

# The Evolution of Linguistic Rights: Tracing Major Milestones Throughout History

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## ABSTRACT

*The evolution of linguistic rights represents a significant trajectory in the socio-political history of human societies, mirroring broader shifts in political power, cultural paradigms, and technological advancements. This paper embarks on a historical journey to trace the major milestones in the recognition, protection, and promotion of linguistic rights. Beginning with implicit recognition in ancient and medieval societies, it highlights the complex interplay of power, culture, and language, while also acknowledging the value of linguistic diversity. The paper critically examines the significant strides made in the 20th century, where international treaties and declarations explicitly acknowledged and championed linguistic rights, expanding the conversation to encompass education, public administration, and more. In the 21st century, the digital age has ushered in a new paradigm for the discourse on linguistic rights, shaped by technology and the internet. This period witnesses increased awareness of the digital linguistic divide and the potential of technology to both challenge and champion linguistic rights. Through a detailed exploration of these periods, the paper presents a holistic understanding of the development of linguistic rights, emphasizing the enduring relationship between linguistic diversity, social justice, and national identity, while offering insights into the evolving global narrative on linguistic rights.*

**Keywords:** Human Rights Milestones, Language Discrimination, Linguistic Diversity, Linguistic Rights, Multilingualism.

## I INTRODUCTION

In the vast tapestry of human rights and liberties, linguistic rights occupy a unique and pivotal space. At the core of these rights lies the fundamental premise that individuals and communities should be free to express, communicate, and preserve their identity through language without hindrance. Linguistic rights extend beyond mere language usage; they encapsulate human and civil rights concerning the individual and collective ability to choose, promote, learn, and employ the languages of their choice across various public and private domains. Throughout history, language has been intricately linked to power dynamics, cultural exchanges, and socio-political movements. As societies evolved, so did their understanding and assertion of linguistic rights. The evolution of these rights has been intertwined with significant issues of identity formation, colonial legacies, globalization, and state-building efforts. Additionally, linguistic rights highlight questions of cultural preservation, diversity, and inclusivity, recognizing that the loss of a language entails the disappearance of a unique worldview and cultural heritage. By delving into the history and major milestones of linguistic rights, this paper aims to elucidate the complexities and nuances of this vital subject, emphasizing its relevance in today's world and its enduring significance in shaping our past.

## II LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to linguistic rights, as a domain within the broader purview of human rights, has been notable due to its intricate connections with socio-cultural, political, and economic terrains. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) offers a comprehensive exploration that ties linguistic rights closely with overarching human rights themes. May (2012) provides a lucid delineation of the interface between linguistic rights and minority rights, spanning civilizations from ancient times to the modern era. The colonial legacy's influence on linguistic rights is underscored by Phillipson's seminal work, *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992), and further elaborated on by Makoni & Pennycook (2006). Spolsky (2009) analyzes colonial linguistic policies' lasting impacts on colonized communities. The intertwining of linguistic rights with modern geopolitical dynamics is discussed by Ricento (2005) and Patten (2001), while Blommaert (2010) and Heller (1999) dissect globalization's implications. In the digital age, Warschauer (2003) highlights technology's dual role in preserving and eroding linguistic diversity, echoed by Cunliffe et al. (2013). Despite numerous studies focusing on specific moments in linguistic rights' evolution, a comprehensive, chronological tracing of these rights throughout history is lacking. This gap in the literature calls for holistic research connecting disparate dots into a cohesive narrative, encompassing grassroots movements, indigenous language preservation struggles, and technology's role in shaping linguistic rights discourse in the 21st century.

**(a) Research Question:** Linguistic rights, understood as the rights of communities to use their language as a mode of communication and education, have been a topic of contention and evolution for centuries. As societies grew and changed, so too did the understanding and appreciation of linguistic rights. While several studies have explored specific instances where linguistic rights have been championed or suppressed, there is a lack of comprehensive research tracing the overarching historical evolution of these rights.

- How have linguistic rights evolved throughout history, and what have been the major milestones marking this evolution?

**(b) Purpose of the Article:** The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the major milestones in the historical evolution of linguistic rights, drawing connections between past events and current practices.

### III METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically historical analysis, to trace the evolution of linguistic rights throughout history and identify the major milestones that have shaped this trajectory.

