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LINGUISTIC DEMOGRAPHY: POPULATION STUDIES

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Abstract.

Linguistic demography is an interdisciplinary domain that investigates how population processes shape the distribution, evolution, and vitality of languages. By combining insights from demography, sociolinguistics, anthropology, and geography, it examines patterns of language growth, decline, migration-driven shifts, and intergenerational transmission. This paper analyses the foundational concepts of linguistic demography, the major methods used to collect and interpret linguistic data, and the global trends influencing linguistic diversity. It also evaluates the increasing challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, and language endangerment. Furthermore, the study highlights the crucial role of linguistic demography in informing public policy, educational planning, migration studies, and cultural preservation. Together, these insights demonstrate the value of linguistic demography as a tool for understanding the dynamic relationship between languages and the populations that sustain them.

Keywords: Linguistic demography, Language distribution, Population studies, Language vitality, Multilingualism, Language shift, Sociolinguistics, Demographic change, Linguistic diversity, Migration and language, Census data, Language endangerment, Cultural sustainability, Language mapping, UNESCO language framework.

1 Introduction

Language is far more than a means of verbal communication; it is a symbolic system through which individuals and communities construct identity, express cultural values, and maintain social relationships. Every language encodes unique worldviews, traditional knowledge, ecological understanding, and historical memory. Thus, the presence, absence, or transformation of a language within a population has deep implications for cultural continuity, social cohesion, and community resilience.

In the contemporary world, demographic forces play a decisive role in shaping linguistic landscapes. Population growth can lead to the expansion of linguistic communities, while declining fertility rates or ageing populations may reduce the speaker base of certain languages. Migration both internal and international introduces new languages into regions, creating multilingual urban centres and linguistic enclaves. Urbanization accelerates language contact, assimilation, and sometimes language shift, as younger generations adapt to socially or economically dominant languages. Globalization further intensifies these processes by elevating the status of certain languages (such as English, Mandarin, or Spanish) and placing pressure on smaller languages with limited functional domains.

Linguistic demography emerged as a specialized field to analyse these complex interactions between languages and population dynamics. It employs demographic data, census statistics, GIS-based linguistic mapping, sociolinguistic surveys, and longitudinal studies to understand how languages are distributed across geographic regions, how speaker populations change over time, and what factors influence language maintenance or decline. By combining quantitative measures (e.g., number of speakers, age distribution, migration patterns) with qualitative sociocultural insights (e.g., prestige, intergenerational transmission, institutional support), linguistic demography offers a holistic framework for understanding linguistic vitality.

The relevance of linguistic demography extends across multiple sectors. Governments rely on linguistic demographic data to design language-based educational policies, official language frameworks, and public communication strategies. Planners and development agencies use linguistic profiles to ensure inclusive governance in multilingual societies. NGOs and cultural organizations depend on linguistic demographic analysis to identify endangered languages and develop community-based revitalization programmes. Scholars in anthropology, sociology, and linguistics study linguistic demography to understand cultural change, identity formation, and the socio-political dynamics of language use.

In a world where linguistic diversity is rapidly declining UNESCO estimates that nearly 40% of the world's languages are endangered linguistic demography plays a critical role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By documenting and analysing the demographic conditions that influence language sustainability, the field contributes to more effective policies aimed at preserving linguistic diversity, promoting equitable development, and strengthening social integration



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in multicultural societies.

Concept and Scope of Linguistic Demography

Linguistic demography is an interdisciplinary field that lies at the intersection of demography, sociolinguistics, anthropology, geography, and population studies. It systematically examines how languages are distributed within societies and how demographic processes influence their growth, decline, and long-term sustainability. The concept of linguistic demography extends beyond simple numerical counts of speakers; it encompasses the social, cultural, political, and spatial dynamics that shape linguistic patterns across time and space.

Concept

The concept of linguistic demography is rooted in the understanding that languages behave much like living systems they grow, evolve, relocate, adapt, and in some cases, become extinct. This dynamic nature of language is directly tied to the demographic behaviour of the populations that speak them. Thus, linguistic demography views language not as a fixed structure but as a *population-dependent phenomenon* whose survival and transformation are governed by demographic processes.

A language continues to exist only when its speaker community maintains active usage and ensures intergenerational transmission. When demographic factors such as declining birth rates, large-scale migration, cultural assimilation, or educational shifts affect a community, they inevitably influence the future of its language. For example, if younger generations migrate to urban centres and adopt dominant metropolitan languages for economic mobility, the mother tongue may experience decline in use and transmission. Similarly, if a community experiences population growth, its linguistic footprint may expand geographically and socially.

