Speaking Truth to Power: Language, Politics, and Human Rights in a Globalized World

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Abstract

This article investigates linguistic socio-political structures in a globalized world, focusing on the intersections between language policy, ideology, and socio-political disturbances. It examines cases of linguistic suppression in Franco-era Spain and communist China to explore similarities in language policy in authoritarian contexts. A comparison of English and Portuguese lects serves to explore language ideologies within the context of social and cultural hierarchies. This article highlights the complex relationship between legal and social aspects of language discrimination within nation-states and linguistic cultures; it argues that understanding these linguistic socio-political structures can serve not only to better understand a political context, but as a bellwether for minority rights and human rights violations.

Keywords

Language Policy; Language Ideology; Minority Languages; Sociolects; Linguistic Authoritarianism; Human Rights; Franco-Era Spain; Communist China; Colonial Morocco; Human Rights Indicators

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identities. With their complex and manifold aspects, languages have come to represent both micro- and macro-communities made distinct by geographies, personal and communal attributes, and collective experiences. As of 2023, there are 7,168 languages actively spoken worldwide, and this number is rapidly decreasing. Only 23 languages are spoken by the majority of the world's population, and nearly half of all languages are considered endangered.[1] In addition to complex and varied changes on local and international levels leading to language loss, many distinct language varieties—as well as the communities that speak them—have long been subject to suppression and disappearance tactics aimed at maintaining political and cultural hegemony. This article explores the interconnected dynamics between language policy and cultural linguistic standards, along with disruptions to these interactions. Specifically, it examines how these three aspects of language politics interact to inform the experiences of linguistic minorities within specific nation-states, between nations that speak the same language, and on a global scale. Ultimately, this research project seeks to explore the role of language politics as a potential indicator of human rights violations in a world with rapidly changing linguistic and socio-political terrains.

The field of sociolinguistics is based in understanding the interactions between languages, the individuals that speak them, and the social groups those people belong to. Important topics within sociolinguistics range from the more scientific and analytical to the social and cultural. The study of language change and variation, for example, examines the mechanisms behind evolving patterns of language and involves predicting how languages will continue to vary from each other. Meanwhile, the notion of boundary markers includes

[1] "How Many Languages Are There in the World?" Ethnologue (Standard), accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/how-many-languages/.

"the symbolic function of language as a means of group formation."[2] In other words, language can be used as a method of distinguishing one group from another. This happens both on broader, international scales, as well as on smaller, sub- or intra-societal levels. The studies of various particularities and distinctions among and between dialects, accents, languages, and language families has become a central aspect of sociolinguistic studies.

An important challenge within the field of sociolinguistics is that of categorization. While terms such as *language*, *dialect*, and *accent*, have distinct definitions, they carry with them important connotations. States have often opted to refer to certain varieties of languages as *dialects* of the selected national language, rather than as languages in their own right—even in cases when those languages are not mutually intelligible.

As such, I utilize the words *variety* and *lect* as catch-alls, and refrain from using terms such as *dialect* and *accent* in cases where varieties are not mutually intelligible, or where there is a history of minimization of lects using these terms. Each case will begin with a discussion of the relevant linguistic landscape, which will provide not only a socio-linguistic context for the case, but will also demonstrate the complexities in discussing language varieties.

Language politics span states, cultures, formal and informal groups, and periods of time. Given the breadth of the issue, I have carefully selected cases that are both broad in their global reach, and specific in their interaction with language politics. I use a compare-and-contrast approach in order to both examine the broad impact of language politics and to provide a specific and clear example of its different manifestations in our globalized world. Ultimately, this research aims to provide a new framework for understanding the interactions between language, culture, domestic and international policy, and globalization by examining specific cases of language politics in action and understanding the relevance of those cases to a global structure.

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[2] Florian Coulmas, "Introduction," in *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405166256.ch0.

Language Policy and Legal Suppression

Language plays an important role in the defining of groups and acts as a social and cultural marker. Thus, ethnicity and nationality are closely intertwined with language. While the concept of statehood differs from that of nationality in that a state is not inherently defined by a specific language, countless states and governments have attempted to utilize language as a tool for national unification. In language politics on both the national and global levels, the role of the state is of key importance. This section examines the impact of state actors and state policy on linguistic differentiation, interaction, suppression, and discrimination through a focus on two cases: Francisco Franco's Fascist Spain and modern communist China. Despite the varying linguistic geographies and circumstances in these two countries, language policy has played a major role in impacting minority groups, and many policies surrounding language in both countries share strikingly similar features aimed at achieving similar ends. Key to both cases of authoritarianism is the conception of a unified language not only as a feature of a state, but as a necessity for nationhood. Additionally, this section examines what similarities in policies across such different nations may mean in regard to a broader understanding of a nation's political atmosphere and its philosophy and outlook on human rights and minority groups.

Language Policy in Franco's Spain

Spain is home to several major languages. Although Castellano (Castilian Spanish) is the only official language on the national level, there are several other important languages spoken regionally. The largest of these minority languages, Catalá (Catalan), is found predominantly in the northeastern portions of the country, stretching down the Mediterranean coast, and on the Balearic Islands. In the country 's central north, Euskara (Basque) is

commonly spoken, and Galego (Galician) is spoken in Spain's northwestern regions, especially to the north of neighboring Portugal.[3]

Catalá and Galego are Romance languages, with a relatively high degree of lexical similarity to Castellano, meaning both share a degree of mutual intelligibility with the official national language. Additionally, Galego—especially in its southern dialects—shares significant similarity with standard European Portuguese. Euskara, however, has a markedly different standing in the region. As the last remaining language isolate on the European continent, Euskara is not related to Catalá, Galego, Castellano, or any other Romance language. It is unique in its grammar and syntactic structure, as well as its vocabulary, distinguishing it from the rest of the Iberian languages. Today, more than 6 million Spaniards speak Catalá, Galego, or Euskara as their first language, and more than a quarter (26%) of the country's population speaks one of these languages fluently.[4]

Recent Spanish history has seen several significant political turning points. Among the most significant are the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939 and *La Transición*, Spain's transition to democracy in the second half of the 1970s. Between these two political turning points, Spain was under the control of Francisco Franco, a fascist dictator who aligned himself with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. The Francoist period in Spain saw significant efforts aimed towards the creation of a national identity, including the use of language policy and suppression tactics.

