level includes L2 self-confidence; perceptions of communicative competence coupled with a lack of anxiety define the self-confident L2 speaker. This concept is somewhat more specific than the linguistic competencies described at the lower level to capture the idea that learners may overestimate or underestimate their capabilities and how they may be applied (MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997).
When we move to the next layer of the pyramid, we make a transition from enduring influences to situational ones. The sense of time is coming to focus on the here-and-now. At this level of the pyramid model is the desire to communicate with a specific person as well as a state of self-confidence. The general attitudes and motives found at lower levels find their embodiments in persons immediately present, and exceptions to the rules can be made. At this level, power motives are reconciled with affiliation, task and relationship orientations find their expressions, and persons are accepted or rejected as communication partners. The self-confidence expressed in a given situation is based on actual competencies possessed by a speaker, any systematic biases in perception of abilities (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997), and key elements of the situation.

The culmination of the processes described thus far is the willingness to communicate, that is, a readiness to initiate second language discourse on a specific occasion with a specific person. This represents the level of behavioural intention to speak (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) if one has the opportunity. Potential courses of action taken by language learners that might result in a conflicted state of mind, where one might choose to speak or remain silent include (MacIntyre, in press):

- do I raise my hand to answer a question in the classroom, what if I make a mistake?
- do I offer assistance to a second language speaker I just met at the airport, is there somebody more capable of providing assistance?
- do I try to use the second language in an actual conversation, not knowing exactly what course it might take or what embarrassment awaits?

Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) have likened these sorts of events to “crossing the Rubicon,” a point of no return where one commits to act in the L2. At times one crosses such a
threshold with reluctance, hesitation, even trepidation. Conflicts such as these emphasize the ambivalent nature of many of our experiences. When the opportunity to use the L2 arises, it is not unusual to be ‘of two minds;' one mind wishes to approach the opportunity and the other wishes to withdraw from it (MacIntyre & MacKinnon, 2007).

WTC and language learning success.

The willingness to take advantage of opportunities to use a second language reflects a level of success in language learning and language training. What language teacher would not want her or his students willingly speaking the L2? Clearly a language program that leads students to be willing to communicate can be considered successful. Examining the issue from the reverse perspective leads to an interesting question: Can a language program be considered successful if it fails to engender WTC among its students (see MacIntyre et al., 1998)? This is an area of significant concern for language curriculum designers and language planners because conversations in L2 are instances of intergroup contact and have the potential to promote positive intergroup relations. However, contact between language groups also has the power to alter language learning and communication patterns, with minority languages in a position of some risk if speakers consistently speak the language of the majority group. WTC therefore reflects both individual and societal-level communication processes.

WTC goes beyond assessing communicative competence in that it focuses on more than the ability to use a language; the focus is on the psychological preparedness to communicate at a particular moment. Language acquisition and the development of communicative competence are key components of the process, but they are not necessarily the end of the story. As an example, consider the autobiographical account of Lim (2002), a
Korean learning to speak English. Lim’s experiences when traveling to Australia, illustrate the difference between WTC and communicative competence:

I was very surprised by the fact that I didn't have much trouble traveling by myself for a month. I could speak with other English speakers and made friends with no problem. I started to believe that my English must not be so bad and I didn't have to produce perfect pronunciation and sentences to be understood. Because I no longer believed that perfection was necessary to communicate and because I had shown that I could communicate, I now regained control over my own learning. . . . That experience - managing with my English - gave me great inspiration and motivation to continue to improve. I discovered that what my teachers had been telling me was not true. I could reach my goal without being perfect. (p. 100)

From a grammatical / linguistic perspective, Lim leaves the reader with the impression that there might still be room for improvement in her English skills. But from the perspective of willingness to communicate, Lim is a successful language learner, willingly using the L2 for authentic communication in spite of imperfect grammar. Lim’s experience is similar to the results of many immersion programs where L2 communication patterns are impressive (Swain & Lapkin, 1986; Krashen, 1984) but linguistic evaluations indicate that L2 proficiency is not native-like (Hammerly, 1987; Lyster, 1987). Whether an outcome such as Lim’s is positive or negative may be a matter of perspective and expectations. Let us be clear that the expectations of language teachers, curriculum developers and language planners might differ considerably from that of individual learners. However, if we accept that WTC influences language use and use is an important predictor of language vitality, then it becomes quite important to know why individual learners willingly use (or avoid using) a second language.
In closing, I would like to turn to a broader social consequence of people willingly using a second language. The learning of so-called ‘heritage languages’ in North America provides an interesting case to be examined. Although the definition of the term ‘heritage language’ is somewhat contested (Carreira, 2004), the notion that the language maintains a link to a person’s ancestry and identity is a common thread. In my home province of Nova Scotia (Canada), English clearly is the dominant language (Statistics Canada, 2001). Two heritage languages in the province are particularly noteworthy, Gaelic and Mi’kmaq. Both have a long history in the geographic area and have very different patterns of current usage.