Therefore, the concept of linguistic demography incorporates several analytical dimensions:

1. Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis forms the statistical backbone of linguistic demography. It involves:

- **Counting the number of speakers** of a particular language or dialect.
- **Determining linguistic density**, such as the number of languages spoken per square kilometre (useful in hyper-diverse regions).
- **Studying age structures** within linguistic communities, such as the proportion of children versus elderly speakers. A language with mostly elderly speakers is likely endangered.
- **Tracking changes in speaker population** across census years to identify patterns of expansion or shrinkage.

This statistical foundation allows researchers and policymakers to understand the strength, growth, or vulnerability of linguistic groups.

2. Spatial Analysis

Languages are inherently tied to geography. Spatial analysis examines:

- **Where languages are spoken**, using maps and GIS technologies.
- **How languages expand or contract** in specific regions over time.
- **The interaction of linguistic groups**, such as border regions where multilingualism is common.
- **Linguistic hotspots**, where high levels of diversity exist (e.g., Northeast India, Papua New Guinea).

Spatial patterns reveal how environmental, political, or cultural boundaries influence linguistic diversity.

3. Temporal Analysis

Temporal analysis focuses on how languages change over time. It helps answer questions such as:

- How has the number of speakers changed over the past decades?
- When did language shift occur in certain communities?



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- What historical events (colonization, migration, urbanization) triggered linguistic transformations?

This dimension places linguistic data in a chronological framework, allowing researchers to detect trends like language endangerment, revival, or spread.

4. Sociocultural Interpretation

Linguistic demography is incomplete without interpreting the social and cultural forces that shape language behaviour. Key sociocultural factors include:

- **Prestige and status of languages** (e.g., English as a global language of opportunity).
- **Educational policies**, such as medium-of-instruction choices in schools.
- **Employment patterns**, which may encourage use of dominant languages in workplaces.
- **Identity and cultural pride**, which motivate communities to preserve or revive heritage languages.
- **Religion, media, technology, and globalization**, all of which influence linguistic choices.

These factors help explain why certain languages thrive despite having fewer speakers, while others decline even with substantial populations.

Core Principle of the Concept

At its heart, linguistic demography emphasizes that **language vitality is inseparable from the demographic realities of its speakers**. Demographic forces—birth rates, mortality, mobility, literacy, urbanization, and social aspiration—collectively determine whether a language will:

- Remain stable,
- Expand to new regions,
- Evolve into new forms (dialects or creoles),
- Shift toward a dominant language, or
- Become endangered or extinct.

Understanding these demographic dynamics is essential for accurately predicting linguistic futures and for designing effective policies to protect linguistic diversity.

1.1 Scope of Linguistic Demography

The scope of linguistic demography is broad, multidimensional, and deeply interdisciplinary. It encompasses the study of how languages behave within populations and how socio-political, economic, and geographic forces influence their survival, spread, or decline. Because languages reflect both human behaviour and societal structures, the scope of linguistic demography extends into areas such as education, migration studies, cultural preservation, public policy, and technological development.

Below is a detailed exploration of the major domains included within the scope of linguistic demography:

1. Numerical and Statistical Dimensions

This domain focuses on quantitative measurements that form the foundation of linguistic demographic research. It includes:

- **Counting language speakers** according to census data, surveys, and field studies.
- **Measuring linguistic density**, especially in linguistically rich areas (e.g., Northeast India, Sub-Saharan Africa).
- **Age-wise distribution of speakers**, identifying which languages have young, middle-aged, or ageing populations.
- **Calculating growth or decline rates**, comparing language populations across different census years.



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- **Studying bilingualism and multilingualism**, including dominant secondary languages and patterns of language mixing.

These numerical insights help identify languages that are flourishing, stable, declining, or endangered.

2. Spatial and Geographic Dimensions

Languages are inherently shaped by space and geography. The spatial scope of linguistic demography includes:

- **Mapping the geographic distribution of languages** using tools like GIS.
- **Identifying linguistic regions**, dialect zones, and transitional boundaries.
- **Tracking geographic expansion or contraction** of languages due to migration, colonization, or displacement.
- **Examining linguistic enclaves**, such as diasporic communities where minority languages are preserved.
- **Studying linguistic landscapes** public signage, media presence, and usage in public spaces.

Spatial analysis reveals how languages coexist, compete, or displace one another over time.