In 1931, Article 4 of the Constitution of the Second Republic asserted that:

> Castellano is the official language of the Republic. Every Spaniard has the obligation to know it and the right to use it… Except as provided in special laws, no one may be required to know or use any regional language.[5]

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[3] Goldie Shabad and Richard Gunther, "Language, Nationalism, and Political Conflict in Spain," *Comparative Politics* 14, no. 4 (1982): 443-477, https://doi.org/10.2307/421632.
[4] "Europeans and Their Languages," Publications Office of the EU, accessed April 23, 2025, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f551bd64-8615-4781-9be1-c592217dad83.
[5] Manuel Delgado-Iribarren García-Campero, "Sinopsis Artículo 3 - Constitución Española," *Congreso de los Diputados de España,* https://app.congreso.es/consti/constitucion/indice/sinopsis/sinopsis.jsp?art=3&tipo=2.

This legal approach to local and regional languages, while not expressly outlawing them, began to promote a language hierarchy through a legal framework and served as a precursor to Franco's policy. When Franco's dictatorship rose to power at the end of the decade, he initiated efforts to suppress minority and regional languages:

> In 1938, with his armies already crossing the Segre into Catalonia, he declared that: 'Spain is being reorganized within a broad totalitarian concept… The character of each region will be respected, but without prejudice to national unity, which we desire to be complete, with a single language, [Castellano], and a single personality, the Spanish one.'[6]

For Franco, language played an important role in the imagining of the nation, and of the state *as* a nation. Castellano's implementation as a national language under Franco went beyond the Second Republic's approach in that it began to suppress minority language on both the local and national levels.

During the Francoist era, from 1936 to 1975, the use of non-Castellano languages was severely restricted, both through language policy at the federal level, as well as smaller-scale responses and efforts. In Catalonia, the use of Catalá was outlawed entirely. Beginning in 1939, "absolutely nothing, not even devotional literature, might be printed in [Catalá]."[7] In addition, existing books and literature in Catalá were required to be turned over to the government for pulping, the circulation of all media in languages other than Castellano was made illegal, and all newborns were to be given names in Castellano starting in 1938.[8]

Euskara, Galego, and many other smaller varieties were also banned or heavily restricted. For Basque people, Euskara was central to the political story of Francoist Spain:

> [T]he language issue and the political awareness of the Basques may be seen as inter-linked….The banning of the language [Euskara] under the new Franco regime not only silenced the public cultural life of the Euskadi of the forties and fifties but ensured that the new generation would be unable to speak their language through the

[6] Paul Preston, ed., *Spain in Crisis: The Evolution and Decline of the Franco Régime* (Harvester Press, 1976), 236.
[7] Preston, *Spain in Crisis*, 240.
[8] Marc Pons, "'If You're Spanish, Speak Spanish': How Castilian Became Spain's Dominant Language," ElNacional.CAT, August 18, 2019, https://www.elnacional.cat/en/culture/history-castilian-language-spain_408874_102.html.

> fear of their parents, who obviously spoke nothing but Spanish for the future 'good' of their children.[9]

Language policies had long-lasting effects, impacting not only those who directly interacted with these policies, but future generations cut off by the political fear instilled in minority language speakers. Additionally, educators and teachers found themselves among the various groups impacted by suppressive language policies. Broadly, Spanish universities became an important vehicle for the rise and spread of Spanish nationalism and fascism, as well as the erasure of so-called "non-Spanish" cultures. In Catalonia, studies of the Catalá language and culture were removed from both public and private universities, and the use of the language was banned across the education system.[10] Education across the country was subject to investigation by "purifying committees" that purged many educators nationwide, including *all* teachers in Catalonia—either dismissing them entirely, or sending them to teach in remote corners of the country.[11] Hundreds of teachers were then sent from Castilla, in central Spain, to replace teachers in Catalonia. In the Basque region, universities became a site of conflict and counter-protest, as well as a hotspot for the rise of ETA, a Basque separatist group.

These language suppression policies were not enacted in isolation. By some estimates, the Franco regime was responsible for the murder of up to 400,000 people.[12] These included ideological and political dissidents, as well as journalists, educators, and those deemed to be "separatists" by the regime. More than 190 concentration and labor camps were established across the country.[13] As the centralized authoritarian state came to power, varying degrees of regional autonomy and decentralized governing structures—which had begun to take hold during the Second Republic (1931-1939)—were done away with, as were

[9] Preston, *Spain in Crisis*, 236.
[10] Preston, *Spain in Crisis,* 215.
[11] Preston, *Spain in Crisis*, 239.
[12] "Franco's Spain: History of Western Civilization II," n.d, accessed April 23, 2025, https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory2/chapter/francos-spain/.
[13] "Franco's Spain: History of Western Civilization II."

progressive policies regarding gender, equality, and labor. Language and language policy played a key role in the formation of this totalitarian state, serving as an indication of the regime's approach to state-building, minority rights, and human rights more broadly.

