The norm that is accepted in the international community is that a state should ideally be made up of a single national/ethnic group speaking a single language. Such notions have their origins in the Europe of the late Middle Ages, following the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire. This ideal of what a state should be has spread across the world in the wake of European expansion and domination and has been universally accepted in spite of the fact that the states that appeared in Europe hardly ever fit the model. For a state to survive, those over whom control is exercised generally have to accept the legitimacy of that state. Its citizens, therefore, have to be presented with a body of ideological justifications for the existence of the state and its authority. One such justification is that the state is the highest expression of a shared national identity.

The claim that this identity exists is based on cultural characteristics that are considered to be common to members of the group but not to others. Where a common national identity does not exist, it is usually suggested that such an identity is in the process of being forged. Another
justification is that within the state there exists a common language that permits communication between all citizens of the state. Where such a common language manifestly does not exist, the governing groups propose that it is emerging and/or being spread as part of the process of nation building. National identity and language identity become linked when, as often happens, one of the cultural features a national group claims to share is a common language.

The notion of “a language” is itself a cultural construct. Speakers of a series of related language varieties may, at a particular point in their history, come to view these speech forms as belonging to a single entity, a language. These speakers begin to perceive this shared language both as a medium of communication among themselves and as a means of distinguishing members of their own group from members of other groups. Several factors may trigger the change in language consciousness that gives rise to the notion that a language exists. One such factor is the appearance of written language.

Purely oral languages do have some disadvantages. Up until the twentieth century, speakers of nonwritten languages could not communicate with each other unless they were within earshot. Writing is a form of technology for representing language that circumvents this difficulty. The reader does not need to be present at the time and place where the writer produced the message. A written language message has as a potential audience anyone who can gain access to the surface on which the written symbols have been marked. In reality, of course, such access is restricted. Only two options exist. One could physically transport oneself to the place where the written message is located. Otherwise, potential readers could have the written language message physically transported to them.

Printing solved the dilemma of restricted access to single written bodies of language messages. It created the possibility of multiple copies of the same language message. Access was not now limited to the original form of the message. The existence of multiple copies increased several times over the size of the potential audience for any written message. With