3. Migration and Population Mobility

Migration is one of the strongest demographic forces influencing language use. The scope includes:

- **Internal migration**, such as rural-to-urban movements that expose speakers to dominant languages.
- **International migration**, creating diasporas that transmit languages across continents (e.g., Hindi in the Gulf, Tamil in Singapore).
- **Refugee movements**, which often cause rapid linguistic assimilation or loss.
- **Language retention vs. assimilation** among migrant children.
- **Formation of new linguistic communities**, including mixed languages (creoles, pidgins).

Migration studies reveal how languages spread, adapt, or weaken in new environments.

4. Language Vitality, Shift, and Endangerment

This is one of the most critical components of linguistic demography. It involves:

- **Assessing intergenerational transmission**, a key indicator of language survival.
- **Evaluating domains of language use**, such as home, school, administration, and media.
- **Identifying endangered languages** using frameworks like UNESCO's Language Vitality Index.
- **Studying language shift**, where communities gradually replace their mother tongue with another language.
- **Understanding language death**, the final stage where no speakers remain.
- **Documenting revival movements**, such as Hebrew, Māori, and several Indian tribal languages.

This domain helps policymakers target languages that need preservation or revitalization efforts.

5. Socio-economic and Political Dimensions

Language choices are strongly influenced by social and political structures. The scope includes:

- **Official language policies and legislation**, such as national language acts.
- **Medium-of-instruction policies in education**, shaping language literacy and usage.



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- **Economic incentives**, where certain languages (English, Mandarin, Hindi) offer upward mobility.
- **Political identity formation**, where linguistic groups negotiate recognition and rights.
- **State vs. minority language dynamics**, which may create linguistic hierarchies.

These dimensions reveal how power relations shape linguistic landscapes.

6. Cultural and Identity Dimensions

Languages are carriers of cultural identity and heritage. The scope includes:

- **Studying language as a marker of ethnic identity**, community cohesion, and social belonging.
- **Understanding cultural loss due to language decline**, including oral traditions, folklore, and indigenous knowledge.
- **Documenting linguistic diversity** as part of intangible cultural heritage.
- **Analysing cultural movements** that promote mother tongues, literature, and traditional practices.

This dimension recognizes linguistic diversity as a form of cultural wealth.

7. Educational and Technological Applications

Modern educational and technological systems rely heavily on linguistic demographic data. The scope includes:

- **Designing school curricula and textbooks** based on regional linguistic profiles.
- **Developing digital tools** such as keyboards, speech recognition systems, and translation software.
- **Creating multi-language platforms** for government services, health communication, and public welfare.
- **Understanding digital language presence**, which influences linguistic survival in the information age.

These applications ensure that languages are represented in modern communication systems.

The scope of linguistic demography extends far beyond counting speakers. It incorporates social, cultural, political, technological, and geographical dimensions that collectively shape how languages function within populations. By analysing these interconnected factors, linguistic demography provides essential insights for developing inclusive language policies, preserving endangered languages, and promoting cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

2 Methods and Data Sources in Linguistic Demography

Studying linguistic demography requires a combination of quantitative, qualitative, spatial, and historical research methods. Because languages are influenced by demographic behaviour, accurate and multi-dimensional data collection is essential. The methods used in linguistic demography draw from demography, sociolinguistics, anthropology, geography, statistics, and digital mapping technologies. This section explains the major methods and data sources used to analyse the distribution, vitality, and demographic patterns of languages.

2.1 Census and National Surveys

Census Data

- National censuses are the most important and widely used data source in linguistic demography.

They provide:



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- Number of speakers for each language and mother tongue
- Age-wise distribution of speakers
- Gender-wise linguistic patterns
- Bilingualism and trilingualism data
- Geographic distribution of linguistic groups
- Urban–rural linguistic variations
- Countries like India conduct highly detailed language-based censuses, which include mother tongues, dialects, and secondary languages.
- National Sample Surveys
- Apart from decennial censuses, periodic sample surveys provide:
 - Language use in home, school, workplace
 - Literacy and educational attainment linked to language
 - Migration histories
 - Urban linguistic patterns
 - Code-switching and multilingual behaviour
- These surveys help track changes between census years.

3.2 Sociolinguistic Field Surveys

Field-based sociolinguistic methods include:

- **Structured interviews** with community members
- **Participant observation** in homes, markets, religious spaces, and schools
- **Audio-video recording** of language use and oral traditions
- **Dialect mapping** to document local variations
- **Intergenerational transmission studies** among families

These methods are essential for:

- Indigenous languages
- Tribal languages
- Endangered languages
- Unwritten and undocumented languages

Field studies capture social dynamics, attitudes, and cultural contexts that numerical data cannot show.

