Does language foster reconciliation? Evidence from the former Yugoslavia

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Abstract

Despite a surge in research on post-conflict reconciliation, the specific factors which promote reconciliation remain a subject of debate. In particular, the possible role of shared language in fostering reconciliation has received little scholarly attention. This paper examines two possible channels through which shared language may facilitate reconciliation, and tests these using a new survey dataset of 446 individuals from Serbia. As expected, the results indicated that shared language reduces the negative effect of conflict on intergroup trust and friendship, two crucial components of reconciliation. Furthermore, the results suggest that in the former Yugoslavia this effect is generated by the communication-enabling aspects of a shared language, rather than its other properties such as acting as a marker of ethnic or cultural identity.

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1. Introduction

Post-conflict reconciliation has experienced a surge in scholarly attention since the 1990s within political science and political psychology (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004), possibly due to the 'ethnic revival' and its associated conflicts which began in that same decade (Haarmann, 1999: 67). Most researchers agree that it involves some type of change in intergroup attitudes, with the goal of generating a newfound constructive relationship (e.g. Staub, 2006; Shnabel and Nadler, 2008). But the factors which promote reconciliation remain a subject of debate. An enormous range of possible factors have been proposed, including intergroup contact, effective transitional justice, non-governmental organisations, and 'inclusive caring' (Gibson, 2004; Rettig, 2008; Kosic and Tauber, 2010; Staub, 2013), but agreement on their relative importance remains elusive. Furthermore, one factor appears to have been largely overlooked as a possible facilitator of reconciliation: the presence of a shared language.

There are two main reasons why shared language would be expected to facilitate reconciliation. First, shared language is a necessary condition for communication, and when communication is not possible intergroup contact cannot occur. Existing studies have already found that intergroup contact promotes reconciliation (Gibson, 2004; Tam et. al, 2008; Tropp et. al, 2017), which is consistent with research from psychology which demonstrates a link between contact and improvements in intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Another body of research reaches a similar conclusion through different means, contending that intergroup contact improves attitudes by providing incentives for trustworthy behaviour (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 2003). But language is not only a tool of communication—it is also a marker of ethnic or cultural identity (Gellner, 1983; Haarmann, 1999). The second reason why shared language could facilitate reconciliation is therefore because it acts as a 'badge' which highlights this shared identity. Since people prefer to trust and interact with those perceived as similar to themselves (McPherson et. al, 2001), this may encourage feelings of solidarity between groups formerly in conflict.

I hypothesise that the 'communication' channel is the more likely of the two to be operating in the former Yugoslavia. Operationalising reconciliation as the extent to which past conflict is reflected in current levels of intergroup trust and friendship, I test these ideas using a weighted survey dataset of over 2,600 trust and social contact observations derived from 446 respondents in Serbia. OLS and ordered probit modelling revealed that shared language reduces the

negative effect of past conflict on present levels of intergroup trust and friendship, suggesting that it does indeed facilitate reconciliation. Second, after decomposing the effect of shared language into its 'identity' and 'communication' components, I find that the communication component is the one most strongly linked to improvements in intergroup trust and friendship. These results suggest that shared language can play an important role in fostering reconciliation, and that in the former Yugoslavia it does this primarily by enabling communication between groups formerly in conflict.

2. Literature review

Reconciliation is a multifaceted concept, although it is generally agreed to be more than mere 'conflict resolution'. While the latter refers merely to the cessation of armed hostilities, reconciliation involves a 'changed psychological orientation toward the other' (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008: 116). This idea of deep and sustainable change in attitudes, behaviours and relations between groups formerly in conflict is central to most treatments of reconciliation. Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004: 14) contend that it involves the 'formation or restoration of a genuine peaceful relationship', noting further that these newfound peaceful relations must involve the entire society and not merely the political leaders of each group. Staub (2006) defines it more broadly as 'mutual acceptance by groups of each other', emphasising that is has occurred when parties 'see the humanity of one another, accept each other, and see the possibility of a constructive relationship'.

Perhaps aware that different authors emphasise different aspects, Gibson (2007) contends that reconciliation is not a concept but rather a 'meta-concept' which encompasses several distinct components. In Gibson's framework, reconciliation involves at least four different dimensions: political tolerance, acceptance of institutional legitimacy, interracial reconciliation, and support for human rights principles. It is the third of these—interracial reconciliation—which this paper and most other empirical treatments of reconciliation concern themselves (eg. Noor et. al, 2008a; Tam et. al, 2008). Interracial reconciliation requires that members of each group communicate and interact, accept each other as equals, and eventually come to trust and respect one another (Gibson, 2007). Since the term 'interracial' does not travel well outside of the South African context in which Gibson was writing, I will here substitute the term 'intergroup reconciliation' which is more appropriate for use in other post-conflict settings. In any case, this view of reconciliation is frequently operationalised through variables such as intergroup trust, friendship and forgiveness for past misdeeds (Tam et. al, 2008; Tropp et. al, 2017; Noor et. al 2008a, Noor et. al 2008b).

There is perhaps even less agreement on the factors that promote reconciliation after the end of a conflict. Staub (2013) identifies a range of factors ranging from the behavioural (practicing inclusive caring and active bystandership) to the psychological (healing from past victimisation) as well as political factors such as respect for authority and training new community leaders. Gibson (2004) and Rettig (2008) both highlight the role of truth and reconciliation commissions, and Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) 'needs-based' model points to the emotional needs of each party as a prerequisite for reconciliation. Meanwhile, Noor et. al (2008b) drew attention to 'subjective evaluation of past violence': groups which deny or minimise the violence they perpetrated are less likely to reconcile. Similarly, Gibson (2004) found that reconciliation is more likely when parties are willing to accept the historical 'truth' about the conflict.

One factor which is generally acknowledged to promote reconciliation is intergroup contact (Gibson, 2004; Staub, 2006; Tam et. al, 2008; Staub, 2013; Tropp et. al, 2017). As Tropp et. al note, 'contact can promote more positive intergroup attitudes … as well as more positive perceptions of outgroup members' intentions in working toward peace and greater active involvement in reconciliation efforts'. Given that there is a longstanding literature in psychology demonstrating that contact improves intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954, Pettigrew, 1998), this is perhaps not surprising. By engaging in intergroup contact, parties can correct misperceptions and reduce stereotypes, thus engendering more positive views of one another (Sigelman and Welch, 1993). This effect has been repeatedly documented during reconciliation efforts in Israel, Sri Lanka, India and the Ivory Coast (Staub, 2013: 580).

