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## Minority Languages and Territorial Rights



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### Synonyms

[Minoritized Languages and Territorial Rights](#)

### Definition

Languages are commonly associated to territories as they are traditionally spoken by communities living in specific places. Nevertheless, languages do relate to speakers and not always to territories. This difference is highlighted by globalization, and more specifically by the increase and new possibilities of migrations, the development of Information and Communication Technologies and the global tendency to learn new foreign languages.

This new context calls for direct association between languages and speakers in order to preserve the rights of the latter and the languages

themselves. Small minority languages are even more affected by globalization and speakers require globally recognized rights and measures according to their new reality.

### Description

Languages are commonly associated to territories. They are usually spoken in specific territories and, in a more legal sense, they may be official or recognized by political entities associated with territories (May 2012). In this sense, most languages get their names from the places where they are spoken or where they originated. It is said that Icelandic is the language of Iceland. It is also claimed that Spanish – or Castilian – is the language of Spain, although it is also the official or common language in other 19 countries and it is not the only language of Spain – and it did not originate in the whole Spain.

Nevertheless, languages do not belong to territories but to speakers and the previous link language-territory have some counterparts (Pavlenko 2011; Heller and Duchêne 2007). While stating that Nepali or Tibetan are the languages of both sides of the Mount Everest, it is difficult to imagine Nepali or Tibetan being continuously spoken in the top of the Everest. Nomad tribes like Tuareg people move around vast spaces but their languages are not continuously spoken in such territories. Their languages are more prone to receive the name of the speakers' tribe rather than the one

of the territory – although these different categories may mix and the vast territory may receive the name of the tribe. Some languages belong to peoples spread on different regions where other languages already established, developing minority groups along vast territories. That would be the case of the Romani language or languages spoken by Gypsy communities especially around Europe and Asia.

In spite of the previous rebuttals, the traditional link language-territory have been accepted and used. However, globalization processes deeply challenge this relationship and three factors must be taken into account: migrations, Information and Communication Technologies, and the growing popularity of learning languages. None of these factors is strictly new. Many huge migrations happened over the history and many languages moved and new ones appeared. Celtic and Latin languages spread over Europe, and European – and even African – languages arrived to America. Nowadays migrations are increasing and the development of transport means and networks offers new temporal and territorial dimensions. Information and Communication Technologies find their forerunners in old post services, but during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries they have become faster, more accessible, and they are offering more functionalities: from the old post services to virtual social networks, people not only receive but also produce more and more information and it is possible to instantaneously share it with vast communities all over the world in a cheaper and faster manner. Telegraph, radio, phone, and television are also milestones in this evolution. Finally, learning languages is something popular and demanded by more and more people and most educational systems introduce the instruction of at least one foreign language.

The challenges towards the links between languages and territories are even deeper in the case of small minority languages. For these languages, migrations and social networks are critical, and their teaching and learning present different contexts, with weaker human and material resources, with a fewer number of students, but at the same time, highly motivated. Information and

Communication Technologies, and specially virtual social networks where the speakers can obtain and provide written material, may play a very positive role in its preservation, but at the same time the pressure of mainstream languages in these platforms may have a negative influence (see also ► [“Endangered Languages and Territorial Rights”](#)).

It must be noted that minority languages and endangered languages are not the same even when they usually correlate. Some minority languages are not endangered, as it is the case of the Sentinelese language, native language of the Sentinelese tribe with some 100–250 estimated speakers who reject any kind of contact with the outside world and modern civilization. This community and some other groups in the Amazon or Papua New Guinea jungles are very small but at the same time they remain stable and there is not any imminent serious danger against their language. Similarly, some endangered languages are not minority languages, as it happens with some Chinese languages spoken by millions of people but disappearing owing to the pressure of Mandarin Chinese. Furthermore, a specific language may be a minority or endangered language or not depending on the analyzed territory. Spanish is neither an endangered nor a minority language in general terms, but if we focus on the Philippines, then it is both an endangered and a minority language.

In the three following sections, I address the relationship between minority languages and territories with regard to the new context provided by globalization, and more specifically, by migrations, new Information and Communication Technologies, and language learning.