3.3 Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Linguistic Mapping

GIS technology is now a powerful tool in linguistic demography. It helps:

- **Map linguistic territories and distribution patterns**
- **Identify multilingual regions and linguistic borders**
- **Visualize migration flows and spatial expansion or contraction**
- **Overlay linguistic data with population density, topography, or administrative boundaries**

Linguistic mapping allows researchers to identify linguistic hotspots and areas facing demographic or cultural pressure.

3.4 Vitality and Endangerment Assessment Tools

UNESCO's **Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework** is widely used to assess the status of languages.

Key indicators include:

- Intergenerational transmission
- Absolute number of speakers
- Proportion of speakers within total population
- Domains of language use



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- Response to new media and digital platforms
- Government and institutional attitudes
- Availability of teaching and literacy materials

This framework helps classify languages as **safe, vulnerable, endangered, severely endangered, or critically endangered.**

3.5 Historical and Archival Records

Historical linguistic demography uses:

- Colonial records
- Old census reports
- Missionary documents
- Travel writings
- Ethnographic reports
- Early dictionaries and grammars
- Historical maps of linguistic regions

These archives reveal how languages evolved, spread, or underwent shift over centuries.

3.6 Digital Databases and Linguistic Repositories

Modern linguistic demography benefits from global digital platforms such as:

- **Ethnologue** (global language statistics and classification)
- **UNESCO Atlas of World's Languages in Danger**
- **Endangered Languages Project (ELP)**
- **Glottolog** (linguistic genealogies and typology)
- **World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS)**
- **National language corpora and digital archives**

These databases provide standardized information essential for comparative and cross-regional studies.

3.7 Statistical and Analytical Methods

Linguistic demography uses advanced statistical tools, including:

- Time-series analysis of speaker populations
- Predictive modelling to forecast language vitality
- Correlation studies between language use and socio-economic factors
- Spatial clustering and hotspot analysis using GIS
- Lexical and phonological variation studies using computational linguistics

These methods help quantify changes and predict long-term linguistic trends.

The methods and data sources of linguistic demography are diverse and interdisciplinary. By integrating census figures, field surveys, GIS mapping, vitality assessments, archival research, and digital linguistic databases, scholars gain a comprehensive understanding of how languages behave within populations. These methods collectively enable researchers and policymakers to monitor linguistic trends, identify endangered languages, and design effective interventions to preserve linguistic diversity.

4. Global Linguistic Patterns

Global linguistic patterns reveal a complex and uneven distribution of the world's approximately 7,100 languages, shaped by geography, history, migration, population density, and socio-political forces. Some regions such as Papua New Guinea, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia are linguistic hotspots with extraordinary diversity, where hundreds of languages coexist within relatively small geographic spaces. For example, Papua New Guinea alone accounts for over 840 languages due to its mountainous terrain, tribal segmentation, and limited intergroup mobility. In contrast, large parts of Europe, East Asia, and the Americas are dominated by a few major languages due to centuries of political centralization, colonization, and cultural assimilation. Globalization has further accelerated the dominance of high-prestige languages such as English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi, which spread through international migration, digital technology, global trade, and media influence. At the same time, about 40% of the world's languages are endangered, particularly indigenous and minority tongues that lack institutional support, face generational discontinuity, and compete with dominant national or global languages. Urbanization plays a significant role in this shift, as younger populations in cities often adopt majority languages for education and employment, leading to reduced home transmission of ancestral languages. Diaspora communities, however, create new linguistic patterns by maintaining their mother tongues abroad while simultaneously developing hybrid, bilingual, or creolized forms of speech. These global trends illustrate that linguistic diversity is both dynamic and fragile, influenced by demographic



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pressure, socio-economic conditions, political structures, and the global flow of people and information.

5. Linguistic Demography in India

India represents one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world, with its linguistic demography shaped by centuries of migration, cultural evolution, geographic variation, and sociopolitical history. According to the Census of India 2011, the country is home to 22 scheduled languages, 121 major languages, and 1,369 mother tongues, reflecting extraordinary diversity across regions, ethnic groups, and social communities. The Indo-Aryan languages dominate northern and central India, while Dravidian languages are predominant in the south, alongside significant pockets of Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Andamanese languages. This rich distribution is supported by high levels of multilingualism, with a vast majority of Indians able to speak two or more languages due to cultural contact, education, internal migration, and administrative necessity. Patterns of language use vary widely across states: for instance, Hindi has the largest speaker base, while languages like Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati, Kannada, and Odia each have tens of millions of speakers and strong regional identities. At the same time, India also faces serious challenges related to endangered languages, especially among tribal and indigenous communities in the Northeast, Central India, and the Andaman Islands, where reduced intergenerational transmission and shifting socio-economic aspirations threaten linguistic continuity. Urbanization and migration have created new linguistic landscapes in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru, where mixed linguistic communities foster bilingualism but also accelerate shifts toward dominant urban languages. Language politics and policy such as debates around official languages, medium of instruction, and linguistic states further shape India's linguistic demography by influencing education systems, cultural identity, and administrative structures. Overall, India stands as a powerful example of how linguistic diversity interacts with population behaviour, cultural heritage, demographic change, and state policy, making it a critical case study in global linguistic demography.

