Communicating Language Rights in Multilingual Societies

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ABSTRACT

Language rights are fundamental components of human rights, especially in multilingual societies where speakers of non-dominant languages often face marginalization. This paper examines the concept of language rights within legal frameworks, theoretical paradigms, historical contexts, and real-life case studies, with particular attention to how such rights are communicated and contested. Drawing on collective and individual perspectives, the study examines how language policies either empower or suppress linguistic minorities, analyzing critical case studies such as the status of the Albanian language in Greece and Italy. The paper also investigates the role of communication strategies and education systems in the protection or erosion of linguistic diversity. It argues that legal codification, political will, inclusive education, and equitable media representation are essential in promoting language rights as active and enforceable entitlements rather than abstract ideals. Ultimately, the paper underscores the need for inclusive and multilingual communication strategies that can help mediate the complexities of linguistic identity and state power.

Keywords: Language rights, multilingualism, language policy, minority languages, legal frameworks, linguistic justice, communication strategies, bilingual education.

INTRODUCTION

The term language rights refers to a set of legal rights related to specific or groups of languages, primarily focusing on speakers of non-dominant languages. These rights often involve the human right of speakers of minority languages to use their languages publicly, in education, administration, judiciary, etc. Discussions also address the rights of those who do not understand the dominant language, putting them at risk of discrimination. Some contexts are legally regulated, allowing individuals to claim rights and take legal actions when they are violated. However, language rights aren't always codified or easily enforceable. Many claims, such as promoting or protecting a group's language or ensuring linguistic survival, are often seen as aspirations rather than rights. Extensive non-discriminatory and participatory regulations are framed in support of these rights. Most discussions target international legal documents acknowledging language rights, which emphasize the rights of speakers to communicate with administrative institutions and the need for access to services in their language. The right to an interpreter is framed around the need for communication, rather than legitimacy in state discourses [1, 2].

Theoretical Framework

Collective language rights refer to a group's legal rights to maintain and develop its language. These rights are classified into three categories: general language rules, special language rules, and minority legislation. General language rules govern multilingual situations but can marginalize weaker languages, necessitating special provisions for minority languages. Minority legislation encompasses both general rules on multilingualism and specific provisions for their implementation. Collective language rights aim to protect languages and the groups that speak them, regardless of jurisdiction. These rights are vital in multilingual societies, where competing ethnic groups can complicate language rights conditions. The state language may disadvantage groups that do not speak it proficiently, leading to identity politics concerning language use. Language cessation or shift may occur as groups adapt to state language pressures, which can result in conflict and perceptions of discrimination. Negotiating language rights is a

mechanism influenced by expectations regarding privileges and disadvantages within legal frameworks. However, collective language rights in legal structures are not straightforward and can be subject to competing claims. The effectiveness of laws varies; some support groups while others harm them, and these rights face opposition in practice. Furthermore, context, history, and public perception significantly shape the understanding of collective language rights, making the legal landscape complex and multifaceted. The legal framework around language rights is not simply about enforcing laws but involves navigating a battlefield of competing interests and historical influences [3, 4].

Definition of Language Rights

Language rights generally refer to the legal situation of speakers of a language that does not hold the dominant position in a multilingual society or in some society where there is no single dominant language. This situation oftens calls for protection of language rights, excluding dialects of official languages. In addition to declarations, some international documents exist that regulate states' commitment to grant certain language rights. The general provision of the Charter does not define regional or minority languages. The text states that the Charter applies to languages that are "traditionally used within a state" by communities that "formisms or a wish to be identified in physical terms as disadvantaged" described in the preamble to its article 1(a). Sometimes, however, the position of a language dominant nationally can be minority in a specific region. Bills of rights do not exclude languages that are not national because of an asymmetry of power between majorities and minorities reflecting in economic and political predominance when chasing rights. Rights of economically and politically powerful linguistic minorities with a privileged access to public institutions and judicial systems are often well respected. Nevertheless, speakers of a non-dominant language that are only mindful of the preservation of this language often do not expect to obtain equal legal guarantees. The question of language rights and whether languages that have been recognized de facto should be granted de jure rights by legislation needs to be addressed more fruitfully. Rights that states have recognized clearly enough to prohibit any interference with linguistic choices are distinguishable from language rights that states have recognized only vaguely and tend to interpret strictly. The distinction between states' language rights and speakers' language rights has been subject of heavy criticism. The distinction between negative and positive language rights is too crude for some critics. A negative language right to use one's language in a court applies to a state's right not to impede the use of the language but this right does not aim to promote or protect any language or any kind of linguistic identity [5, 6].