### **Migrations**

Migrations affect the origin community, the destination community, and the very migrants, and it may affect the origin community languages, the destination community languages, and the very migrant’s languages (Lewis 1982; Britain 2002). With reference to the migrants influence, two different kinds of migration can be distinguished: one in which the migrant community is bigger or more powerful than the destination community,

and the other one in which the migrant community constitutes a minority, many times in a weaker position in comparison with the already established one. In the former case, the language of the migrant community may become the main one, as it happened in most American countries with the Spanish and English languages. In the latter case, it may vanish and disappear in a few generations, as it is happening with Galician language in Argentina. In both cases, three different factors describe the migrations and their linguistic consequences: spatial, temporal, and sociocultural factors (Kerswill 2006).

Long-distance migrations were traditionally associated with lifelong migrations, but as means of transport become faster and cheaper, that is no longer the case. Spanish, English, French, and Dutch colonizers of America migrated for a very long – even lifelong – time, while nowadays many European people go to America just for holidays. On the contrary, short distance migrations traditionally allowed for the maintenance of linguistic and cultural ties. With regard to minority languages, they are usually associated with rural areas and during the rural exodus of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries many of their speakers are moving to bigger towns and cities to study and to work. Many of the Aragonese speakers located in the Aragonese Pyrenees move from their small villages to the head of the regions during their high school, where they sometimes commute while other times they stay in the new town. The same speakers may move to bigger cities like Huesca, Zaragoza, or even Madrid and Barcelona – where they cannot commute anymore – for higher training or work (Reyes et al. 2017). As people get older, migration pressure increases, such migration points to further distances, links with the original rural area vanish, the native language is no longer used in the new localities, and in many cases it is only recovered during the summer or winter holidays. Sometimes, the migrant community settles in particular districts or areas of the bigger heads and cities, forming their own districts, suburbs, or ghettos, where the language may still remain, as it happened with Jewish languages in different European countries over different times.

From a linguistic point of view, migrations also cause diglossic processes in which the different languages adopt characteristics of the others, what may also cause the emergence of new creole languages and pidgins. Jewish languages like Yiddish or Judaeo-Spanish are examples of these processes. If different varieties of the same language merge, natural dialect leveling or koineization into a simplified variety happens (Trudgill 1983, 127; Kerswill and Williams 2000). So far, when the inhabitants of the different deep Aragonese valleys moved into the south plains during the Reconquista, a quite homogeneous Aragonese koine emerged (Conte et al. 1977).

Temporal factors are strongly related with the spatial ones, but this correlation is weakening as means of transport are increasingly faster and cheaper. Migrations may have different duration and four different categories are usually listed: daily, periodic, seasonal, and long-term migrations (Gould and Pothero 1975, cited in Kerswill 2006). Daily migrations are cyclical and they do not suppose overnight stays. Such direct steady contact between different languages or dialects may play a fundamental role in linguistic leveling processes (Trudgill 1983). Periodic migrants move from their origin places for a short period of time establishing weak contacts with the destination community. They often circulate by various places and countries for short periods. This kind of migration favors the establishment of a lingua franca, like English in Western countries or Tagalog – and also English – inside the Philippines, damaging the image of local minority languages. Business workers, researchers, or tourists are some examples of periodic migrants. Seasonal migrants stay for months or years in the destination place with the intention of returning. Romanian migrants-speakers in Aragon were a few hundred in 2001, to increase to almost 70,000 in 2013 and then to decrease to less than 50,000 in 2016. Some of these seasonal migrants may change their mind and stay in the destination place becoming long-term migrants, like many Turkish people living in Germany. Long-term migrants often leave their origin place without the intention of returning, as many European

migrants who went to the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did, or many Occitan people moving from rural areas to cities like Toulouse or Paris. While seasonal migrants are likely to preserve their language and pass it into their children, many long-term migrants forget it and the minority language disappears in one or a few generations.