Language Policy in Communist China

Home to nearly a billion and a half people, China is one of the world's most linguistically diverse countries. To the country's north, there is a significant Mongolian-speaking population, as well as speakers of other related Mongolic languages. In the central and southwestern regions, Dbus Gtsang (central Tibetan) is more commonly spoken, as well as the Amdo and Khams dialects. Meanwhile, Turkic Languages such as Uyghur, Kazakh, and Kirghiz run along the western-most regions of the country. Other languages common in bordering countries are spoken in several Chinese regions as well, such as the aforementioned Kazakh and Kirghiz languages, along with Korean and Tajik.[14] In all, China is home to more than three hundred minority languages.

While China is home to a staggering number of non-Chinese languages, the vast majority of people, approximately 92%, speak Chinese, or Hanyu (translated literally as "the language of the Han people"). However, Hanyu cannot be considered one language, but rather a language family, or even an umbrella covering several language families. The northern, eastern, and southwestern languages are referred to collectively as "Mandarin." Within Mandarin, the Beijing dialect, known today as PuTongHua (literally, *the common tongue*), has been selected by the Chinese government as the state's official language. Meanwhile, other languages have long-established histories in the southeastern portions of the country. Languages such as Wu, Min, and Yue—often referred to as dialects rather than

[14] "Turkic Languages," *Britannica*, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Komuz-languages.

bona-fide languages—collectively have hundreds of millions of speakers both in China and around the world.[15]

Many of the languages under the broader umbrella of Hanyu are not mutually intelligible and can be as different from each other as English is from German.[16] As such, the term "Hanyu" becomes somewhat useless when considering the immense variety of languages it encompasses. Given the diversity of languages across China, this section focuses specifically on the impacts of national language policy on the Uyghur population of the Xinjiang province.

Language policy has played a significant role in Chinese governance since 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power. Initial language policies enacted by the CCP were more heavily focused on corpus planning, or modifications in grammar, vocabulary, or writing.[17] Faced with "what were considered urgent problems of illiteracy and lack of popular education," CCP's initial language planning centered on the simplification of Mandarin characters. Additionally, the *Commission for the Reform of the Chinese Written Languag*e, established in 1954, created and approved *PinYin*, a Romanized Chinese script, which Splosky argues "suggests clearly that Chinese language management closely reflects the current political views of the Communist Party."[18] In a rapidly globalizing world, the CCP elected to engage in corpus planning that would allow for more seamless internationalization.

Beyond this corpus planning, the Communist Party moved to incorporate status planning—modifications in the social role of a language[19]—much more heavily in its policies. As early as 1956, the CCP made official the status of northern-dialect Mandarin at

[15] "Under Threat: Cantonese Speakers Worry about Their Language's Future," *DW News*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUELieQeUKM.
[16] "Under Threat."
[17] Heinz Kloss, "Research Possibilities on Group Bilingualism: A Report," (1969), 81, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED037728.pdf.
[18] Bernard Spolsky, "Language Management in the People's Republic of China," *Language* 90, no. 4 (2014): 166, https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2014.0075.
[19] Kloss, "Research Possibilities," 81.

the state level: "Beijing pronunciation is regarded as the standard pronunciation; the northern dialect is the basic dialect; the grammar of modern Chinese vernacular writings is the standard grammar."[20] While this legislation did not necessarily impact the use of other languages and dialects, it elevated the status of PuTongHua above those of every other language spoken within the country. In the same 1956 directive, the government ordered that:

> (a) The Ministry of Education formally instruct elementary, middle, and normal schools to begin to use the standard dialect and to arrange for the training in rotation of their teachers therein; (b) The Army's Political Department organize similar programs in the Army; and (c) Committees be established to promote the common language in all provinces, municipalities, and self-governing areas and its propagation by cultural centers, radio, etc.[21]

Policies such as these aim to promote the use of the national language and point to a marked change in the phrasing used by the CCP in discussing language. The CCP's 2011 statement on language pivots to "heavily promoting and normalizing the national commonly used language and writing system… [and] scientifically protecting every ethnic language and writing system."[22] While the 1949 Constitution seemed to allow for linguistic equality and diversity, the CCP's more recent stance has been markedly different. Rather than allow for the usage, development, and growth of minority languages, the government now seeks to protect languages for "scientific" purposes. The official language is required across media, advertising, goods, and services, as well as within academia. There is little room for the use of minority languages *without* the supplemental use of the official language.

Additionally, language suppression tactics have been enacted even if not expressly formalized through legislation. In its closing clauses, the Language Law requires that:

> Anyone who violates the provisions of this Law and interferes with the learning and use of the common language of others shall be ordered by the relevant administrative department to make corrections within a time limit and a warning shall be given.[23]

[20]Qingsheng Zhou, *Ethnic Minority Languages in China: Policy and Practice (*DeGruyter Brill, 2020), 29, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501511837.
[21] Harriet C. Mills, "Language Reform in China: Some Recent Developments," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 15, no. 4 (1956): 527, https://doi.org/10.2307/2941922 .
[22] Zhou, *Ethnic Minority Languages*, 274.
[23] Zhou, *Ethnic Minority Languages.*

This clause is perhaps the Language Law's most consequential. In its intentional vagueness, the clause leaves much room for interpretation of what a violation of the law or an "interference with the learning and usage of the common language" is, as well as which "relevant administrative department" must respond and what "corrections" may be included.

China's western-most province, the Xinjiang Uyghar Autonomous Region (XUAR) is home to approximately 10 million Uyghur Muslims, most of whom speak the Turkic Uyghur language. Language suppression tactics have played a significant role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of the province. Education in the province is required entirely in PuTongHua, while the Uyghur language may only be taught as a subject within schools. This takes place within the context of the 2001 Language Law and "the universalization of Mandarin Chinese, under the guise of 'bilingual education' that will [purportedly] make graduates more competitive."[24] Additionally, "authorities are sentencing Uyghur Muslim educators who publish textbooks in their native language to life in prison and even death."[25] To speak PuTongHua is to expand one's opportunities, while regional dialects such as Uyghur are—to differing extents—minimized and suppressed.