But the role of shared language as a facilitator of reconciliation has received surprisingly little attention. Even though many parties to violent conflicts have been divided along linguistic lines, there has been no scholarly treatment of whether shared language enhances the prospect of reconciliation. This may be partly because many studies of reconciliation focus on a single conflict dyad, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Hewstone et. al, 2008, Noor et. al, 2008b), Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda (Rettig, 2008) or Croats and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia (Ajdukovic and Biruski, 2008; Kosic and Tauber, 2010). Within an individual dyad, the groups either share a language or do not. The variable does not vary, and the question of whether shared language affects reconciliation may not have seemed pertinent. But shared language does vary across dyads and could facilitate reconciliation where one is present. One recent paper (Mitchell and Miller, 2019) examined the link between language *learning* and reconciliation, but this focused on the experience of studying a language rather

than the question of whether two groups which speak the same language are more likely to reconcile. Others have examined the language *of* reconciliation, arguing that the very term itself may function as a tool of legitimation by certain parties to a conflict (Short, 2005). But the question of whether the presence of a shared language itself may facilitate reconciliation remains unanswered by empirical research. Since intergroup contact is widely acknowledged as a contributor to reconciliation, and communication is arguably necessary for intergroup contact to occur (Buzasi, 2015; Liu, 2015), the absence of language from previous treatments of reconciliation seems a puzzling omission.

Although not focused on reconciliation, there is a broader literature which considers the relationship between language and conflict. Theories of civil conflict are often categorised as either 'greed', 'grievance' or 'opportunity' explanations (Cederman and Vogt, 2017); language issues can play a role in all of these. Bormann et. al (2017) found that language divides were potent generators of civil conflict because of their ability to translate ethnic grievances into opportunities for collective action by rebel groups. Meanwhile, Collier and Hoeffler's (2002) 'greed' approach found that ethnic or linguistic divisions can affect the risk of conflict by conditioning the cost-benefit calculations of potential rebel groups. If language barriers can generate conflict, it stands to reason that they could also inhibit reconciliation after conflict has ended, particularly if language grievances remain unresolved. On the other hand, Fearon and Laitin's (2003) influential paper found that ethnically or linguistically divided countries were no more likely to experience conflict, and other factors such as state strength are the real determinants of conflict opportunities. An earlier paper came to an even more surprising conclusion, finding that language grievances reduced the likelihood of conflict (Laitin, 2000). But much of this literature suffers from a serious limitation: it operationalises language division as 'ethnolinguistic fractionalisation', which measures only mother-tongue speakers of each language and does not account for multilingualism or lingua francas. It is therefore a poor indicator of real intergroup communication potential (Buzasi, 2015; Kumove, 2020).

3. Language and reconciliation

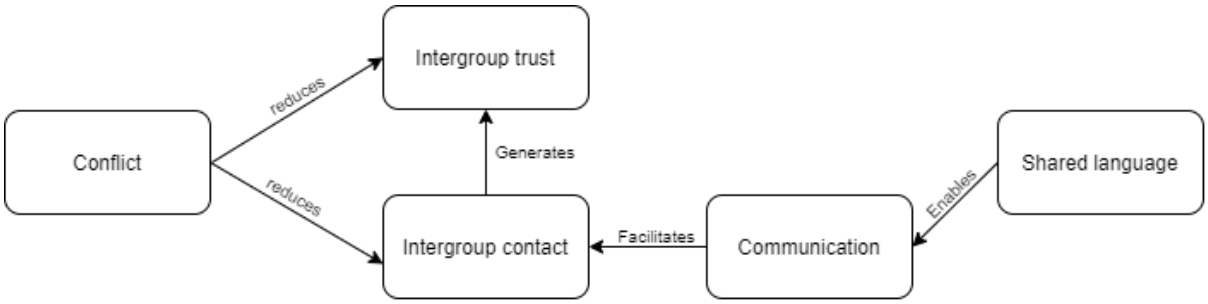
In general, there are two possible channels through which a shared language may facilitate reconciliation.[2] The first of these might be called the 'communication' channel, as it involves the ability of shared language to facilitate intergroup contact by permitting communication.

[2] The idea that shared language can have both 'communication' and 'identity' effects is not novel. Van Parijs (2006) has touched upon this dual nature of language. But empirical studies of language have rarely attempted to separate out the two strands, and certainly not in the context of cross-group trust or reconciliation.

This channel is built around the now well-established idea that intergroup contact improves attitudes. The 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954) proposes that groups which engage in social contact will develop more positive perceptions of one another, so long as certain conditions are met. This theory has received a great deal of empirical support, even when some conditions have not been met (Pettigrew, 1998). Another body of research, mainly from economics and political science, reaches a similar conclusion from different premises. Axelrod and Hamilton's (1981) seminal paper showed how cooperation can emerge in iterated prisoner's dilemma games because the spectre of defection in future rounds encourages cooperation in the present. Putnam (1993: 177) applied this logic to the study of social trust, writing that ongoing social contact builds trust by reducing uncertainty and incentives to defect, while Ostrom (2003: 23-24) pointed out that 'repeated games' give actors the ability to punish non-cooperators in future encounters, thus incentivising trustworthy behaviour in the present. An interesting real-world confirmation of this effect was provided by Habyarimana et. al (2007), whose experiment with ethnic groups in Uganda showed that removing anonymity—thereby exposing a player to possible future sanction by co-ethnics—made them more cooperative during public goods games. Given this large body of research on the positive effects of social contact, it is no surprise that intergroup contact has repeatedly been found to facilitate reconciliation (Gibson, 2004; Staub, 2006; Tam et. al, 2008; Staub, 2013; Tropp et. al, 2017).

Because intergroup contact is unlikely to occur if communication is not possible, reconciliation should be more likely to occur when a shared language is present. Language can serve many functions, but perhaps the most obvious is that it enables communication. Ostler (2010: 6-9) notes that the communicative aspect of languages separates people into groups; languages are the 'currency of human communities'. Liu (2015: 5) emphasises the role of languages as a 'glue' which permit communication and thereby bind people into a community. Without a shared language, communication is difficult or impossible (Liu, 2015: 62-63). Two groups who speak different languages with therefore be unable to engage in meaningful social contact with each other. They may be able to hold what Granovetter (1973) described as 'absent' social ties, such as nodding to each other on the street, but the more substantial forms of intergroup contact which foster reconciliation will be largely off-limits. Buzasi (2015) and Kumove (2020) have already found evidence for this effect in large-N studies of social trust, showing that shared language causes higher trust by enabling intergroup contact. The only remaining step is to apply this logic to the reconciliation context. Figure 1 displays this potential relationship below:

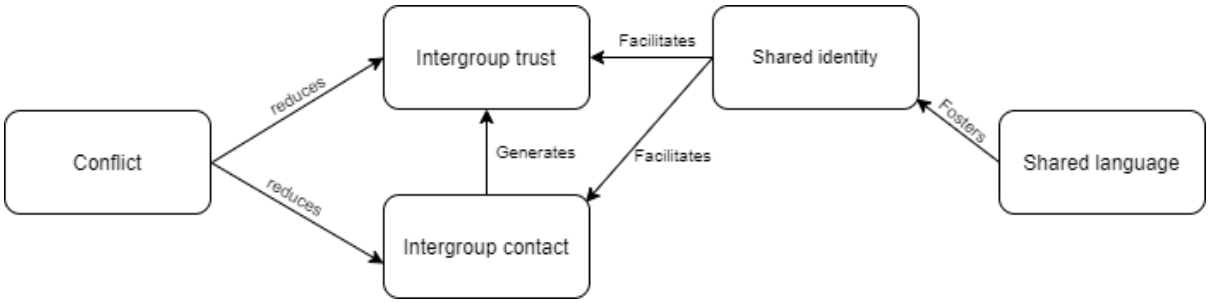
***Figure 1**: Communication explanation of how shared language fosters reconciliation*



The second channel through which shared language may foster reconciliation is the 'identity' channel. In this explanation, language improves cross-group attitudes by acting as a marker of ethnic or cultural identity. It could be that this sense of group solidarity fosters reconciliation, rather than the communicative benefits conferred by the shared language. Countless papers have pointed to shared language as the basis for the formation of a shared identity. Von Herder's famous claim that language is the 'quintessential characteristic of nationhood' (Patten, 2010: 667) might be too strong for modern scholars, but even the likes of Gellner (1983) and Haarmann (1999) highlighted language as a basis for ethnic or national identities. Anderson (1983) might be the most prominent exponent of this view, arguing that shared print languages formed the basis for the 'imagined communities' of nationhood.

Perhaps influenced by these views, empirical studies of ethnicity often operationalise the concept using shared language (e.g. Easterly and Levine, 1997; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Even if a shared language did not create a shared national or ethnic identity *per se*, the language could still function as a 'macro-identity' which highlights the general cultural similarity between groups formerly in conflict. In this case, although the groups might perceive themselves as ethnically distinct, the shared language highlights their similarities and generates feelings of broader cultural solidarity. Because people tend to like and prefer the company of those they perceive as similar to themselves (McPherson et. al, 2001), the shared language is still likely to encourage the groups to form friendships and trust one another to a greater degree than would occur without it. Evidence for the role of cultural similarity in generating intergroup trust has already been found between countries in Europe, although not in a reconciliation context (Delhey, 2007; Gerritsen and Lubbers, 2010). Figure 2 shows the operation of this channel in a reconciliation context:

***Figure 2**: Identity explanation of how shared language fosters reconciliation*



As in Figure 1, a conflict is assumed to reduce the levels of trust and contact between the groups in question. After this point, differences will again emerge depending on whether the groups have a shared language. Groups which share a language will tend to share an ethnic or cultural identity, which increases the levels of both intergroup contact (McPherson et. al, 2001) and intergroup trust (Delhey, 2007; Gerritsen and Lubbers, 2010). One difference from Figure 1 is that the model in Figure 2 allows shared language to increase both contact and trust through the mediator of shared identity. In Figure 1, the mediating variable—communication—had no direct effect on trust. The effect was indirect and operated by increasing the level of intergroup contact.[3]

4. Application to the former Yugoslavia

The language situation of the former Yugoslavia makes this region particularly suitable for studying the link between reconciliation and shared language. The most widely spoken language in the region is Serbo-Croatian, which is the main language of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro. Since the end of the wars, each country has begun to emphasise the uniqueness of their own variety of the language, with Serbs now claiming to speak 'Serbian', Croats 'Croatian' and so on. Despite differences in nomenclature, linguists still consider them branches of the same 'polycentric' language, with differences comparable to those between the different types of German (Haarmann, 1999: 64; Merelli, 2017). This paper will refer to the language as Serbo-Croatian. The other three countries of the former Yugoslavia each speak different languages. Slovenia and Macedonia speak Slovene and Macedonian respectively, both of which are closely related to Serbo-Croatian, while Kosovo mainly speaks Albanian,

[3] A third channel through which shared language may facilitate reconciliation involves language policy choices in the wake of civil war. If the warring groups share a language, then the winning side making its own language the 'official language' of the state does not 'disenfranchise' the losers (Ginsburgh and Weber, 2005), and is less likely to inflame tensions. But because the former Yugoslavia broke up into multiple successor states, there is little prospect for a 'winning' group to impose their language on the losers. Further detail on this channel is contained in Section 1 of the Online Appendix.

which is only very distantly related to any of the others (Friedman, 2017). These variations allow the relationship between language and reconciliation to be tested empirically. For instance, if the negative effect of the conflicts on current intergroup attitudes was reduced in those dyads where a shared language is present (e.g. Serbs and Croats), this would be consistent with the view that shared language facilitates reconciliation. This kind of comparison is not possible in single-dyad studies of reconciliation.

However, it is important to note that the level of conflict differs across dyads. For instance, the level of conflict between Serbs and Croats was much higher than between Serbs and Slovenes.[4] As a result, we cannot simply use the levels of trust or friendship in each dyad as an indicator of reconciliation. Rather than suggesting that a great deal of reconciliation has occurred, a high level of trust or friendship might simply reflect the fact that little conflict originally took place, as was the case between Serbs and Slovenes. Instead, I conceptualise reconciliation as the extent to which past conflict—which varies between dyads—is reflected in current levels of intergroup friendship or trust. If past conflict was found to have no association with current levels of friendship or trust in a regression model, this would be taken as an indication that intergroup reconciliation has largely been completed. Conversely, if the level of past conflict was found to have a strong negative association with present friendship and trust, this would indicate that little reconciliation has occurred: the legacy of the conflicts continues to affect present-day intergroup attitudes.[5]

Section 3 provides two good reasons to believe that reconciliation will proceed faster in the shared language dyads compared to the dyads with no shared language. The shared language could repair friendship and trust in the wake of conflict by enabling cross-group communication, by acting as a badge of shared identity which generates feelings of cross-group solidarity, or perhaps both. In any case, conceptualising reconciliation in this way means that the relationship between conflict, language and friendship or trust is an *interactive* relationship where shared language moderates the expected negative link between conflict and trust or friendship. In the dyads with no shared language, we would expect conflict to still be strongly reflected in current levels of trust and friendship, but when a shared language is present, conflict

[4] The exact measurement of dyad-level conflict is discussed in the Data section below.

