

Are People Groups the Same as Language Groups?

Ideally, "people groups" would be identified according to the type of ministry envisioned. If language-focused ministry is in view then it makes sense to equate people group with language group. Language-focused ministries would include radio / TV / internet evangelistic outreaches, as well as literature distributions, Jesus film showings, and the like.

But for church planting purposes, there are many situations where racial / ethnic / tribal / religious and perhaps other factors need to be taken into account as people groups are identified. Individuals cannot be expected to readily worship together who have a long history of animosity or sense of superiority / inferiority or mutual distrust and so forth.

Consider the Muslim Hui people of China. They speak Mandarin Chinese just as most of the Han do, yet are quite distinct from the Han in culture, and to some degree, in appearance. Not to mention religion. Attempting to incorporate the Hui into a Han Chinese church would likely prove difficult. The Hui require a distinct church planting effort and therefore are classified as a distinct people group.

Consider the many indigenous tribes in North and South America which are rapidly losing their tribal languages and are now speaking the dominant language around them (English, Spanish, Portuguese). Yet their tribal identities continue, to a degree. Church planters need to think in terms of these tribal identities and not assume that merely because most of the individuals now speak English they can be lumped with all other English speakers. A similar thing can be said about the many immigrant communities now living in major cities.

But the main part of the world where language boundaries are inadequate is South Asia. As we understand things, the traditional "communities" of that region are defined not by language spoken, but by societal and government practices that have developed over the generations. The caste system is a big part of that, but isn't the total story. Even outside the formal caste system there is a sense of societal hierarchies that is pervasive. In South Asia, each individual is likely to speak more than one language, and each community (people group) is likely to speak several languages. To attempt to plant churches by language spoken is to ignore the strong barriers resulting from caste and tribal consciousness.

There are [other articles](#) on the Joshua Project website about the situation in South Asia. Especially note the article "[Why Use Caste to Define Peoples?](#)" ("caste" may not be the best term to use, but it's a term that people understand.)

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The above issues are treated in the Joshua Project database by accommodating three categories.

1. A language is spoken by exactly one people group in a country, and this people group speaks only this language.
2. A language is spoken by more than one people group in a country, and these people groups speak only this language.
3. A language is spoken by more than one people group in a country, and these people groups may speak any number of languages.

Category #1 above treats a language group as a people group. 57% of the people groups on the Joshua Project list are of this type.

Category #2 allows for a language group to be subdivided, based on dialect differences or racial / ethnic / other differences. 9% of the people groups on the Joshua Project list are of this type.

Category #3 occurs primarily in South Asia. Language spoken is rather incidental to how the people group is identified. 34% of the people groups on the Joshua Project list are of this type.

The above somewhat over-simplifies the reality on the ground but is useful, nevertheless. After all, the reality on the ground is just too complex to represent exactly in a database.

In summary, in the Joshua Project database, 66% of the people groups on the Joshua Project list are either language groups or subdivisions of language groups. The remaining 34% are mostly the traditional communities of South Asia, and are usually not identified by language(s) spoken. Joshua Project's main purpose is to support church planting, and we trust our method of identifying the world's people groups is consistent with that activity.