The CCP's undisputed power in the province has allowed it to enact these language policies, as well as countless additional human rights violations, often in the name of an Islamophobic "war on terror."[26] Testimony of rape and forced sterilization in the region have been deemed "lies and absurd allegations" by the government. Meanwhile, the Communist Party has enacted multiple "antiterrorism" campaigns in Xinjiang, implemented widespread AI-powered surveillance systems, and engaged in mass-detention and "re-education" of both children and adults.[27] At the national level, language policy is often framed as simply placing

[24] Charlie Campbell, "How Beijing Is Redefining What It Means to Be Chinese, from Xinjiang to Inner Mongolia," *Time*, July 12, 2021, https://time.com/6078961/china-ccp-anniversary-identity/.
[25] U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, "Uyghur Educators Face Prison, Death in China," May 4, 2021, https://ge.usembassy.gov/uyghur-educators-face-prison-death-in-china/.
[26] U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, "Uyghur Educators."
[27] Campbell, "How Beijing Is Redefining."

PuTongHua at a higher status, without explicitly impacting local and minority languages. Meanwhile, these policies leave room for broad interpretations and for widespread linguistic suppression. And of course, similar policies have been enacted with varying degrees of severity across the Chinese state.

Comparing Language Policies in Spain and China

In examining language policies of Francoist Spain and communist China, several key similarities emerge. Both states create a strong foundation for suppressive language policies through the promotion of a national language. Notably, the initial declaration of Castellano as Spain's national language, as well as the declaration of PuTongHua as China's both mention the importance of recognizing minority languages. However, they each also emphasize the right of all citizens to use the national language. The use of the word "right" is of importance, as it frames the use of the national language as essential to citizenship in the respective country. Meanwhile, these laws acknowledge the existence of linguistic diversity, but do not offer the *right* to speak them. Through a legal framework, these policies place the selected national language above other regional languages, providing an environment which is conducive to the use of the official language as a precursor to the explicit suppression of other languages.

Additionally, both states utilize education-related policy as a means of impacting language-suppression. In Francoist Spain and communist China, educators are either removed or are required to teach in the national language. The acquisition of languages other than the official state language are at best given second-class status, and at worst are abolished from curricula entirely. To differing extents, the publication and broadcasting of media is restricted to the national language in both cases, and minority populations deem the national language to be inherently more valuable as an economic, educational, or cultural tool

than other languages. In both cases, authoritarian language policies and tactics have been of key importance to the consolidation of power by authoritarian governments, as well as the construction of states that violate the human rights of political dissidents and minority groups.

Since Franco's death in 1975, Spain has transitioned to a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government. In the half-century since this transition began, the country's language policies have changed dramatically. While Castellano is still the only federally official language, Catalá, Galego, and Euskara—among other languages—hold official status in autonomous communities across the country.[28] Transportation signage in the autonomous communities where Euskara, Catalá, and Galego are official is written in these languages in addition to Castellano.[29] In China, totalitarian language policies continue, and have become more severe in recent years.[30]

As policies continue to restrict minority languages in China, and as regional languages begin to flourish in Spain, these changes reflect broader narratives about each country. In Spain, changing language policies indicate broad political shifts towards greater equality between linguistic, social, and ethnic groups in significant contrast to the authoritarianism of the twentieth century. In China, language policies reflect a political landscape which favors a majority ethnic group and aspires for the complete dominance of that ethnic group over others. It reflects an idea of the state not as made up of nations, but *as* a nation in and of itself —with a common politics, culture, and outlook, bound together by a singular language.

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[28] Stephen May, "Language Rights: The "Cinderella" Human Right," *Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 3 (2011): 279, https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2011.596073.
[29] David Lasagabaster, "Language Policy in Spain: The Coexistence of Small and Big Languages," *Uniformity and Diversity in Language Policy: Global Perspectives* (2011): 119, https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847694478-012.
[30] Huizhong Wu, "Students in Inner Mongolia Protest Chinese Language Policy," *AP News,* September 2, 2020, https://apnews.com/general-news-fbec428448572f4789f9b3f711d7e2f8.

Linguistic Culture, Ideology, and Discrimination

What social and cultural systems is linguistic discrimination based on? How does discrimination reflect broader social hierarchies? And to what extent are discriminating groups aware of their linguistic prejudices? This section compares two separate cases. The first is that of varying regional dialects and related linguistic discrimination across the United Kingdom, focused especially on England. This is a case deeply rooted in more than a millennium of development of hierarchical social structures, and one which today is connected intimately within class differentiation. The second case will explore language discrimination between the European and Brazilian varieties of the Portuguese language. This case is more closely related to hierarchies linked to colonization, race, and ethnicity. In each of these cases, the social frameworks and histories involved in discriminatory practices will be explored, as will the levels of awareness of that discrimination in the societies examined.

English Dialects and Sociolects

When playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*—a comedy on British class structures—he noted in its prologue that "it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him."[31] The play follows a phoneticist intent on training a working-class Cockney florist to speak in a more "respectable" dialect in order to be accepted in British high society.[32] Shaw's play is very much representative of a certain linguistic attitude prevalent across the United Kingdom. In a country defined by social and economic hierarchy, language plays a crucial role in social distinction. While English is spoken across today's United Kingdom, English dialects vary significantly from region to region, county to county, and even from town to town.

[31] Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (Longman, 1991).
[32] "Pygmalion," *Britannica,* April 11, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pygmalion-play-by-Shaw.