[5] There are strong reasons to believe that the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s continue to negatively affect cross-group trust and friendship. Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) found that past conflict can poison intergroup attitudes for generations. Given that only about 20 years have elapsed since the conflicts, it seems unlikely that the damage to relations has been fully repaired. Numerous studies have found that the legacy of the Yugoslav Wars continues to drive generate intergroup prejudice today (Ajdukovic and Biruski, 2008; Dyrstad, 2012; Reidy et. al, 2015).

should show a much weaker link to trust and friendship for the reasons described in Section 3. If shared language really does foster reconciliation, we would therefore expect to observe the following in a regression model:

H_1: Shared language has a positive moderating effect on the negative link between past conflict and present-day trust or friendship.

If H_1 is correct, an interaction term between conflict and shared language should show a positive and statistically significant link to trust and friendship. This would mean that conflict has a weaker negative association with trust and friendship when a shared language is present. But H_1 says nothing about the channel this effect operates through. Would the shared language foster reconciliation for 'communication' reasons, 'identity' reasons, or both? It seems unlikely that the 'identity' channel is operating in the former Yugoslavia. Recall from Section 3 that the shared language was theorised to either form the basis of a shared ethnic identity, or at least to act as a 'macro-identity' which generates feelings of intergroup solidarity. In the case of Serbia's relations with the other former Yugoslav nations, we can dismiss the first possibility out of hand. Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins clearly regard themselves as ethnically distinct from one another. As Hroch (1999) notes, Serb ethnicity is 'defined above all by Orthodoxy', and the Serbian Orthodox Church has historically adopted a role as the keystone of Serbian identity.

The second possibility, that the language acts as a macro-identity which increases perceptions of cross-group similarity, is slightly more plausible. One Serb I interviewed noted that *'We kinda share history with Croatians and Bosnians. We share a language, culture…. So we kinda feel like that cousin at a family meeting that you don't really like or get along with, but they're still family, you know?'*[6] This suggests the perception of a broader supra-ethnic 'family' based on cultural similarities such as the shared language. On the other hand, it seems difficult to imagine that the shared language could generate substantial levels of intergroup solidarity given that each group now frequently claims, in an explicit attempt to emphasise their differences from the other groups, that their own variety is actually a separate 'language' (Haarmann, 1999; Merelli, 2017). Montenegro even added two new letters to its orthography in an attempt to distinguish its variety from the others (Sonnad, 2017). The shared language appears to have fallen victim to the 'narcissism of small differences', where slight cultural variations are magnified to emphasise the differences between groups which are otherwise very

[6] Stefana Karlovci, interview by author, 4 June 2019. Pseudonym used to protect the subject's privacy.

similar. It is not that identity effects exist but fail to moderate the relationship—rather, identity effects are probably not even being generated in the first place.

It seems more likely that the 'communication' channel is operating in this situation. In the short term, no amount of relabelling the local varieties of Serbo-Croatian as separate 'languages' can change the fact that they remain mutually intelligible with one another in the same way that British English is intelligible with American English. Linguists note that they are 'essentially identical' (Bailyn, 2010). In the long run, concerted efforts by language planners can reduce the mutual intelligibility between language varieties which were once near-identical, as occurred between Hindi and Urdu (King, 2001), but there is little evidence that this has yet occurred between the varieties of Serbo-Croatian. As one young Serb put it, *'it's like if you [an English speaker] talk to an American person or a British person. Like, we have different accents but the words are all pretty much the same.'*[7]

Because Serbs can communicate with Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins, the communication mechanism described in Section 3 is able to operate. Through intergroup contact, Serbs can correct misperceptions and remove stereotypes (Sigelman and Welch, 1993) which helps to reduce prejudice and improve trust (Allport, 1954). This contact may also improve trust by providing incentives for trustworthy behaviour (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom 2003). But with Slovenes, Macedonians and Kosovo Albanians, these benefits cannot accrue because the lack of a shared language prevents contact. There is already some evidence that intergroup contact can improve intergroup relations in the former Yugoslavia (Cehajic et. al, 2008; Voci et. al, 2017), even when it occurs online via social media (Žeželj et. al, 2017). If we accept that substantial intergroup contact is near-impossible without communication, it stands to reason that the shared language should foster reconciliation between Serbs and Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. This implies the following:

H_2: The positive effect of shared language described in H_1 accrues through the 'communication' channel, not the 'identity' channel.

How could we know if H_2 is correct? Fortunately, the survey contains two items which allow the effect of shared language to be 'decomposed' into its identity and communication sub-components. One item measures the extent to which communication affects intergroup contact, while another measures the extent to which 'cultural or religious' factors affect intergroup

[7] Natalija Markovic, interview by author, 11 June 2019. Pseudonym used to protect privacy of the subject.

contact. To test H_2, I replace the original interaction term between conflict and shared language with two new interaction terms between conflict and each of these survey items respectively. If H_2 is correct, then the interaction term between conflict and communication should show a positive association with cross-group friendship and trust, but the interaction term between conflict and 'cultural or religious' factors should show no link to friendship or trust. This would indicate that it is communication, rather than perceptions of cultural similarity, which reduces the negative impact of conflict on trust and friendship and thereby fosters reconciliation.

Finally, although H_2 is expected to hold true in the former Yugoslavia, this may not be the case elsewhere. As noted above, the reason why 'identity' effects are unlikely to accrue from the shared language is partly because officials in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro have attempted to undermine the idea that Serbo-Croatian is actually a single language at all. By contrast, shared languages in other post-conflict settings might be more effective vectors for identity effects. Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, for instance, might find that Kinyarwanda—their shared language which is mostly unique to that country—is a powerful vehicle for building shared identity. Conversely, when a shared language is manipulated for political ends as in Yugoslavia, this may compromise its ability to act as a symbol of pan-ethnic identity.

5. Data and method

The paper tests these hypotheses using a new dataset of trust and friendship between Serbs and the six other major groups of the former Yugoslavia: Croats, Bosniaks, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Macedonians and Kosovo Albanians. A survey was distributed online within Serbia in 2019, and by the end of the survey period 446 valid responses had been collected. Online distribution was undertaken primarily through Facebook advertising, and geo-targeting was used to ensure that only users physically located within Serbia were able to view the survey advertisement. Respondents were not offered any reward for completing the survey. While online survey pools such as Amazon's Mturk are sometimes effective at obtaining representative samples (Levay et. al, 2016), the low number of Mturk users in the former Yugoslavia meant that this method was not feasible for the present study.[8] Facebook provides an alternative means of recruiting an online sample, and may even offer some advantages over Mturk. While Mturk surveys rely on a pre-registered group of 'professional' survey-takers, the Facebook advertisement used here pushed the survey to people from all over Serbia. Samples obtained

[8] Attempting to recruit a sample using Mturk generated only three responses, which were not included in the dataset.

through Facebook have been shown to perform comparably to those obtained via Mturk (Samuels and Zucco, 2013; Boas et. al, 2015). Moreover, although the existing South-East European Social Survey Project (SEESSP) dataset is both large and representative, it does not contain data on the underlying 'frequency of encounter' between groups, a variable which seems likely to confound any link between language and trust. I therefore use the SEESSP data only as a robustness check in Section 7. Because of the difficulty of obtaining representative datasets, many studies of the former Yugoslavia have therefore relied on small convenience samples and tailor-made survey questionnaires (e.g. Cehajic et. al, 2008).