Historical Context

Communicating language rights is a prioritising modern phenomenon, a response to society's movement away from a monocentric view. Multilingual societies can be characterised by uneven distributions of language resources. Those with material or cultural resources usually keep the upper-hand in power structure and policy ubiquity. Indeed, there is a burgeoning recognition of the need for bilingual or multilingual approaches. Although it can lead to a resourceful, inclusive, or fairer society, in fact, it can also favour certain languages and thereby resonate with wider social issues or orientations, and interpreting multilinguality continues to be a challenge. A multilingual society has to deal with more than one, and often multiple, spoken languages or signed languages. Types and intensity of language contact and communication vary significantly in multilingual societies. Some may choose to be parallel, some compatible, and others, competing. The formation of a multilingual society is often linked to past or present migration, colonisation, and the communication needs of a new generation. How languages intertwine in a multilingual society turns out to depend on policy decisions and the resulting sociolinguistic isoglosses that vary from regions to regions, and thus communication approaches and narratives cannot be generalised. And yet, as assumptions on the nature of society are worked through the concept of language rights, multilinguality can appear like a changed consciousness, an equivalent of enlightenment or modernity in which language as culture comes to view. It can also be interpreted to reflect and reinforce the ambivalence of society's attitude towards it, which remains keenly felt within a society despite being dwellers of it. Thus some narratives can characterise multilinguality as a problem or even danger. Multilingual societies can also be characterised by the continued use and vision of printed matter even among signed languages, as opposed to the predominance of parochialism in a monocentric approach. The shift of the centre of gravity, through immigration, conquest, or colonisation, to another region also necessitates the emergence and projection of another language or languages [7, 8].

Key Theories in Language Rights

Language rights refer to the legal status of speakers of non-dominant languages, which are not officially recognized. To fully grasp language rights, it's essential to differentiate and clarify their meaning, as terms like linguistic rights and rights of linguistic communities are also used in literature but lack the same acceptance as "language rights." Some view the rights of linguistic communities as the collective

right to use their language, while others see it as a legal approach pertaining to institutions like schools. International documents demonstrate inconsistencies in defining regional or minority languages, often excluding dialects and non-dominant languages due to vague criteria. Furthermore, the terms 'host' and 'all' in human rights instruments can apply to both macroethnic minority languages and smaller non-dominant languages, leading to a lack of specific protections for various speakers. This reflects a discrepancy between language rights considered human rights and those arising from international legal frameworks. A distinction exists between negative and positive language rights. Negative rights prohibit states from discriminating against languages or their speakers, while positive rights require states to actively promote and protect these languages. Although some argue that this distinction is overly simplistic, it helps clarify various issues. The right to an interpreter focuses on enabling effective communication rather than promoting a specific language or linguistic identity [9, 10].

Multilingualism in Society

Language is a phenomenon inherent in bilingual and multilingual situations. When people or groups are socialized, they communicate using one or more codes, which are sounds that become language. A code is a language that the communicator and the communicant share; and this language can be verbal, non-verbal or semi-verbal codes of communication. In this case, one verbal code is as important as the others, for it produces sounds that are symbolically used to create meanings. A bilingual speaker has access to two verbal codes. Two codes are usually spoken, although they can also be of various combinations of a verbal code, a non-verbal code and a semi-verbal code. When two codes are used, there are two domains for verbal codes to operate spoken to face-to-face, or written to written communication, just as telephone (relying on voice, i.e. spoken), and written communication (using letters). An action can repeatedly be expressed at least in two codes. Man fistfuls goods suddenly and waves one hand vigorously towards the direction of the action depicts the meaning of the act, that is, to convey for goods (verbal code) to one direction of movement (non-verbal code). Most linguists agree that speakers have some knowledge of their languages and language behavior that is not easily observable. Speakers have an abstract knowledge of the languages they speak, knowledge that includes not just sounds, words, and sentences, but rules and principles that tie these together. Linguists have called this abstract knowledge of knowledge of language competence. Each language has a set of rules from which sensible sentences are formed, and these rules allow further expansion in one speaker's language. Someone is said to be bi-lingual if the person speaks two languages, regardless of whether he/she knows two or more languages well or badly. Thus there is no precise definition of bilingualism because it is a "phrase of degrees". This varies considerably, ranging from those who learnt only L1 up to the age of five to an expectation of complete proficiency. Multilingualism is generally used in the same sense as 'polyglot', a very rare situation of a person who speaks more than two languages. Many of the world's languages are neither linguistically nor demographically dominated, and it is hardly surprising that nations with more than one official language are common. Even so, as a phenomenon in its own right, multilingualism is less common, less readily understood, and consequently less frequently studied. It has been studied in more limited terms than bilingualism, or more correctly in relation to bilingualism as a further development [11, 12].