**(a) Data Collection:** The study utilized secondary data drawn from various sources, including academic articles, legal documents, international treaties, and historical texts. The data for this research was collected through a systematic review of the literature. This involved searching electronic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PubMed for scholarly articles using relevant keywords such as 'linguistic rights', 'language policy', 'historical evolution of linguistic rights', and 'major milestones in linguistic rights'. Historical documents and international treaties were accessed through archives of international institutions like the United Nations.

**(b) Data Analysis:** The collected data underwent systematic analysis, focusing on identifying key events, shifts in policy, and significant developments related to linguistic rights. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis. This involved coding the data for recurrent themes related to the evolution of linguistic rights. Sub-themes were also identified to offer detailed insights into the major milestones. The coded data was then analyzed to draw out patterns and trends.

**(c) Approach:** The historical analysis approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of linguistic rights from antiquity to the present day, enabling the identification of patterns, trends, and influential factors that have influenced the evolution of linguistic rights globally.

**(d) Limitations:** While the qualitative historical analysis provides valuable insights into the evolution of linguistic rights, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations such as bias in historical sources and the subjective interpretation of events. Additionally, the study's scope may be limited by the availability and reliability of historical data.

**(e) Validation:** The findings of this study were validated through triangulation, ensuring that the identified milestones and evolutionary trends were corroborated by multiple sources. This helped to enhance the reliability and validity of the research.

### IV RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### **(a) Ancient and Medieval Times: Early Notions of Language Rights**

Language, throughout ancient and medieval times, has been more than a tool of communication; it served as an emblem of cultural identity, socio-political power, and spiritual continuity. The ways in which societies engaged with languages often reflected broader historical and sociological trends, including the consolidation of empires, the spread of religions, and the migration of peoples.

During the vast expanse of the ancient world, empires like the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans often promoted their languages as a means of administrative control and cultural assimilation. The imposition of a dominant language was a common strategy to maintain control over newly acquired territories, yet this did not always mean the eradication or suppression of regional languages.

For instance, the Achaemenid Persians, despite their vast territories stretching from India to Egypt, adopted an approach of relative linguistic tolerance. Local languages in regions like Egypt or the Indus Valley persisted alongside the official imperial Aramaic. This multi-lingual approach can be seen as an early acknowledgment of the practicality and possibly the rights of linguistic diversity.

The medieval period, characterized by the rise of kingdoms, principalities, and religious movements, also had its share of linguistic fluctuations. As Christianity spread across Europe, Latin became not only a liturgical language but also an intellectual and scholarly lingua franca. However, the vernacular languages held their ground, often in parallel domains and at times intersecting with Latin, especially in literary creations.

Furthermore, during the Islamic Golden Age, while Arabic was the primary medium of scholarly and religious discourse, non-Arab regions under Islamic rule, like Persia or parts of Central Asia, retained and even flourished in their native languages, further emphasizing the era's intricate linguistic tapestry.

In short, the ancient and medieval periods were not devoid of linguistic consciousness. While power dynamics did influence the prominence of certain languages, there was an implicit understanding of the value and utility of linguistic diversity.

### **(b) Renaissance and Enlightenment: Languages and Nationhood**

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, spanning approximately from the 14th to the 18th centuries, catalyzed profound transformations across the European continent, reshaping fields ranging from art and science to philosophy and, critically, language. Originating in Italy, the Renaissance marked a vibrant "rebirth" of classical wisdom, reviving the allure of Greek and Latin manuscripts. Equally, if not more pivotal for the broader populace, it bestowed vernacular languages with an unprecedented esteem.

Johannes Gutenberg's groundbreaking invention of the printing press around 1440 significantly expedited this linguistic metamorphosis. The advent of this technology facilitated broader access to books, fostering the gradual standardization of vernaculars. The ensuing democratization of literacy and enlightenment underscored the versatility of vernacular languages - they transcended mere verbal interaction, embodying knowledge, cultural essence, and nascent nationalistic sentiments.

The Enlightenment era, with its robust emphasis on rationalism, scientific inquiry, and individual liberties, further enriched the discourse on language. Luminaries like John Locke posited that language was inextricably intertwined with cognition, shaping our understanding of humanity and its intrinsic nature. This epoch, characterized by secularism and a predilection for rational discourse, impelled societies to reexamine the significance of language in facets ranging from governance and pedagogy to civic engagements.