Of course, languages other than English are also spoken natively in the British Isles. The western regions, including Ireland and Wales, are home to Celtic languages such as Irish and Welsh, respectively.[33] Meanwhile other Celtic languages such as Scottish Gaelic have been spoken in different regions across Britain. The Germanic languages of the region, including Scots (spoken in Scotland) and English, arrived on the British Isles in their earliest forms only 1,500 years ago.[34] This form of English would be unrecognizable today, especially given the significant outside influences which have shaped language over the last millennium and a half and contributed to modern socio-linguistic differences.

In 1066, the Norman invasion upended political, social, and economic life across England. Within five years of the initial invasion, Romance-speaking Normans controlled virtually all of modern-day England. By 1100, their influence had spread to Wales as well.[35] In the wake of the invasion, Norman control "extended to the spiritual and the secular sphere alike, so that the English leaders of the Church as well as the great landowners were ousted to make room for [Norman] Frenchmen."[36] As Anglo-Norman (also referred to as Anglo-French) slowly replaced Anglo-Latin to dominate the political, legal, and religious spheres, the linguistic disparities between the upper and lower echelons of society became increasingly greater. Political changes, such as the taking-over of the religious and legal institutions by the Normans, "made it clear that it was in the interest of the English to have a grasp of French if they wished to participate in the running of their country."[37] However, French education was not available to members of the lower and middle classes, further

[33] John T. Koch, and Antone Minard, eds. *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture,* 2 vols. (ABC-CLIO, 2012).
[34] Albert Baugh, and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 1993), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994634.
[35] Simeon Netchev, "Norman Conquest of Britain, 1066 – 1086," *World History Encyclopedia,* January 17, 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/image/9862/map-of-the-norman-conquest-of-britain-1066---1086/.
[36] William Rothwell, ed., *Anglo-Norman Dictionary,* 2nd ed. (Maney, 2005), https://archive.org/details/anglonormandicti0000unse.
[37] Rothwell, *Anglo-Norman Dictionary.*

stratifying use of the French language between those who could afford to learn it and those who could not.[38]

To this day the English language reflects the class-based linguistic differentiation between Anglo-Norman and Old English of the Medieval period. Modern English words relating to academia, law, and politics are more likely to originate from French—such as *Library, Academy, Court,* and *Constitution*. In the 1500s, even as use of Anglo-Norman became uncommon, the Chancery Standard, the written language used by educated clerks and lawyers, continued a system of language separated along class lines.[39] Meanwhile, the modern English words for meats typically consumed by the wealthy—such as *Beef, Pork,* and *Poultry*—come from French, while the corresponding livestock typically raised by lower working classes—such as *Cow, Pig,* and *Chicken*—come from Germanic roots.[40]

Speaking English in Britain is a crucial element of belonging and is essential to conceptions of citizenship.[41] In 2019, then-contender for prime minister Boris Johnson publicly stated that it was necessary "to feel British – that's the most important thing – and to learn English."[42] However, varieties of English are not all perceived, valued, and accepted equally within the British Context.

One variety in particular—Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as *The King's English*, *BBC English*, and *Oxford English*—has come to be thought of as the English "standard." Merriam Webster defines the term as "standard, pure, or correct English speech or usage."[43] The RP accent originated in "public schools and universities of 19th-century

[38] Rothwell, *Anglo-Norman Dictionary.*
[39] Lesley Milroy, "Britain and the United States: Two Nations Divided by the Same Language (and Different Language Ideologies)" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (2000): 84, https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2000.10.1.56.
[40] "How English Got Frenchified," *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/norman-conquest-new-english-words.
[41] Milroy, "Britain and the United States," 57.
[42] "Johnson Pledges to Make All Immigrants Learn English," *The Guardian,* accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jul/05/johnson-pledges-to-make-all-immigrants-learn-english.
[43] "Definition of King's English," *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/King%27s+English.

Britain," including Oxford and Cambridge.[44] In the aftermath of the Second World War, education became much more accessible and social mobility more feasible for the middle and lower classes. Those who managed to advance educationally and socially "often felt under considerable pressure to conform linguistically and thus adopt the accent of the establishment or at least modify their speech towards RP norms."[45]

While RP is considered the elite and standard accent, other varieties, predominantly those in lower-class industrial cities and towns, have been constructed and perceived as less desirable. As Crowley reveals, the industrial revolution led to a dramatic restructuring of accents as populations moved from rural areas into cities primarily in the British North.[46] It is no coincidence that the accents seen as *least* desirable include Brummie, Scouse, Glaswegean, and Cockney come from industrial hubs—Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow, and London, respectively. To this day, Britons who speak these varieties are discriminated against socially and economically.

A 1997 article in the *London Times* urged: "If you have a Liverpool, Glasgow or Birmingham accent, and you are really keen to get that job, then learn sign language before your interview. Those are the three accents that are seen as 'negative' by some employers." The same article quoted employment consultants stating that "I would advise anyone with a redbrick industrial accent to upgrade… people with a Scouse accent sound whiny and people with Brummie accents sound stupid."[47] A 2013 poll found that 28% of Britons felt discriminated against based on accent, and that the Cockney, Brummie, and Scouse accents were seen as indicating significantly lower intelligence and trustworthiness than other

[44] Kirsty Major, "Can You 'Lose' an Accent? And More Importantly, Why Would You Want To?" *The Guardian*, November 3, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/03/can-you-lose-accent-england-southern.
[45] Jonnie Robinson, "Received Pronunciation," The British Library, 1 April 2007, https://www.bl.uk/british-accents-and-dialects/articles/received-pronunciation.
[46] Tony Crowley, *Standard English and the Politics of Language* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 132, 237, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501935.
[47] Joe Smith, "Employers Admit That They Still Lend an Ear to Accents," *London Times*, January 2, 1997.

accents.[48] Meanwhile, a 2022 study found significant evidence of discrimination against those with Northern accents—especially in the region's urban areas.[49] While Mugglestone argues that accent as an index of class in Britain emerged during—and in the wake of—the Industrial Revolution,[50] the reality is that a British language ideology based in class hierarchies is rooted in centuries of linguistic and cultural history. The English language and its vocabulary, syntax, and varieties have of course changed over the centuries, as has the linguistic landscape of Great Britain. However, the nature of British linguistic differentiation points to widespread perceptions of language being indicative of class and class features.