Sociocultural factors may explain why some minority languages remain while others do disappear when presenting similar temporal and territorial contexts (Sallabank 2010; Edwards 2010). In terms of these factors, the relationship of the migrants with the destination community can be classified into segregation or participation relations. Segregation spirit in migrating groups is a factor for the conservation of their origin – and now minority – language. That is the case of German language of Amish and Mennonites communities in North America (Coleman 1997). Participation does not necessarily suppose the loss of the minority language, although its weaker position may demand special measures for its preservation. Furthermore, a difference between voluntary migrations and forced migrations, like the one of refugees, can be made. In the latter case, groups are more likely to develop a deep sense of pride towards their origins.

### Information and Communication Technologies

Development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) since the nineteenth century to this day is having a deep impact in all the languages, and more specifically in minority languages, breaking the traditional link between language and territories (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011): once a message is created, it can be sent and received everywhere. These technologies are rather heterogeneous and the main factors for their analysis are the creator of the information herself, the message to be transmitted, the channel of communication, and the receiver of the information (Cunliffe et al. 2013; see also “► [Endangered Languages and Territorial Rights](#)”). While in the nineteenth century the development of these technologies focused on the information transmission between individuals –

telegraph and then telephone – in the twentieth century these technologies – radio, television – allowed information diffusion from a few senders to large populations, as written press did before. Mainstream languages were established for those new communication channels, prejudicing the production and the image of minority language for both the speakers’ communities and the non-speakers’ communities. During the twenty-first century, popularization of the Internet is a challenge: while most of these new channels are initially developed in the mainstream languages, the users are available to create and receive information in their own language. New ICTs may be both a factor for the demise of minority languages and for their preservation (De Bot and Stoessel 2002). The irruption of virtual social networks since the mid-2000s – and more recently the popularization of smartphones – increases the possibilities of the speakers and the magnitude of the challenge.

Both creators and receivers of information are usually young people, while most endangered languages speakers are elderly (Edwards 2002). These young people typically speak other mainstream languages (Fleming and Debski 2007) and they use the minority language depending of different factors: language confidence, language use in nonvirtual contexts, message to share, target audience, and previous presence of the language in the channel. In general terms, the more confident the speaker is, the more he uses the language in the ICTs, and the more the speaker uses the language in nonvirtual contexts, the more he uses it in virtual contexts (Cunliffe et al. 2013).

According to the message to be transmitted using the minority language, some topics are more popular. Issues about traditions associated with the community of speakers and discussions about the sociology and the linguistics of the language itself tend to be written in the minority language (Cru 2015). In the case of highly aware people, political discussions usually appear written in the minority language. ICTs also spread research and technical contents about the language, like linguistic discussions, interviews, recordings, clips, and movies of speakers who often do not have personal presence in these channels – e.g., elderly people. On the contrary,

general scientific, global, and technical contents are usually written in the mainstream languages as well as messages expected to reach larger audiences. Finally, the more the presence of the minority language in the channel, the more the speaker tends to create contents in the minority language.

The channel also determines the minority language level of use. It is usually said that software developers do not pay enough attention to minority languages and nowadays most of the virtual social networks or mainstream applications do not offer interfaces in these languages (Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed 2012). It is argued that Google does not offer interface and products options in most of the endangered languages while at the same time it created and funded the Endangered Languages Project. Other times they offer several minority languages, but the lack of linguistic adaptation of these languages to the new technologies generates linguistic solutions that are not accepted among the community of speakers.

Target audiences influence the language too (Cunliffe et al. 2013). Most virtual social networks allow for different kind of messages with different target audiences. The user can vary the language of particular messages addressed to different audiences, and she can also use different languages for her status and profile information, elements with different communicative purposes and usually addressed to larger audiences. Some platforms also allow for the creation of specific – sometimes private – groups formed by speakers of the minority language, more popular among activist adults rather than among teenagers and children. In the case of video platforms, the creator can offer subtitles and additional information in different languages.

Apart from the previous elements influencing the use of a minority language in new technologies, ICTs allow for migrant speakers to still use their language everywhere (Sallabank 2010; Lanza and Svendsen 2007; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). That may strengthen the speaker's community and the use of the language. ICTs also serve as a means for the visibility and promotion of endangered languages among the nonspeakers. The development of some language learning applications may also support the

preservation of minority languages (Mirza and Sundaram 2017).