Historical milestones, such as the Treaty of Augsburg in 1555, while primarily crafted as a religious covenant, implicitly sanctioned linguistic plurality. This treaty permitted sovereigns to determine the dominant faith (and indirectly, often the linguistic framework) within their dominions. This devolution of religious and linguistic choices hints at nascent inklings of linguistic rights, serving as a precursor to contemporary perspectives on the matter.

Furthermore, the advent of notable literary figures, such as Dante Alighieri with his 'Divine Comedy' written in the Tuscan dialect, exemplified the burgeoning prominence of vernacular literature. Dante's choice to eschew Latin in favor of a regional dialect was revolutionary, elevating the status of vernaculars and setting a precedent for other European writers.

By the denouement of these transformative eras, the archetype of the nation-state crystallized, wherein language became deeply entwined with constructs of national identity. As territorial demarcations oscillated, the languages reverberating within these borders evolved beyond mere communicative mediums, symbolizing unifying national ethos and identity.

### **(c) Ancient and Medieval Periods: Early Recognition of Linguistic Rights**

The ancient and medieval periods offer fascinating glimpses into the early recognition of linguistic rights, even if they were not explicitly labeled as such. Here are some examples:

- (i) Akkadian Empire:** Sumerian and Akkadian Languages: The Akkadian Empire (circa 2334-2154 BCE) successfully amalgamated multiple linguistic groups. Although the Akkadians imposed their Semitic Akkadian language for administrative purposes, the earlier Sumerian language and culture continued to flourish, especially in religious and literary contexts.
- (ii) Ancient Egypt:** Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic Scripts: While hieroglyphics were used for monumental inscriptions, hieratic and later demotic scripts, derived from hieroglyphics, were used for religious texts and everyday writing, respectively. This adaptation of script to suit various social contexts reflects an implicit acknowledgment of linguistic diversity and utility.
- (iii) The Achaemenid Empire (Ancient Persia):** Old Persian and Aramaic: Darius the Great adopted Aramaic as the administrative language for the vast Achaemenid Empire, despite Old Persian being the language of the rulers. This was an early recognition of the importance of utilizing a lingua franca familiar to a broader audience for effective governance.
- (iv) Ancient Rome and Latin:** Latin and Greek: Latin was the administrative language of Rome, but Greek was widely spoken and respected, especially in the eastern provinces. Many educated Romans were bilingual, reflecting the importance of linguistic inclusivity in governance, trade, and culture.
- (v) Ancient India:** The subcontinent has a rich linguistic tapestry that dates back millennia. The classical language Sanskrit, used for religious and scholarly works, coexisted with regional languages like Prakrit. The Emperor Ashoka, in the 3rd century BCE, inscribed edicts in various languages, catering to different regions, which reflects an implicit acknowledgment of linguistic diversity.

- (vi) **The Islamic Caliphates:** As Islam spread, Arabic became the language of religion and scholarship. However, local languages such as Persian, Berber, and others continued to flourish in respective regions. Many Persian poets, for instance, contributed vastly to literature in their language despite the dominance of Arabic.
- (vii) **Medieval Spain (Al-Andalus):** Arabic, Hebrew, and Romance Languages: During the Muslim rule in Spain, there was a vibrant coexistence of multiple languages. Arabic was the primary language of administration and scholarship, but Hebrew and various Romance languages were also spoken and written. This period produced scholars like Maimonides, who wrote in both Hebrew and Arabic.
- (viii) **The Ottoman Empire:** Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Others: The Ottomans, recognizing the linguistic diversity of their expansive empire, did not attempt to suppress non-Turkish languages. Arabic and Persian were highly esteemed, especially in scholarly, legal, and religious contexts. This allowed for a multi-lingual bureaucracy and literary culture.
- (ix) **Medieval India:** Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Regional Languages: While Sanskrit was a language of scholarship and religious texts, Prakrit and other regional languages (e.g., Tamil, Kannada, and Bengali) had their own vibrant literary and cultural traditions. Kings often patronized multiple languages, recognizing their cultural value and the importance of linguistic accessibility.
- (x) **Medieval Europe:** Latin was the dominant language of scholarship and the Church, but vernacular languages played a significant role in daily life. With the Magna Carta in 1215, for example, although written in Latin, it aimed to address and communicate rights and privileges of common people, indirectly suggesting the value of making crucial information accessible to the masses.
- (xi) **Ancient China:** Classical Chinese was used for official and literary purposes, while various spoken dialects existed across regions. This distinction between written and spoken forms allowed for a unified administration but still acknowledged regional linguistic diversity.
- (xii) **The Byzantine Empire:** While Greek was the official language, other languages like Armenian, Coptic, and Syriac had their own communities and religious functions within the empire. This coexistence reveals an early understanding of communal linguistic rights.