Since each respondent was asked six times about their levels of trust and friendship—once for each of the six out-groups—over 2,600 evaluations of trust and friendship were collected. As this sample skewed slightly young, female and educated, survey weights were applied to ensure that the sample matched the Serbian population.[9] The first part was biographical, and asked respondents about their age, gender, education and ethnicity. The survey also asked about:

- Their **level of trust** in each of the six outgroups. This was measured on an ordinal five-point scale ranging from 0 ('no trust') to 4 ('a great deal of trust').
- The **number of friends** that they have from each of the six outgroups. This was measured on an ordinal five-point scale ranging from 0 ('None of my friends are from this group') to 4 ('Most of my friends are from this group').
- Their **frequency of encounter** with each of the six outgroups. This was measured on an ordinal five-point scale ranging from 0 ('I never encounter them') to 4 ('I encounter them every day').
- Their **location within Serbia**. This was used to place each respondent into one of Serbia's 29 local districts.[10] This enabled the use of location fixed effects, as well as the creation of a variable for whether the respondent was in a neighbouring region or district to the outgroup in question. For instance, Vojvodina borders Croatia, so all trust or friendship evaluations made towards Croats by respondents located in that region were coded as 1 for this 'neighbour' variable. Evaluations made towards Croats by people in different regions, or towards other outgroups by respondents in Vojvodina, were coded as zero.

[9] Stata was used to implement manual iterative weighting on gender, age, education and whether the respondent lived in Belgrade.

[10] Although Serbia claims Kosovo as part of its territory, no respondents were located in Kosovo and it is therefore not counted as such here.

- Whether the respondent believes that the communication benefits of a shared language enable intergroup contact. The survey item asked respondents if contact with any of the six outgroups was limited because 'language differences make it hard to communicate'. Respondents could answer either yes (1) or no (0) for each outgroup. I then reverse-scored this item so that the higher value corresponds to a positive effect on intergroup contact, consistent with the other independent variables. This means responses indicating that communication barriers do not limit contact are coded as 1, and responses indicating that communication barriers do limit contact are coded as zero. This variable is used to capture the **'communication' component of shared language**.[11]
- Whether the respondent believes that the lack of cultural or religious differences enables intergroup contact. The survey item asked if contact with each of the six outgroups was limited because of 'cultural or religious differences'. This was again reverse-scored, so responses indicating that cultural or religious differences do not prevent contact were coded as 1, and responses indicating that they do prevent contact were coded as 0. This is taken as an indicator of the **'identity' component of shared language**. Although the survey item does not ask about language specifically, it is a good proxy because it specifically captures the link between cultural similarity and intergroup contact.
- Whether they **speak any of the other major languages** of the former Yugoslavia, such as Slovene, Macedonian or Albanian.

This information was supplemented with external data to capture two other key variables:

- The **level of conflict** between Serbia and each of the six outgroups during the Yugoslav Wars. This was primarily measured as number of deaths between Serb/Yugoslav forces and each of the other groups. The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) publishes best estimates for battle deaths, based on Lacina and Gleditsch (2005). Where the best estimate was not available, I took the mean of their high- and low-end estimates. The resulting number was highest for the Serb conflict with Bosniaks (44,800 deaths), followed by Croats and Kosovo Albanians (6,850 and 4,000 respectively) and then Slovenes (63). No deaths were recorded between Serbs and either Montenegrins or Macedonians. Because the effect of conflict on trust is unlikely to be linear, I took the natural log of these values in all models.[12]

[11] A construct validity test for this measure is contained in Section 7 of the Online Appendix.
[12] Conflict duration, rather than battle deaths, was used for additional robustness checks in Section 3 of the Online Appendix.

- Whether the respondent has a **shared language** with the group they are being asked about. Since Serbs speak the same language as Croats, Bosniaks and Montenegrins, this dummy variable was coded as 1 with respect to these groups. It was also coded as 1 for Slovenes, Macedonians or Kosovo Albanians if the respondent indicated on the survey that they were able to speak Slovene, Macedonian or Albanian respectively.

The descriptive statistics are contained in Table 1. I used robust standard errors clustered on the individual respondent to correct for possible intraclass correlation between observations from the same respondent. Finally, while ordered probit estimation would generally be more suited to a model with an ordinal dependent variable, logit and probit models complicate the interpretation of interaction terms because the link function itself is already interactive (Kam and Franzese, 2007: 112). For this reason, the model is first estimated using OLS and then by ordered probit as a robustness check.

***Table 1**: Post-weighting descriptive statistics*

	Mean	Min	Max	SD	Type
Trust	2.531	0	4	1.096	Ordinal
Number of friends	1.090	0	4	1.019	Ordinal
Deaths in Yugoslav Wars (1000s)	9.282	0	44.8	16.086	Continuous
Shared language	0.514	0	1	0.500	Binary
Communication component	0.084	0	1	0.278	Binary
Identity component	0.121	0	1	0.327	Binary
Gender	0.517	0	1	0.500	Continuous
Age	44.873	19	88	18.268	Continuous
Education	2.525	1	6	0.856	Ordinal
Frequency of encounter	1.823	0	4	0.272	Ordinal
Neighbouring district	0.068	0	1	0.252	Binary

6. Results

As noted above, the empirical strategy here relies on interaction terms to demonstrate how shared language and its subcomponents affect the relationship between past conflict and present attitudes. It is that relationship, rather than the raw levels of trust or friendship, which acts as the indicator of reconciliation. The first set of results were estimated via OLS and are presented in Table 2. In model (1), the respondents' level of trust in each outgroup is regressed against several variables including the interaction term between conflict and shared language. I also include district fixed effects and controls for the individual-level characteristics of age, education level and gender. As expected, the natural log of battle deaths has a negative link to trust, indicating that the Yugoslav Wars continue to negatively impact present-day attitudes. But the relevant term for testing H_1 is the interaction between battle deaths and shared language. This term showed a positive coefficient with a high level of statistical significance, indicating that moving from no shared language (0) to a shared language (1) makes the negative effect of battle deaths on trust more positive—or put another way, less negative. This is precisely the moderation effect that was expected under H_1.