Portugal and Brazil: Lusophone discrimination

Spoken by nearly 260 million people, Portuguese is among the world's most spoken languages.[51] Originally spoken along the western coast of the Iberian Peninsula, Portuguese, as a result of colonization, is now an official language in nine countries across Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia.[52] There are significant variations in Portuguese—this section will focus specifically on the European and Brazilian varieties of the language. In Portugal, dialects are generally split into southern and northern ones, though there are distinctions within these groups. Brazilian varieties, which are more closely related to the Southern European Portuguese varieties, can also be split into a southern and northern group. Within these groups, however, there are many more regionally specific subgroups.

[48] "28% Feel Accent Discrimination," *ITV News*, September 25, 2013, https://www.itv.com/news/story/2013-09-25/regional-accents-discrimination-friendliest/.
[49] Robert McKenzie, "Implicit and Explicit Language Attitudes and Accent Discrimination in England," *Northumbria University Institute of Humanities*, 2022, https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/languageattitudesengland/.
[50] Lynda Mugglestone, *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford UP, 2003), 185, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199250622.003.0003.
[51] "Portuguese," Ethnologue (Standard), accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.ethnologue.com/language/por/.
[52] "World Portuguese Language Day," UNESCO, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.unesco.org/en/days/portuguese-language.

Additionally, the country is home to a sociolect more closely related to European varieties and more commonly associated with the educated upper class. [53]

The Brazilian language landscape certainly contains languages other than Portuguese. A number of other European languages are also spoken in certain regions, as well as more than 160 indigenous languages.[54] Portuguese, however, is by far the most dominant language, spoken by virtually all people in the country. As Brazilian varieties deviated from European ones, linguists pointed to race and ethnicity as sources of these changes. Brazilian linguist and translator Gladstone Chaves de Melo argued in 1946 that Brazilian Portuguese was being "distorted, or if you like, modified in certain aspects of its morphology and phonetics by the action of the Indians and negros."[55]

These discriminatory views on Brazilian varieties were not new when Melo published his work; they are emblematic of a language ideology based in racial-ethnic hierarchies and discrimination. Following Brazil's independence in 1882, it was a commonly held belief that the newly formed country was semi-civilized. With Europe held up as an aspirational ideal, Brazilians of European descent saw non-white Brazilians as holding back the country economically, socially, and culturally.[56] As O'Neill and Massini-Cagliari note, "Any connection with Europe, especially the linguistic one, was viewed as an aspect of civilization. Thus, the educated Brazilian standard which very closely resembled the European Portuguese standard was a marker of civilization and order, and the speech of the masses was considered as a barbarous aberration and deviation from this linguistic ideal."[57]

[53] "Portuguese Dialects," Wikipedia, accessed April 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_dialects.
[54] "Languages," Povos Indigenas Brasil, accessed April 23, 2025, https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/Languages.
[55] Gladstone Chaves de Melo, *A Língua do Brasil* (AGIR, 1946). See also Serafim da Silva Neto, *Introdução Ao Estudo de Língua Portuguêsa No Brasil* (Departamento de Impr. Nacional, 1950).
[56] Paul O'Neill, and Gladis Massini-Cagliari, "Linguistic Prejudice and Discrimination in Brazilian Portuguese and Beyond," *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 3, no. 1 (2019): 32-62, https://doi.org/10.1558/jld.37344.
[57] O'Neill and Massini-Cagliari, "Linguistic Prejudice," *40*.

Ideas of linguistic purity have continued to permeate beliefs surrounding the Portuguese language in Brazil to this day. The 2011 publication of a book by an NGO aimed at teaching illiterate adults in Brazil caused a national controversy when it indicated that people who choose to use a certain syntactical construction should "be careful because, depending on the situation, you run the risk of being a victim of linguistic prejudice."[58] While the differentiation between varieties in Brazil does touch on class issues and levels of education, these are rooted not only in a history of separation by wealth, but a history of racial capitalism, ethnic prejudice, and racism.

This racialized ideology plays a role in linguistic relationships not only within Brazil, but between Brazil and Portugal as well. In Portugal, language is closely tied to ideas of nationhood and history. Portugal's current border with Spain was demarcated in 1297, making it one of the world's oldest borders.[59] As Arenas discusses, Portugal's current conception of nationhood is defined by *saudade*, or longing. Once defined by its dominance over maritime trade and as a colonial power credited with catalyzing the so-called "age of discovery," Portugal today is a nation whose identity is "linked to the memory and the symbolic space of empire."[60] Within this context, relationships with the Portuguese language are tense in Portugal, especially as Brazil has grown in global influence.

In 2009, the Portuguese Orthographic Agreement—originally signed in 1990 and aimed at standardizing spelling conventions across the Lusophone world—began its implementation in both Brazil and Portugal. Although the agreement would require changes for nearly all Portuguese-speakers worldwide in one form or another, it became a political flashpoint in Portugal. The changes, which took place over the course of several years, were met with multiple public petitions calling for suspension of the agreement for fear that the

[58] O'Neill and Massini-Cagliari, "Linguistic Prejudice," *42.*
[59] Fernando Arenas, *Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 2, https://doi.org/10.1353/lbr.2004.0004.
[60] Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez, "Review of Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 41, no. 1 (2004): 198-200, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/lbr.2004.0004.

reform was a "Brazilianization" of the language.[61] Significant pushback against the bill, which one member of the Portuguese government called "a capitulation to Brazilian interests,"[62] was based largely on fears that the country's linguistic heritage would be lost, destroyed, and made impure.