In many of these examples, linguistic rights were more about practical governance, cultural preservation, or elite bilingualism rather than egalitarian principles. Still, they show early notions of linguistic pluralism and the importance of language in administration, culture, and identity

The 19th century was indeed a transformative period in terms of linguistic rights and perceptions, deeply intertwined with the rise of nationalism and the consolidation of European empires. Here's a summary of the key points highlighted in the text:

- **Nationalism and Linguistic Homogenization:** The 19th century witnessed a surge in nationalism across Europe and beyond, leading to the promotion of standardized national languages as a means to foster unity and control regional separatist tendencies. Examples include the promotion of French in France, Standard German in Germany, and Tuscan-based Italian in Italy.
- **Colonialism and Language Imposition:** European colonial powers exported their languages to vast territories across Africa, Asia, and the Americas, often suppressing or erasing indigenous languages in favor of English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese.
- **Resistance and Revival Movements:** Despite efforts towards linguistic homogenization, there were instances of resistance and revival movements. For example, the Gaelic Revival in Ireland sought to resurrect and promote the Irish language as a symbol of resistance against English hegemony.
- **Key Examples of Linguistic Homogenization:** Various examples from around the world illustrate the push towards linguistic homogenization during the 19th century, including German unification, the Meiji Restoration in Japan, Italian unification, French language laws, Americanization efforts in the United States, Russification in the Russian Empire, and Magyarization in Hungary.
- **Absence of a Formalized Linguistic Rights Movement:** Despite the significant political changes and rise of nationalism, there was no global, cohesive linguistic rights movement in the 19th century. Several factors contributed to this, including the conceptual framework of rights still being developed, the prioritization of national unity over linguistic diversity, the overshadowing of linguistic rights by broader political movements, and the lack of global platforms for advocacy.

Overall, the 19th century laid the groundwork for the organized and recognized efforts towards linguistic rights that emerged in the 20th century. The socio-political developments of this period significantly shaped the trajectory of linguistic rights reframing.

The 20th century witnessed significant advancements in the recognition and establishment of linguistic rights on a global scale, building upon the foundation laid by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948. Here's a breakdown of the key points highlighted in the text:

- ✓ **UDHR and Linguistic Rights:** The UDHR, while not exclusively focused on language, played a crucial role in recognizing linguistic rights as fundamental human rights. Article 2 of the UDHR emphasized that every individual is entitled to rights and freedoms "without distinction of any kind, such as...language."
- ✓ **International Treaties and Declarations:** Following the UDHR, several pivotal treaties and declarations were established to further emphasize linguistic rights. Examples include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992).
- ✓ **Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights:** The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) emerged as one of the most comprehensive documents on linguistic rights. It detailed rights in various sectors and asserted the equality of all languages, emphasizing their recognition and support.
- ✓ **Real-World Applications:** These principles found real-world applications across various contexts. Examples include Canada's policy on bilingualism, which recognized English and French, and South Africa's post-apartheid linguistic policies, which aimed to ensure equal status for all 11 official languages.
- ✓ **Significance of the UDHR:** The UDHR served as a cornerstone for human rights principles worldwide, providing a comprehensive framework for the rights and freedoms of all individuals, regardless of their distinctions, including language.
- ✓ **Context of Post-World War II:** The UDHR emerged in the aftermath of World War II, a period marked by the recognition of the devastating effects of prejudice, discrimination, and genocide. Including language as a fundamental human right was crucial, given the persecution faced by linguistic communities during the war.

- ✓ **Decolonization Movements:** The 20th century saw a wave of decolonization movements, where countries sought to reclaim their sovereignty from colonial powers. Reviving and promoting native languages suppressed during colonial rule became a critical aspect of these movements.
- ✓ **Globalization and Migration:** Increasing globalization and migration led to multicultural and multilingual societies. Recognizing linguistic rights became imperative to ensure that minority communities were not marginalized and could fully participate in societal functions.
- ✓ **Catalyst for Later Declarations:** The principles of the UDHR acted as a catalyst for the development of more specific linguistic rights declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) in Barcelona, which further elaborated on the principles of linguistic rights.