In model (2), I remove the terms containing shared language, and replace them with separate terms for the 'communication' and 'identity' effects which a shared language is presumed to generate. This allows me to compare the effect of each of those subcomponents. The results are consistent with H_2. The interaction term between conflict and the communication subcomponent was positive and significant, indicating that an increase in communication reduces the negative effect of conflict on trust. Conversely, the interaction term between conflict and the identity subcomponent was not significant. Taken together, these results indicate that shared language reduces the effect of conflict on trust (i.e., fosters reconciliation) because it enables communication, rather than by acting as a badge of shared identity. Models (3) and (4) repeat this exercise, but use friendship as the dependent variable instead of trust. The results are the same. The interaction term between conflict and shared language is positive, consistent with H_1, and in model (4) it is the interaction between conflict and communication, rather than conflict and identity, which is positive and statistically significant. This indicates that the communication component of shared language is responsible for mitigating the negative effect of conflict on friendship, which is again exactly what was predicted by H_2.

Table 2: *OLS results*

Independent variable	(1) Outcome: Trust	(2) Outcome: Trust	(3) Outcome: Friendship	(4) Outcome: Friendship
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)	-0.047*** (0.005)	-0.040*** (0.010)	-0.025*** (0.004)	-0.023* (0.012)
District fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Frequency of encounter	0.178*** (0.045)	0.158*** (0.039)	0.508*** (0.028)	0.545*** (0.030)
Neighbouring district	-0.199* (0.084)	-0.089 (0.091)	-0.094 (0.129)	0.002 (0.120)
Shared language	0.382*** (0.088)		0.424*** (0.080)	
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)* Shared language	0.054*** (0.006)		0.030*** (0.110)	
Communication component		0.600*** (0.158)		0.185* (0.073)
Identity component		0.874*** (0.111)		0.178* (0.074)
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)* Communication component		0.041*** (0.010)		0.017* (0.008)
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)* Identity component		-0.011 (0.007)		0.003 (0.009)
R^2	0.1934	0.2221	0.5718	0.5467
Individual respondents	445	445	445	445
N	2,659	2,659	2,662	2,662

*Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * is p<0.05, ** is p<0.01, *** p<0.001.*

The interaction effects from models (1) and (2) are displayed in Figures 3 to 6. In Figure 3, the predicted marginal effects (PME) plot shows that as log battle deaths increases, there is essentially no change in the level of trust if a shared language is present. But when a shared

language does not exist, increases in battle deaths reduce the predicted level of trust. Figure 4 displays the same interaction effect in a different way: the conditional marginal effect (CME) of log battle deaths on trust differs dramatically depending on whether there is a shared language. This is consistent with H_1. Figures 5 and 6 display the individual interactions between the communication and identity components of language respectively, and log battle deaths. In Figure 5, we can see that the PME of battle deaths on trust is somewhat weaker when communication does not limit intergroup contact. This is consistent with the idea that communication component of a shared language weakens the link between conflict and trust. Conversely, Figure 6 shows that the identity component makes no difference: increases in battle deaths reduce trust regardless of whether the respondent perceives cultural similarity with the outgroup. This reflects the lack of statistical significance for the corresponding interaction term in model (2).

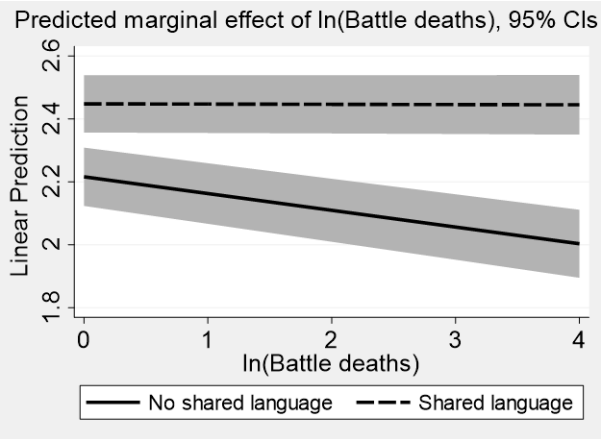


Figure 3: *PME of battle deaths on trust, by shared language*

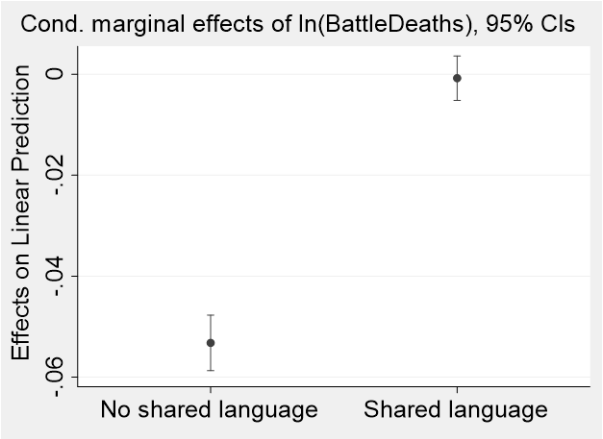


Figure 4: *CME of battle deaths on trust, by shared language*

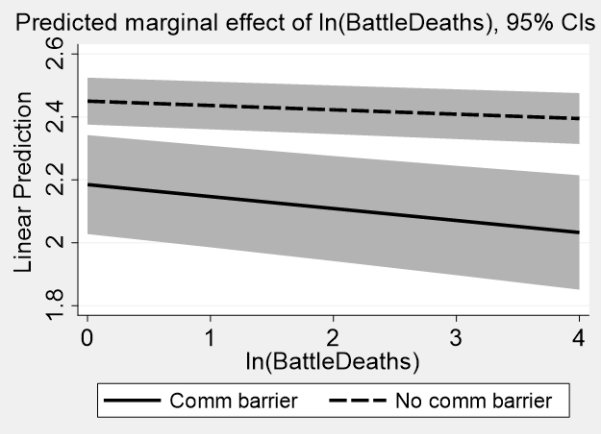


Figure 5: *PME of battle deaths on trust, by communication*

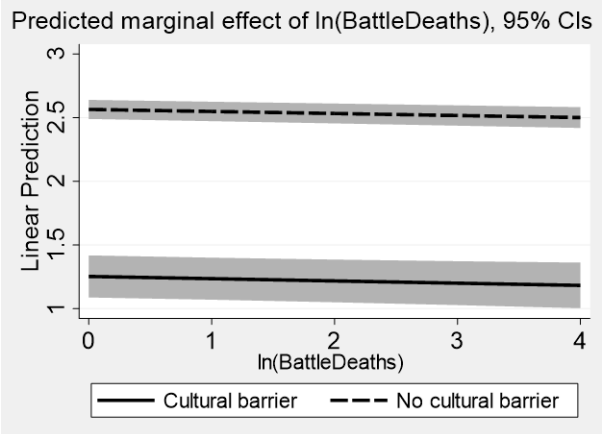


Figure 6: *PME of battle deaths on trust, by identity*

The interaction effects from models (3) and (4) of Table 2 are contained in Section 8 of the Online Appendix. The results appear similar, although the interaction effects do not seem as dramatic in these cases. Nevertheless, Figure A2 and A3 demonstrate that the negative link between battle deaths and friendship is weakened when a shared language is present. This is again consistent with the idea that a shared language fosters reconciliation and supports H_1. Figures A4 and A5 show how the effect of battle deaths on friendship changes depending on the presence of the communication and identity subcomponents of the shared language. While the effect is not as immediately visible as in Figure 5, the effect of battle deaths on friendship appears slightly weaker when the respondent does not perceive communication barriers to limit intergroup contact. This is consistent with H_2 and reflects the statistical significance and positive sign of the corresponding interaction term in model (4).