The Gaelic language was brought by immigrants from Ireland and Scotland who settled the area in the 1800s, migration spurred by both the Irish Potato Famine and the Scottish Highland Clearances. The Celtic cultural tradition is rich, and is still featured prominently in local music and dance. Spoken Gaelic, once a thriving language, has been almost completely lost. Recently, the government of the province directed a small amount of money toward the preservation of Gaelic (Nova Scotia Archives & Records Management), but the loss of Gaelic seems destined to continue. John Edwards (2006) comments on the situation facing Gaelic by drawing on a passage from a recent conference:

These are difficult times for some languages—the small ones, the stateless ones, those of lesser-used or minority status, and so on. An exchange taken from a recent conference transcript is illustrative here:

“Think of Gallic now—be honest!”
“Well it is a language that may still do you some good in the Highlands and Islands, maybe still in parts of Cape Breton, but outside those little areas, it isn’t going to take you very far…”

“Isn’t it used in any other settings, then?”

“No, it’s simple, really—no one to speak it with. Who did you have in mind?”

“Maybe Scots abroad…?”

“Listen, outside Scotland, Gallic speakers hardly use the language at all, even amongst themselves.”

“OK, but what d’you think of the language itself—is it a good sort of language, or what?”

“Actually, I’m not too keen on it, as a language per se. It has become pretty bastardised, you know, bit of a mixture really—different dialects, English borrowings…” p. 197

Edwards succinctly identifies the difficult position of such a language: how do we get people to learn the language if there is a tiny community of use, and how will that community expand if people do not learn the language? Perhaps there is some advice to be taken from another threatened linguistic group in my local area.

I would suggest that, for a discussion of WTC, the most interesting linguistic group in the province is the aboriginal population whose settlements in Atlantic Canada and New England predate contact with European settlers coming to the “New World.” Once known by the Anglicized term ‘MicMac’ the group strongly re-asserted its identity in the 1980s and 1990s and are now known as ‘Mi’kmaq’ (pronounced Mig-Maw or Mig-a-Mah). During that time, Aboriginal communities across Canada strengthened their ethnic identity, asserted land claims, and won settlements for mistreatment suffered at residential schools.
The Mi’kmaq language has rebounded, showing an 8.2% increase in usage between 1996 and 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2007, p. 24). The growth has been almost entirely among persons speaking Mi’kmaq as a second language, with English remaining as the lingua franca. Results for the most recent census are due in December 2007 and seem likely to show both population growth and that the language has continued to shake off its endangered status: a move toward sustainability.

The recent experience with Mi’kmaq shows that even a small community with an endangered language can increase language usage, given appropriate conditions. Returning to our focus on WTC, we see that the Mi’Kmaq people are successfully increasing their willingness to use their language with the accompanying motivation and emotional support drawn from ethnic identity. We do not see this same support for the Gaelic language and its loss seems inevitable.

Looking back at the passage from Edwards immediately above, we read in it a sense of lost hope. But maybe all is not lost for Gaelic just yet. Edwards’ account is actually an adaptation; a passage written for dramatic effect. The exchange quoted above is not from a recent conference nor did it originally refer to the Gaelic language. The original was written in the year 1578 and the interlocutors were referring to the use of English (for the original quote, see Edwards, 2006, p. 198). Given the current status of English as a dominant and (some would say) oppressive language world-wide (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003), we can be certain that things have changed. It would seem that predicting the eventual dominance of World English was difficult in 1578 just as it might now be difficult to predict the future for any specific language. As Edwards (2006) cautions, “Large forces and weighty histories are at work, and their presence should be acknowledged and thought about… (p. 203).” The capacity for individuals and groups to
respond to these societal trends might appear insignificant when compared to the seemingly overwhelming odds faced by minority languages such as Gaelic, M’ikmaq, and many others. Human history has many examples of languages that are now known only to a select few scholars, and maybe this is a price to be paid in a globalizing world (Macedo et al., 2003). Yet, minority language users need not – in fact, should not – simply resign themselves to the erosion and eventual disappearance of their language. Language is a part of a person’s “core,” and an essential part of identity (Dörnyei, 2005), so it is little wonder that many react vehemently against the prospect of language loss. Perhaps the single best safeguard for a language is its speakers willingly using it for authentic communication in everyday settings. “In the end, it is the broader cultural tapestry of values which determines the contextual conditions for [language] mastery.” (Clément, Noels, & MacIntyre, 2007)

Conclusion.

The decision to speak may be the most critical instrument to ensure language survival and language learning success. The pyramid model demonstrates the wide variety of factors that affect the psychological readiness to speak. We can identify both individual factors (anxiety, motivation, attitudes, interpersonal attraction, etc.) and social contextual factors (ethnolinguistic vitality, language contact, etc.) that either enhance or reduce WTC. These factors interact at the moment a person chooses to speak in L2. This is part of the battle to be fought when trying to preserve heritage languages, and is going to be an ongoing issue all over the world as language and identity come under threat by the hegemony of world English (Kiely, 2007). Some researchers are predicting the loss of many of the world’s languages, but there is a role to be played by individual decision making. That is, up to a certain point, languages may be maintained and preserved by the actions of individuals
acting to preserve their ethnic identity. It is difficult to preserve language but the
motivation provided by a threatened identity can do the trick. With enough personal
motivation, with enough people making the effort, generating the Willingness to
Communicate might help to preserve languages under threat.
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Figure 1:

Two conceptions of time:

1. Linear

   Begin | (time elapses) | End

2. Converging events

   Distal influences       Proximal influences       Now
Figure 2: The pyramid Model of WTC