In summary, the phrase "The Universal Declaration and Beyond" encapsulates not only the importance of the UDHR as a starting point but also the subsequent growth and development of linguistic rights throughout the 20th century and beyond.

## V 21ST CENTURY: DIGITAL AGE AND LINGUISTIC RIGHTS

The 21st century has brought about a significant shift in the landscape of linguistic rights, driven by rapid technological advancements. Here's an overview of the key developments:

- (a) **Digital Exclusion and Linguistic Marginalization:** The early years of the digital age witnessed the dominance of major languages on the internet, leading to the marginalization of indigenous and less-spoken languages. This digital linguistic divide resulted in limited access to online resources for speakers of non-dominant languages.
- (b) **Revival and Preservation through Technology:** Despite challenges, technology has also enabled efforts to revive and preserve endangered languages. Digital platforms, including websites, mobile applications, and online communities, have become powerful tools for teaching, learning, and promoting minority languages. Initiatives like the "Endangered Languages Project" have facilitated collaboration among linguists and communities to share resources and content for endangered languages.
- (c) **Linguistic Rights in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Technology:** The rise of AI and machine learning has raised concerns about linguistic diversity representation. While these technologies primarily support widely spoken languages, grassroots initiatives are advocating for AI that respects linguistic

diversity, ensuring that minority languages receive adequate representation in the digital sphere.

**(d) Online Activism and Linguistic Rights:** The digital age has witnessed a surge in online activism advocating for linguistic rights. Social media campaigns, online petitions, and virtual forums have provided platforms for marginalized linguistic communities to voice their concerns and rally for their rights on a global scale.

In summary, the 21st century, characterized by its digital ethos, has redefined the landscape of linguistic rights. While challenges such as digital exclusion persist, the digital age has also unlocked unprecedented opportunities for the advocacy, preservation, and celebration of linguistic diversity.

Time Period	Key Events & Milestones
Ancient and Medieval Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greek and Roman expansions with efforts to protect local languages.</li> <li>- Medieval Europe sees Latin as the liturgical and scholarly language, while vernacular languages gain ground in daily life.</li> </ul>
Renaissance and Enlightenment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognition of languages as markers of cultural and national identity.</li> <li>- Emergence of linguistic nationalism in Europe.</li> </ul>
19th Century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rise of nationalism and efforts toward linguistic homogenization in certain states.</li> <li>- Establishment of language-based nation-states.</li> </ul>
20th Century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) upholds rights without distinction of language.</li> <li>- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and other treaties bolster linguistic rights.</li> <li>- Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) in Barcelona outlines principles of linguistic rights.</li> </ul>
21st Century: Digital Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital linguistic divide emerges with dominant internet languages.</li> <li>- Technological tools aid in the preservation and promotion of endangered languages.</li> <li>- AI and machine learning offer new challenges and opportunities for linguistic diversity.</li> </ul>

## VI CONCLUSION

The journey of linguistic rights, from ancient civilizations to the digital age, underscores their increasingly recognized importance for protection and promotion. The evolution of linguistic rights reflects shifts in global power dynamics, cultural exchanges, and technological advancements.

Linguistic rights initially existed as implicit or indirect provisions in ancient and medieval societies, evidenced by protective measures for local languages during Greek and Roman expansions. Their significance grew during the Renaissance and Enlightenment as nations recognized languages as symbols of cultural and national identity.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw a juxtaposition of nationalism and linguistic homogenization alongside growing international awareness of linguistic diversity and rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent treaties played a crucial role in endorsing linguistic rights as fundamental human rights.

In the 21st century, the digital revolution presented new challenges and opportunities for linguistic rights. Digital exclusion, linguistic marginalization, and the rise of

Artificial Intelligence highlighted the importance of linguistic rights in a hyper-connected world. Simultaneously, technology emerged as a powerful tool for revitalizing, preserving, and promoting endangered and minority languages.

The ongoing advocacy for linguistic rights goes beyond cultural preservation; it embodies the human desire for self-expression, identity, and belonging. It underscores the intricate connection between languages and human rights, reflecting an evolving understanding of these rights in a changing world.

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