For Brazilians living in Portugal, linguistic hostility against Brazilian Portuguese varieties impacts day-to-day life. Even highly qualified Brazilian immigrants in Portugal face significant discrimination in employment and social life.[63] The stratification of language within Brazil among the educated elite and the popular, regionally differentiated accents, as well as the contentious linguistic relationship between European and Brazilian Portuguese-speakers indicates a language ideology representative of deep-seated racial hierarchies, structures, and stereotypes within and between both nations.

Examining Sociolinguistic Relationships

In examining British and Lusophone cases of sociolinguistic differentiation and discrimination, images of social structures and hierarchies in both contexts emerge as deeply entrenched both in histories and in modern issues. While language in Britain is primarily differentiated by geography, it is ideologized along class lines. Individuals with regional accents originating in industrial cities are discriminated against on the basis of language and accent, while other varieties are framed as more desirable, especially if they are not associated with the industrial working class.

Meanwhile, the case of Brazil and Portugal, though also tied to class in certain cases, is at its core a racialized language ideology. Portuguese speakers in Portugal see Brazilian

[61] Adrian Lancashire, "Portuguese Language Reform Law Goes Global," *Euronews*, May 14, 2015, https://www.euronews.com/2015/05/14/portuguese-language-reform-law-goes-global.
[62] "Brazil Embraces Spelling Reforms," BBC, January 1, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7807116.stm.
[63] Liv Cichon, "Racial Discrimination in the Portuguese Labor Market: The Case of Brazilian Qualified Workers" (Dissertação de mestrado em Estudos Internacionais, ISCTE Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2019), 26.

varieties as broadly undesirable and view any linguistic changes as a destruction of "pure" Portuguese. In contrast to the British case, people who speak with the elite accents and dialects—in both Brazil and Portugal—seem less aware of their biases against different varieties as discriminatory, instead framing the issue as one of heritage, purity, and conservation. In both cases, however, language ideologies are indicative of deeply rooted social hierarchies, one based historically in class in Britain, and the other based in histories of race and colonization in the Lusophone world.

As such, the cultural elements of language politics play just as significant a role in impacting the experiences of minority and other marginalized groups as language policies do. While language policy reflects political landscapes, images of nations and nationhood, and majority-minority relations—especially in cases of authoritarianism and human rights violations—examination of language ideology serves to understand the cultural roots of those landscapes, images, and relations. It is these cultural roots which inform language policy and reflect important political shifts which serve to potentially harm marginalized groups—both within and outside of the linguistic realm

Orienting Language Politics: Policy and Culture

When countries such as China or Spain enact specific policies limiting the use of regional lects, or when a new ruling power in Britain brings with it a new legal and governmental language, these policies tend to have an impact on culture. [64] There are two key pieces to this influence that this section discusses. The first element is the *duration* of time for which the policy is in place. With enough time, the policy in question can leave a mark on linguistic culture long after it has been formally repealed or replaced.[65] The second

[64] For the case of Britain, I consider the use of Anglo Norman at the ruling level to be policy under the definition of language policy outlined in the introduction.
[65] Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 2012).

element to consider is *stringency*. For policies that are more stringently enforced, the impact on broader culture can be greater as governing bodies pressure individuals to shift their habits and lifestyles to conform with the legislation. Policies that are not stringently enforced but that last for centuries can have just as great an impact on culture as policies that only last for several years or decades but are carried out more coercively.

While policy plays an important role in influencing linguistic culture, culture influences language policy as well. Specifically, policy can, and often is, enacted to reflect the moral or hierarchical standards and socio-political ideologies of those in power. The Chinese and Brazilian cases discussed in the previous sections demonstrate the role of pre-existing cultural beliefs in language policy (both in terms of formal legislation and in the actions and responses of political and social elites). In effect, socio-political ideologies and moral structures in these cases are being legislated by those in power, and the relationship between language policy and linguistic culture is a reciprocal one. Language policy often reflects deeply entrenched socio-political ideologies, and linguistic culture is influenced by policy.

The cycle of policy influencing culture and culture shaping policy can continue until there is a disruption that breaks the cycle and reformats the structures at play. These changes can include inter-linguistic interactions more generally, as well as political turning points. A disruption can be either oriented towards policy, or oriented towards culture. Additionally, it can be internal—at the hands of a minority, opposition, or other group—or external—through colonization, immigration, or an influx of outside ideologies.

Cultural change could take place quickly or evolve over several generations, and may not be apparent until long after the upheaval has taken place. The broad cultural and political changes these disruptions can cause may take a variety of different forms depending on the existing socio-political structures, the type of interference, and velocity. Ultimately, this

confluence of language policy, linguistic culture, and political interference—can be used to understand the relationship between policy within individual contexts as well as globally.

Conclusion

Each case discussed in this article represents a political and linguistic turning point; a moment when socio-linguistic disruption upended an existing cultural and policy status quo. In Spain, the Second Republic and subsequent rise of Franco instituted a cultural and linguistic hierarchy which had an impact on non-Castillians for decades. The transition to democracy brought about a new disruption—one which led to increased language diversity and the growth of minority languages. In China, the ascent of the CCP came with the imposition of specific cultural and moral structures through language policy, which at first placed PuTongHua on a pedestal, and then began to systematically minimize and destroy other languages and lects. In Britain, the arrival of the Normans brought new cultural hierarchies based in class, while the Industrial Revolution constituted a significant formalization of class-based linguistic hierarchies, giving cultural value to certain lects associated with the educated aristocracy, along with the stigmatization of those associated with industrial centers. Finally, the long-lasting effects of Portuguese colonialism have created a cultural hierarchy based not only in class, but in race and ethnicity. However, the economic and cultural rise of Brazil has led to shifts in the corpus planning of the language, though any long-term impacts on the heavily embedded racialized linguistic ideology remain to be seen.