Language Rights and Policy

For many speakers, language is more than communication: it connects them with an identity and home. Language rights are specific human rights that confer protection to languages as a form of cultural heritage that must be preserved. Consequently, they refer to the legal situation of speakers of non-dominant languages in general (or of a particular "lesser" or "other" official, national language) or of speakers of languages in multilingual contexts where there is no single language dominant, when languages are in contact and in asymmetrical positions of power and prestige (where one is politically and socially more powerful and prestigious than another). Many people in the world can freely choose the language they want to speak and to whom. For a greater number of people, the language spoken will not be their choice, and consequently, they are subject to a vulnerability affecting their basic, personal and collective prerogatives. A language policy is a curse that a government makes conferred upon some or all of the languages spoken in the territory it presides over. Such policies can be either explicit or implicit, and they can take on a variety of forms. They can be legislative regulations anchored, for instance, in constitutions; they may be provisions in laws and decrees of subordinate rank; executive decisions and administrative measures; treaties and various agreements; or even unspoken rules that govern the use of some language in matters of state or, on the other hand, languages excluded from them. Policies can also take on the "outlaw" form of a politician's hateful discourse. In particular, explicit language policies must lay out measures for the achievement of their objectives in the eyes of the polity (which includes the national segments of political actors). Language choice is an everyday aspect of communication and,

generally speaking, speakers freely invoke the normative rules that will lead to social penalties for defaults. For many, such an everyday aspect has become a painful arena for the display of an intolerant norm. Politically, language is a top priority, losing sight of all else. Public opinion and political discourse have language as a hook to run the politics of hatred. An absence of a linguistic manifestation of power does not confer equality. Such can be the case: a larger gamut of rights for a single dominant language and a repetitive and trivial mention of some "minority" or other languages with no content [13, 14].

Case Studies

Two case studies are presented in this paper. In both cases, immigrant groups form the basis of examination. Their languages are typically voiceless in the host societies. The countries in question have been in civil war or are recently post-civil war, and are politically unstable. Firstly, the Albanian language rights in Greece are examined, comprising a significant case. Greeks and Albanians form the two competing nationalities of the area. The Albanian language is not a new language in Greece, but it has been revived relatively recently in the political domain. Albanian in public life is still controlled, albeit less strictly than before. State policies can only afford institutionalised regulation and planning on a scale larger than L1. Language practice always eludes state control and gains visibility in language rights and resistance from groups. Language rights may be realised in the legal dimension of public life, but they are often transformed and erased through ideologies and privileges in the institutional dimension of language. In general, the crux of language rights in Albanian-Greek relations is the categorisation of the groups involved. If they are seen simply as two languages and two groups of equal historical legitimacy, the Albanian language is a "protected language," and there are corresponding language rights. However, the groups are often regarded as representing two equal nations, making the Albanian language voiceless, as its absence does not denote a language group. Language rights are translated as a language right in this light. The Greek side therefore treats the case as a language right, stipulating rights of use and education. Nevertheless, these remain fruitless in real life. Next, the case of Albanian language rights in Italy is examined, where the Albanian language has been granted institutional equality and geographic distribution. Language rights may indeed represent a Turkish language in the Turkish exchange rate mechanism. The role of such external language resources in realising language rights is elaborated on. Language rights are more likely to be realised in the presence of external reinforcement by a state language. Albanian in the neighbouring Greek language group enjoys far greater esteem and vitality than Albanian in Italy. Neologism and contact-induced change are widespread media of change. Radio and television are not commercialised or state-subsidised in the Messarais region, limiting their influence to the local area. Greece-Albania relations are also explored, addressing the Albanian diaspora and the lesser diffusion of Albanian language television. The language is furthered by native language media and institutions, fostering dignity and promoting identity [15, 16].

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies play an important role in the negotiation of meaning between two co-participants using different languages. While much research has focused on the communication strategies used by L2 learners while communicating with native or proficient L2 speakers, lowly-proficient L2 learners may also negotiate meaning with L2 teachers or peers. Regarding transferring communication strategies from one medium to another, it appears that while translation strategies can be employed independently of modality, use of cues to assist comprehension appears to rely on the modality being employed at the time. Students learning another language often find that they are unable to understand a speaker's utterances, utter the intended communicative meaning or cannot recall how to specify it. Even if a learner allows an utterance to pass by without trying to negotiate meaning or clarify what they mean, there is still an attempt made to "cross the language barrier." Signaling language is identified as a general communication strategy, which adds to the debate between scholars about explicitly signed communication strategies. Both major do not work which deal exclusively with the topic of communication strategies did not focus exclusively on communication strategies, nor did they identify various signed communication strategies. In a new definition of communication strategy, 7 signed CSs are identified. They are: reference strategies, language strategy, situation-related devices, and localization strategy, asking questions, stays and gestures. It is assumed that a learner's prior language learning experience would determine whether communication strategies would be transferred between two different spoken languages in the original-dominated language and in the L1-dominated language [17, 18].

