From harmony to civil war: When language turns deadly

August 30 2024, by Bradley Worrell

For years, Jaroslav Tir has been pondering a perplexing mystery: Why do some countries where a multi-ethnic populace once lived together in harmony devolve into civil war, slaughter and ethnic cleansing?

"If we look at the former Yugoslavia, where I was born and raised, it's a big puzzle: why the country went from one of the most ethnically harmonious countries to ethnic cleansing and genocide in a few short years," says Tir, a professor in the University of Colorado Boulder Department of Political Science, whose research focus includes armed conflicts and how to stop them.

In Yugoslavia after World War II, "you had multiple ethnic groups that lived in relative harmony. There was evidence that this was real because people intermarried and neighborhoods were ethnically mixed. A lot of people were of mixed ethnic origin," he says. "And then things took a 180-degree turn that ended up in the 1990s with very brutal conflicts."

While some of the dynamics of ethnic conflicts remain unknown, Tir says, in recent years researchers have come to believe that dehumanizing ethnic "others" can help explain how seemingly ordinary individuals become willing not only to fight but also to commit horrific crimes against their former neighbors.

In turn, researchers have suspected that dehumanization stems from perceptions that ethnic others pose a violent threat to one's own group, he says.

Expanding upon that research, Tir and co-author Shane Singh of the University of Georgia recently authored the paper "Less Human Than

Human: Threat, Language and Relative Dehumanization," [published](#) in the *British Journal of Political Science*, in which they made the case that it's not just what the governing authority says about its ethnic minorities that can be potentially threatening, but also the language in which it communicates about those groups.

"A government's choice to communicate [a sense of threat] in a native language, rather than a commonly used and understood non-native tongue, puts the audience on notice that the message is explicitly meant for them to the exclusion of ethnic others," the authors state, adding that "such messaging can exacerbate us-versus-them perceptions and lead to extreme negative attitudes such as dehumanization."

Communicated threats

For their study, Tir and Singh specifically looked at India, where a native (Hindi) and non-native (English) language are understood and used by a sizable portion of the population. In a survey-based experiment, the authors hired an international market research firm to ask Indian respondents about their views towards Muslims and Chinese. Notably, in recent years, both Islamic terrorists and the Chinese military have threatened India's security.

Bilingual Indian respondents were randomly assigned to take the survey in Hindi or English. They were asked about their perceptions of the humanness of Muslim or Chinese people and the groups to which they belong. Responses to that portion of the survey showed that those receiving the survey in the Hindi language triggered the dehumanization of Muslims, while the dehumanization of Chinese was not affected by survey language assignment.

Tir says those findings are likely due to the fact that the government of Narendra Modi has repeatedly demonized India's Muslim population in

Hindi while remaining comparatively silent about the threat from China.

Survey respondents also were randomly assigned to a control condition (a short article about ship recycling) or one of two recent news briefs about violent events that recently took place: a terrorist attack by an Islamic group or Chinese military aggression. In that case, the threat conveyed in Hindi, rather than English, does the most to prompt dehumanizing attitudes toward Chinese, Tir says.

Conversely, the story about the Islamic terror attack did not have a detectable effect on survey respondents' attitudes toward Muslims. At first blush, that would seem to be counterintuitive, but Tir says that Modi's frequent anti-Muslim rhetoric has likely saturated the populace, making respondents insensitive to additional communicated threats.

Impacts beyond the Indian subcontinent

Tir says the survey findings have implications for political communication beyond India, noting that many countries in Africa and Asia have populations that speak both native and non-native languages, typically French or English, depending on their colonial history.

"Compared to communication in a commonly used and understood non-native tongue, a native language environment exacerbates the effect of threat on dehumanization of a rival ethnicity," Tir and Singh write, adding that "this suggests that unscrupulous leaders in multilingual countries with identity-based cleavages and a widely understood non-native language can select the language of communication to incite xenophobic attitudes."

Such was the case with Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian strongman who came to power in the late 1980s. Tir says Milosevic broke with the tradition of using the more neutral Serbo-Croatian language blend

written in the Latin alphabet and popularized in Yugoslavia after WWII in favor of "pure" Serbian and the Cyrillic alphabet.

Milosevic built his political career on demonizing essentially powerless ethnic minorities—initially ethnic Albanians, who he argued posed an existential threat to Serbs.

Tir is quick to note that India is not the former Yugoslavia. Also, he says that just as leaders can use native language to incite xenophobic attitudes, it is possible for more peaceable leaders to communicate in a non-native language to help promote interethnic harmony.

He cites India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who chose English as the language in which to deliver his landmark speech celebrating his country's newfound freedom, which took place against a backdrop of interethnic strife.

However, the risk remains that when the leaders of a country essentially weaponize native language against its ethnic others, it can be very difficult to pull back from the brink, Tir says.

"The traditional ethnic conflict literature highlights the concept called outbidding. When an attention-seeking leader starts to reference the threat to their group by ethnic others, things tend to get more extreme, as opposed to going toward moderation. So essentially, if someone is already delivering an extremist message, the way for someone else to get attention in the political space is with an even more extremist message.

"It's radicalization upon radicalization upon radicalization. It's then very hard to go the other way; moderate voices tend to get ignored and it's the more extremist voices that get listened to in response to a sense of threat to the group.

"That is, more or less, how things played out in the former Yugoslavia," he says. "Things got ever more extreme, destroying the original sense of interethnic harmony."

More information: Shane P. Singh et al, Less Human Than Human: Threat, Language, and Relative Dehumanization, *British Journal of Political Science* (2023). DOI: 10.1017/S0007123423000406

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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