7. Robustness checks

Several robustness checks were used. First, I re-ran all models from Table 2 using an ordered probit model. The results are displayed in Section 2 of the Online Appendix and are almost identical to the OLS results. The same variables reach statistical significance and show the signs expected. Variance inflation factor analysis was also used to confirm that multicollinearity was not present except in one situation: the interaction terms in models (2) and (4) were highly correlated with their own first-order terms. This is common with interaction terms, but since standard errors and confidence intervals remain correct even in the presence of multicollinearity (Kam and Franzese, 2007: 93), the statistical significance of those terms is unlikely to change even if multicollinearity was absent.

However, even the ordered probit relies on data from an online convenience sample. This method may not perfectly reflect the population, even after applying sampling weights. While this does not threaten the internal validity of the results above, questions may remain about the extent to which these results can be generalised to the rest of the Serbian population, not to mention the rest of the former Yugoslavia. To overcome these limitations, I obtained data from the South-East European Social Survey Project (SEESSP) and performed additional regressions to confirm that the results in Table 2 can be replicated. SEESSP was conducted took place in 2003-04 and sampled over 20,000 respondents from Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia (Simkus, 2007).

I reshaped and cleaned the data, and added the previous battle deaths data from PRIO as an indicator of past conflict.[13] This left over 19,000 observations consisting of over 7,000 individual respondents from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia. As before, I created an interaction term between the natural log of the battle deaths between each dyad and the presence of a shared language.[14] This interaction term again acts as the indicator of whether sharing a language reduces the effect of conflict on trust, thus facilitating reconciliation. Two outcome variables were used. Cross-group trust was captured by the item *'I trust many of the people in [country], and it is time to improve our cooperation with them'*. This is measured on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).[15] As an indicator of cross-group friendship, I used the item recording whether the respondent's best friend is from the same group being asked about. This is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the best friend is from that group, and 0 otherwise. I also include individual-level controls for age, gender, education level and income, and fixed effects for the country the respondent is located in, as well as the district within each country. Once again, robust standard errors were used to correct for clustering on the individual respondent.

Table 3: *SEESSP results*

Independent variable	(1) Outcome: Trust	(2) Outcome: Trust	(1) Outcome: Best friend	(2) Outcome: Best friend
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)	-0.023*** (0.003)	-0.022*** (0.003)	-0.136*** (0.022)	-0.135*** (0.022)
District fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Shared language	0.388*** (0.032)	0.384*** (0.032)	2.109*** (0.373)	2.096*** (0.380)
ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)* Shared language	0.010** (0.003)	0.010** (0.003)	0.082*** (0.022)	0.081*** (0.022)
Uses term 'Serbo-Croatian'		0.022 (0.036)		-0.037 (0.098)

[13] Further detail on this process is contained in Section 4 of the Online Appendix.
[14] Shared language was coded as 1 if the respondent indicated that they were either able to speak the language of the other group, or if that language was identified as the 'main language' of their home.
[15] The original data was reverse-scored it so that higher trust now corresponds to a higher score.

Uses term 'Serbo-Croatian'* ln(Battle deaths, 1000s)		-0.009*** (0.002)		-0.001 (0.006)
R^2 / Pseudo R^2	0.1097	0.1109	0.3058	0.3058
Individual respondents	7,588	7,588	7,101	7,101
N	19,266	19,266	18,540	18,540
Estimation method	OLS	OLS	Probit	Probit

*Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * is p<0.05, ** is p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Sample weights (stdwt) applied in all models.*

One benefit of the SEESSP data is that it allows a powerful new test of H_2. Respondents were asked about their language repertoires, and the vast majority (7,061) were able to speak Serbo-Croatian. However, the way they referred to the language differed. Some people stated that they spoke 'Serbo-Croatian', while others chose a 'nationalistic' name for the language such as 'Serbian', 'Bosnian' or 'Croatian', depending on their country. This difference allows the identity and communication effects of the language to be separated. Since these are all essentially the same language (Bailyn, 2010), the level of communication is held constant regardless of what the respondent calls it. However, someone who uses the term 'Serbo-Croatian', which was the name of the language during the Yugoslav era and is associated with pan-Yugoslav unity (Greenberg, 2004), is likely expressing a greater sense of shared identity with the other groups. Referring to the language by its Yugoslav-era name might also be considered an instance of 'Yugonostalgia', which has likewise been linked to 'shared cultural identities and multiethnic solidarity' between the nations of the former Yugoslavia (Takševa, 2019). We therefore have a situation where communication effects are held constant, but identity effects vary. If identity effects were part of the reason why shared language facilitates reconciliation, then calling the language 'Serbo-Croatian' should have its own positive effect on reconciliation separate to that which already arises from simply sharing the language. Conversely, if the 'identity' channel is not operating, calling the language 'Serbo-Croatian' should generate no positive moderating effect.

The results of the regressions are contained in Table 3 and are consistent with the findings above. In model (1), log battle deaths was linked to lower trust as expected. Crucially, the

interaction term between shared language and log battle deaths has a positive sign, indicating once again that shared language reduces the negative effect of conflict on trust. Model (2) adds a first-order dummy and interaction term for whether respondents called the language 'Serbo-Croatian'. But far from reducing the negative effect of conflict on trust, this interaction term was statistically significant in the other direction, indicating that calling the language 'Serbo-Croatian' makes the negative effect of conflict on trust worse. This result is surprising and is inconsistent with the idea that a sense of shared identity or cross-group solidarity explain part of the link between shared language and reconciliation.

Model (3) replicates model (1), but uses the 'best friend' variable as the outcome. Because this is a dichotomous variable, a standard probit model was used instead of ordered probit. Log battle deaths had a negative association with friendship, and as expected the interaction term indicates that a shared language reduces that negative effect. Model (4) replicates model (2) using the 'best friend' outcome. As before, there is no sign that calling the language 'Serbo-Croatian' moderates the negative effect of conflict on friendship, so neither the results here nor those in model (2) are consistent with the idea that identity effects are part of the reason why shared language facilitates reconciliation. This suggests that it must instead be due to communication effects, a finding which aligns nicely with the results in Tables 2. Further robustness checks are contained in the Online Appendix.