### Language Learning and New Speakers

Learning new languages has been a global tendency since the last century and most of the time learned languages are not usually spoken in the territory where the student lives, breaking the link language-territory. Moreover, the needed knowledge of the language and the evaluation of its different aspects – oral expression, listening, writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation – in order to establish new recognized speakers is a challenge. Language learning usually focuses on mainstream languages but an increasing number of people also show interest in minority languages and they decide to learn them. These people usually are middle class young adults associated with new lifestyles, urbanity, and a deep political commitment; they commonly speak other mainstream languages and the language they learn tend to be a standard model sometimes accused of being “artificial” (Costa 2015; Hinton 2011).

Both the background of these new speakers – youth, modernity, urbanity, politicization – and the language they learn – standard – make relevant differences in comparison with the traditional community of speakers, and such differences generate controversies and conflicts. In territorial terms, native speakers usually live in villages and rural areas, while new speakers many times live in big towns and cities (O'Rourke and Ramallo 2011). Interestingly, migrants moving from rural areas towards big towns and cities sometimes connect these two different communities. At the same time, these new speakers make a significant percentage over the total of minority languages speakers. That is the case of Aragonese, Guernesian, and Occitan languages (Reyes et al. 2017; Sallabank 2010; Costa 2015).

Far from being pure descriptive labels, native and new speaker's categories legitimize language users in different manners (Bourdieu 1977). Generally speaking, the main argument for linguistic legitimization is compliance with some linguistic norms previously established by some kind of authority in continuously negotiated processes. As the traditional community decreases and the

new speakers' community increases, the latter gains weight over the former in the establishment of linguistic norms, even when many times the term new speaker is taken as a pejorative one and linguistic solutions used by the traditional community are considered more genuine. Many new speakers often try to establish linguistic norms based on native speakers linguistic solutions, legitimizing the native speakers' vanishing community and trying to be more recognized and legitimized among the new speakers' community. According to this legitimization, the influence of the mainstream surrounding language on the new speakers is much more criticized than the influence of the same language in the native speakers: in this game of legitimacy, native – and especially elderly native – speakers linguistic solutions are more valuable even if their language is more influenced by the mainstream surrounding language. Some authors consider that these legitimacy proposals or discussions serve different nonlinguistic interests related to “political, social, and moral issues” (Costa 2015, 133), and ultimately to the establishment of an authority. This idea is supported by the fact that new speakers who try to establish these linguistic norms often mix linguistic legitimacy of native speakers with other criteria – historical language, etymologies, teaching and learning simplicity, linguistic solutions found in other languages, language leveling – in rather arbitrary manners, trying to spread and impose their own formula. On the other hand, sometimes traditional speakers consider standard varieties of their languages to be the cultural, dominant, and legitimate models to follow (Costa 2015).

Language learning and new speakers also challenge the traditional connection between languages and territories. Mainstream languages like English and Spanish have speakers in countries where they are main languages but also in many other countries due to language learning – and migrations. This fact is even clearer and more significant in small minority languages where an increasing community of middle-class, urban, young, and politicized people learn the language in territories and contexts that are very different from the original ones, reaching a significant

percentage over the total of speakers. The required knowledge for a person to be considered a new speaker and the correspondent evaluation are also challenges.

## Conclusions

Languages belong to speakers and not to territories. While most of peoples have remained in the same place for long periods, the difference was not substantial. But nowadays, globalization challenges this traditional link and new contexts must be pointed and analyzed for correct linguistic policies that preserve the rights of minority languages speakers.

Migrations, Information and Communication Technologies, and language learning are globalization processes to deal with as they break the traditional link language-territory. Migrations are increasing and becoming more complex. ICT's are developing and they offer new possibilities and new challenges. Language learning is becoming more popular and it creates new speakers' communities different from the traditional ones.

Global issues and processes on languages and their speakers ask for global rights. Speakers themselves and public administrations of the places where the languages have been traditionally spoken must support this idea and work along these lines.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Linguistic Territoriality](#)
- ▶ [Territorial Rights and Endangered Languages](#)

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