Each of these cases represents the existing status quos in majority-minority relations, the philosophical, historical, and cultural underpinnings of those status quos, and important disruptions which have sought to institute new cultural values and social hierarchies. In cases such as in Francoist Spain and communist China, the state—under new political

circumstances—attempted to institutionalize political and cultural hegemony over minority groups through the promotion of a selected national language, the explicit suppression of minority languages, and the overall linguistic homogenization of the country. While more historically distant, the cases of English and Portuguese serve as situations in which the arrival of a colonial power created cultural, economic, and racial hierarchies that have lasted for centuries both through enforcement as well as simply becoming more culturally embedded with time.

Meanwhile, the Spanish transition to democracy constitutes an important moment of dissent against the homogenizing and hegemonizing state. It is notable that across these cases, which span continents and centuries, similar tactics have been used to institute linguistic authoritarianism, such as through education, linguistic status planning, and the creation of social norms—both via cultural and political approaches. Additionally, hegemonic and suppressive language politics overlap significantly with political and cultural contexts such as authoritarian regimes, ethno-nationalism, and colonialism across these cases. Similarly, shifts to pluralistic and diverse linguistic environments take place alongside shifts towards democracy, increased respect for human rights, and cultural pluralism. Language policies reflect the political landscapes in which they are situated, and linguistic cultures reflect the cultural landscapes in which they are found. Together, language politics provide insights into both political and popular views of society, of nationhood, and of statehood, as well as a view into the relationships between the state and its constituents.

Cultures are dynamic, not only on their own, but as they intersect and interact with each other. The same can be said for our languages. Though they play an important role in defining groups, they are constantly in flux, in contact, and in communication with each other. And in today's globalized world, increased interconnectedness has meant the rise of a global language politics. While ideologies and policies differ across regions and borders, the

rise of English as a global lingua franca in the last two centuries has constituted the creation of a linguistic hierarchy that, to differing extents, exists worldwide. Since the 1980s, the field of sociolinguistics has seen a significant rise in the examination of "Englishization," a term initially used to describe the process of a language adopting English-like characteristics in grammar, syntax, or vocabulary, showing how the increased global connectivity of the last century has led to increased interferences across and between languages.[66] The rise of the internet and social media has only furthered the impacts of those interactions and changes.[67] Additionally, research on Englishization has recently turned to global English language policy. As of 2019 English education is a mandatory component of public education policy in 142 countries, and available as an elective option in 41 additional countries.[68]

English is not the first language to be spoken as a common language across cultures and borders, and it will not be the last. However, English has become a global language for commerce, academia, and communication unlike any other historical case. For the first time in history, careers exist which are only available to English speakers.[69] And globally, English has become "the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" for speakers of different first languages.[70] This confluence of widespread use, linguistic prestige, and policies promoting the use of English constitutes a new, global language politics. This language culture is underpinned by the rise of global capitalism, and desire for integration

[66] Liwei Gao, "The Englishization of Mandarin in Computer-Mediated Communication," *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 11, no. 1 (2005):59, https://repository.upenn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2d5ce293-aa6c-48d9-9092-dad572bb33dc/content.
[67] Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale UP, 2017) offers an important case of the interactions between human rights violations, public protest, and social media—one example of this increasing interconnectivity of local and global interferences to culture and politics.
[68] "Global English Education." University of Winnipeg, accessed April 23, 2025, https://public.tableau.com/shared/W4G7992PN?:embed=y&:showVizHome=no&:host_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublic.tableau.com%2F&:embed_code_version=3&:toolbar=yes&:animate_transition=yes&:display_static_image=no&:display_spinner=no&:display_overlay=yes&:display_count=yes&:loadOrderID=0.
[69] Hanna Chung, "English Linguistic Imperialism in Programming," LinkedIn, July 30, 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/english-linguistic-imperialism-programming-hannah-chung/.
[70] Barbara Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* (Oxford UP, 2013), 7.

with—and competition within—the global economy. Meanwhile, the global English language culture reciprocally informs local, national, corporate, and international language policies.[71]

Since 2005, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has widely discussed the concept of Human Rights Indicators (HRIs). These are quantitative and qualitative measures that can be used to assess the state of human rights violations or progress towards ending those violations.[72] The OHCHR's 2012 guide to HRIs mentions a wide variety of methods for collecting information, determining the status of indicators, and application of findings. However, the guide only briefly mentions access to media broadcasts and to courts in one's local language as important.[73] There is no mention of language policies which seek to minimize the use of local languages or that promote the use of a national language—which are often closely linked to other authoritarian or expressionist policies.

While the suppression of languages itself constitutes a violation of cultural and human rights, examining the underlying socio-linguistic conditions, policies, and disruptions can serve as a critical tool for understanding political ideologies and conceptions of statehood and nationhood. Ultimately, they serve as an indicator of government and popular views on minority groups, their place in society, and their rights within and beyond the nation-state. Language serves as a fundamental aspect of cultural identity and social inclusion, and its suppression or marginalization can have far-reaching implications for individual and group rights. As we consider human rights atrocities in multiple global conflicts and contexts and the rise of the global far-right, an understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and politics is as important as ever.

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[71] As defined in the introduction.
[72] "Human Rights Indicators: A Guide for Measurement and Implementation," United Nations OHCHR, January 1, 2012, 17, https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/policy-and-methodological-publications/human-rights-indicators-guide-measurement-and.
[73] "Human Rights Indicators," United Nations OHCHR, 97-98.

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