Role of Education

The right to education is one of the cornerstones of human rights. It is a right to individual and social development, a right to participate in society with dignity, and a right to all other rights. Language plays an essential role in education, both as a medium of education and as a subject of instruction. However,

implementation of the right to education entails many linguistic challenges. Societies are evolving and changing, and often ill-equipped to handle the complex challenges of multilingualism. As a result, millions of children are raised in linguistic environments that do not support their language development or education. Quality education in a language known to the child before they start school contributes sensitively to learning and development. However, minority-language children, in particular, are often instructed in a dominant language that they are not proficient in that language, rather than in their home language. This results in a large educational gap. At a minimum, states should commit to language policies which promote inclusion, account for social justice, and ensure access to equivalent services levels. Children from linguistic minorities must also have a right to minority-language media, as linguistic exclusion from media undermines language maintenance. It contributes to wider stigmatization, disempowerment, and collective disenfranchisement. Furthermore, such exclusion leaves groups vulnerable to manipulated narratives of violence and humanitarian crises, and renders them without political representation. Government-monopolized media outlets often ignore the language needs of minorities, remaining only in majority languages. Where media exists in minority languages, it is often illegal, low-quality, and limited to entertainment only. Structural exclusion from media access leads to inter- and intra-group inequalities, and ensures the unaccountability of governments in the context of minority rights violations. Given state neglect of minority-language media, multilingual social media channels and independent platforms operate to provide linguistic inclusion. However, technology was not designed to support community-school relationships, and unregulated comments and hateful, incendiary discourse remain unaddressed [19, 20].

Technology and Language Rights

Advances in technology often drive developments in language rights, impacting communication and access to information. Insufficient technological growth can hinder speakers' freedom to express them, resulting in violations of language rights. This necessitates responses from mechanisms aimed at remedying these violations. Conversely, language rights can motivate the creation of technology for specific languages, influencing technological progress. Since the late 1990s, technology has highlighted the acute endangerment of languages, offering avenues for their preservation while risking a digital divide regarding information access and language transmission. Institutional mechanisms support the representation of less-resourced languages in technology. Efforts to enhance language processing and develop programming tools for historically overlooked languages are expanding, leading to richer multilingual resources. Ensuring security is vital for maintaining multilingualism throughout ongoing research and technology development. Recent decade concerns about accountability and transparency in AI have spurred different ways to explain model decisions, starting in linguistics and expanding to other underrepresented languages. New language rights instruments related to AI promote equity in natural language processing (NLP) for these languages. Ethical and scientific acceptability of NLP can be guided by these instruments, with local users able to demand accountability from stakeholders. However, real-world compliance and adherence remain untested [21, 22].

Future Directions

Exploring language rights involves considering various factors essential for development in multilingual contexts. A deeper understanding of language rights across different territories and their inhabitants, along with their political frameworks, is crucial. In New Zealand, for example, revitalizing a once-dormant language highlights challenges in recognizing and fulfilling language rights within the broader state context. Expanding research to include local as well as state-wide language rights introduces philosophical inquiries, specifically regarding the extent of first nations' territorial or jurisdictional language rights versus merely human rights to use their languages. This research seeks to theorize the dynamic linguistic nature of territories and their social actors, offering insights into how language rights can be articulated and accommodated. Multilingual societies face specific challenges related to territorial arrangements and governance. The changing demographics due to global language contact impact local governance of language rights. In Quebec, for instance, increasing bilingualism and multilingualism contrasts with a significant influx of newcomers from linguistically-homogeneous backgrounds, causing divisions in Montreal exacerbated by language and ethnicity. Understanding this evolving landscape and the diverse linguistic/ethnic groups within it presents a challenge for dialogue on language rights. Effective provisions need support to thrive in contexts where broader language issues are often overlooked. Interest in the communicability of language rights across various modes stems from the growing focus on Arabic script rights, emphasizing the socio-cultural significance of language rights for community members. The ways language rights are interpreted and communicated are essential to ensure they are not missed or misrepresented [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

Communicating language rights in multilingual societies requires a multifaceted approach that extends beyond legal rhetoric into practical realities of education, policy, and social integration. The disparity between de jure rights and de facto experiences of linguistic minorities highlights the challenges in ensuring equitable language practices. Legal systems often offer vague or insufficient recognition of minority languages, while dominant language ideologies continue to influence public institutions, media, and education. Case studies, such as the Albanian experience in Greece and Italy, illustrate how political recognition, public perception, and institutional support interact to either legitimize or marginalize linguistic communities. Communication strategies and inclusive education policies are not supplementary but central to the realization of language rights. For language rights to be truly effective, they must be supported by intentional policies, cross-cultural understanding, and sustained commitment to linguistic diversity as a facet of human dignity. Only then can multilingual societies move toward equitable communication and true cultural pluralism.

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