6. Applications for Linguistic Demography

Linguistic demography has wide-ranging applications across governance, education, cultural preservation, development planning, and technological innovation, making it an essential tool for managing multilingual societies. In governance and public administration, linguistic demographic data helps determine official language policies, allocate resources for minority language communities, design multilingual public communication strategies, and ensure linguistic inclusion in legal, health, and welfare services. In the education sector, linguistic demographic insights guide decisions on medium of instruction, regional curriculum development, teacher training, and the creation of bilingual or multilingual education models that reflect the linguistic composition of local populations. Linguistic demography is equally vital in migration and urban planning, enabling policymakers to understand the linguistic needs of migrant labour, design integration programmes, and facilitate communication between culturally diverse populations in rapidly urbanizing cities. Cultural and heritage institutions rely on linguistic demographic data to identify endangered or vulnerable languages, document oral traditions, and implement revitalization programmes that protect indigenous and minority linguistic identities. In economic and labour markets, linguistic demography supports workforce planning by identifying language skills essential for employment, international trade, tourism, and service industries. Additionally, technological sectors from digital media to artificial intelligence use linguistic demographic data to develop language-specific tools such as speech recognition systems, translation software, keyboards, and regional digital content, ensuring equitable digital access for speakers of both major and minor languages. Overall, the applications of linguistic demography extend far beyond academic research; they play a direct role in shaping inclusive development, social harmony, cultural sustainability, and digital empowerment in multilingual societies.

7. Challenges in Linguistic Demography

Linguistic demography faces numerous challenges arising from methodological, political, social, and technological complexities that make accurate documentation and analysis of language patterns difficult. One major challenge is the under-reporting or misclassification of languages in census data, as many respondents may list dominant languages for social prestige or administrative ease rather than their true mother tongue, leading to inaccurate speaker counts for minority languages. Distinguishing between languages and dialects also poses difficulties, as linguistic boundaries are often fluid, culturally sensitive, and influenced by political recognition rather than purely linguistic criteria. Rapid urbanization and migration further complicate linguistic documentation by creating constantly shifting language ecologies, where speakers frequently adopt or abandon languages in response to economic opportunities, education, and social mobility. Endangered languages, especially those spoken by small tribal or indigenous groups, often lack written scripts, institutional support, or adequate documentation, making field research time-consuming and difficult. Political sensitivities around language identity, such as language-based state formation or official language debates, can influence data collection, policy decisions, and the willingness of communities to accurately report their linguistic identity. Technological gaps, especially in remote or marginalized regions, limit access to digital tools for linguistic mapping and preservation. Additionally, globalizing forces mass media, digital entertainment, and economic integration favour dominant languages, accelerating language shift and further reducing the visibility of minority languages in demographic studies. Together, these challenges highlight the need for more refined methodologies, culturally sensitive approaches,



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stronger institutional support, and advanced technological tools to ensure that linguistic demography accurately reflects the complex and dynamic linguistic realities of modern societies.

8. Conclusion

Linguistic demography plays a vital role in understanding how languages evolve, spread, or decline in relation to demographic processes such as migration, population growth, urbanization, and socio-economic transformation. As languages are deeply intertwined with identity, culture, and social structures, analysing their demographic patterns provides insights into the cultural health and diversity of societies. The global landscape reveals both vibrant multilingualism and alarming rates of language endangerment, driven by globalization, technological dominance, and shifting socio-economic priorities. In countries like India, linguistic demography becomes particularly significant due to the coexistence of major regional languages alongside numerous tribal and minority languages that require careful monitoring and policy intervention. Despite methodological and political challenges, linguistic demography remains an essential discipline for designing inclusive language policies, promoting equitable access to education and governance, and preserving linguistic diversity in an era of rapid change. By integrating quantitative data, spatial analysis, sociocultural insights, and technological tools, linguistic demography not only helps document the present linguistic landscape but also provides a framework for predicting future linguistic trends and safeguarding endangered linguistic heritage. Ultimately, it reinforces the understanding that preserving linguistic diversity is not just a cultural necessity but a fundamental component of sustainable development, social harmony, and human identity.

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