8. Discussion

These results support both hypotheses. H_1 supposed that shared language facilitates reconciliation, and that this effect would be reflected in a regression model by shared language moderating the negative relationship between past conflict and present-day trust or friendship. This is precisely what the results showed. The coefficients on the interaction terms showed that shared language weakens the negative effect of conflict on trust and friendship, even after adding a range of controls and fixed effects. The effect was also robust to switching from an OLS to ordered probit estimator, as well as using an entirely different dataset (SEESSP) in Table 3 which contained trust and friendship data from thousands of people across Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. This provides strong evidence for H_1 and the supposition that shared language does facilitate reconciliation, at least in the former Yugoslavia.

There was also strong evidence for H_2. This proposed that shared language facilitates reconciliation by enabling communication, rather than by acting as a badge of cultural

similarity or shared identity. The results support this. When I replaced the shared language variable with the communication and identity components in Table 2, only the communication component moderated the link between conflict and trust or friendship. These results did not change when switching to an ordered probit estimator. This also received further support from the SEESSP data. Respondents who described their language as 'Serbo-Croatian' are likely to feel a greater sense of solidarity and cultural affinity towards other groups. In short, the 'identity' effect of shared language should be heightened in these individuals. But the results showed that calling the language 'Serbo-Croatian' had no moderating effect, suggesting that identity effects are not in play. This implies that communication effects are likely driving the relationship between shared language and reconciliation.

This paper contributes to the literature in several ways. This appears to be the first paper which has theorised a link between language and reconciliation, or proposed the channels or causal mechanisms through which this effect might occur. Although the likes of Van Parijs (2006) have previously noted that languages can have both communication and identity effects, this idea has never before been applied to reconciliation. This paper also represents the first test of the idea that shared language can facilitate reconciliation between groups in the wake of violent conflict. This has received almost no attention by earlier researchers, and the findings suggest that shared language should be considered an important catalyst of reconciliation alongside transitional justice, 'inclusive caring', acceptance of historical truth and so on. Future studies of reconciliation may benefit from including language variables into any models being estimated. Moreover, the finding that the 'communication' channel seems to be responsible for the effect is consistent with earlier work pointing to the role of intergroup contact as a precursor for reconciliation, such as Gibson (2004) and Tropp et. al (2017).

Core findings aside, the paper also makes other contributions to the study of the former Yugoslavia and intergroup relations. The results showed that the level of conflict during the Yugoslav Wars continues to exert a negative effect on present-day trust and friendship. The conflicts appear to live long in the memory, and these results indicate that intergroup reconciliation remains far from completion. This confirms a number of previous studies drawing similar conclusions (Ajdukovic and Biruski, 2008; Dyrstad, 2012; Reidy et. al, 2015). Second, the idea that shared language can improve intergroup relations is consistent with existing research which has found the same effect (Buzasi, 2015; Kumove, 2020). It also aligns well with the likes of Bormann et. al (2017)—if language divides are associated with conflict, it makes sense that removing a language divide would help to undo the effects of conflict.

This study is also subject to some limitations. The first is external validity. The results here establish that shared language facilitates reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia in general and in Serbia in particular. But we cannot be certain that this effect would generalise to other post-conflict settings. One factor might be the underlying degree of spatial segregation between the groups involved. If the groups are physically separated from one another, it would be difficult to engage in social contact or develop friendships even if a common language existed. As a result, a shared language may do little to foster reconciliation between groups such as Israelis and Palestinians, who are spatially segregated from one another and subject to checkpoints and walls which limit their ability to enjoy intergroup contact. Another limitation concerns how concepts are operationalised. Not only is the communication channel is measured using a double-barrelled question, but the absence of 'language barriers make it hard to communicate' may not equate in all cases to 'language similarities make it easy to communicate'. Similarly, the absence of 'cultural or religious differences' which prevent contact does not necessarily imply that 'cultural similarity encourages contact', although further analysis indicated that the results are robust to alternative specifications of the 'identity' component. This is contained in Section 5 of the Online Appendix.

Questions might also be raised about causal inference. The data seems to support the idea that shared language facilitates reconciliation, but critics might contend that the reverse is equally possible, with people holding more reconciled attitudes also more likely to learn the other group's language. However, it is unlikely that this kind of reverse causation could occur to any significant degree here. In both the original survey and SEESSP datasets, most of the 'shared language' occurs because the respondent shares a mother tongue with the group in question. They did not choose to learn it; the individuals were essentially assigned a shared language at birth. On the other hand, it remains a possibility that individuals holding more reconciled attitudes were less likely to select 'language differences make it hard to communicate' but equally likely to select 'cultural or religious differences'. This could explain why the only the communication component was linked to reconciliation, although there is no obvious reason to suspect that the responses were distributed in this way.

Finally, this paper is concerned only with testing intergroup reconciliation, which refers to the state of intergroup relations between groups formerly in conflict. But as Gibson (2007) notes, reconciliation is a multifaceted concept whose other dimensions include political tolerance, respect for human rights and acceptance of institutional legitimacy. It is unclear whether shared language would affect any of these. Even the concept of intergroup reconciliation likely

extends beyond just trust and friendship—Kriesberg (2007) highlights other aspects including forgiveness, respect and the degree of symmetry between the groups. Future studies might include additional measures of intergroup reconciliation to account for these various facets.

9. Conclusion

Although reconciliation has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the last two decades, the question of whether sharing a language makes two groups more likely to reconcile has never been tested empirically. This paper identifies two channels through which shared language may facilitate reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia, and puts these questions to the test using a new dataset of over 2,600 trust and social contact observations from 446 respondents in Serbia. As expected, the results indicated that sharing a language moderates the negative effect of conflict on trust and friendship, and this effect seems to occur because of the 'communication' function of the language rather than its role as a marker of ethnic or cultural similarity. These results were robust to the use of a different estimator as well performing the analysis on an entirely separate dataset (SEESSP).

While this suggests that shared language explains some of the reconciliation which has occurred between Serbs, Bosnians, Croats and Montenegrins, this effect is not necessarily deterministic. Reconciliation may still occur (albeit perhaps more slowly) between groups which do not share a language. On the other hand, countless factors cause people to feel more trust in other groups, and these results do not constitute a comprehensive explanation of post-conflict reconciliation. However, by illustrating some general trends regarding intergroup trust and friendship, they may prove useful to future researchers and policymakers. These results also suggest that reconciliation efforts are likely be aided by the provision of language-learning programmes or other measures which boost intergroup communication potential.

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