Language Use in the United States: 2007

American Community Survey Reports

Issued April 2010

ACS-12

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INTRODUCTION

This report provides information on the number and characteristics of people in the United States in 2007 who spoke a language other than English at home. While the vast majority of the population 5 years old and over in the United States spoke only English at home (80 percent), the population speaking a language other than English at home has increased steadily for the last three decades. The number of speakers increased for many non-English languages, but not all. This changing landscape of speakers of non-English languages in the United States is highlighted in this report.

Figure 1.
Reproduction of the Questions on Language From the 2007 American Community Survey

13 **a. Does this person speak a language other than English at home?**

☐ Yes
☐ No → *SKIP to question 14*

b. What is this language?

For example: Korean, Italian, Spanish, Vietnamese

c. How well does this person speak English?

☐ Very well
☐ Well
☐ Not well
☐ Not at all

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Data from the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS) are used to describe the language use of the U.S. population aged 5 and over. Responses to language and English-speaking ability questions that were historically collected once every 10 years in the decennial census are now captured every year in the ACS. As Appendix A (at the end of this report) shows, questions about language have varied greatly over time. Since the 1980 decennial census, however, the same series of three questions has been used in U.S. Census Bureau data collections (see Figure 1). The first question pertains to everyone 5 years old and over. It asks if the person speaks a language other than English at home. A person who responds "yes" to this question is then asked to report the language. The Census Bureau codes these responses into 381 detailed languages. The third question asks "how well" that person speaks English, with answer categories of "very well," "well," "not well," and "not at all."

Data on speakers of languages other than English and on their English-speaking ability provide more than

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Table 1.

Population 5 Years and Older Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home by Language Group and English-Speaking Ability: 2007

(For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Characteristic	Total people	English-speaking ability			
		Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
NUMBER					
Population 5 years and older	**280,950,438**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**
Spoke only English at home	225,505,953	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
Spoke a language other than English at home	55,444,485	30,975,474	10,962,722	9,011,298	4,494,991
Spoke a language other than English at home	**55,444,485**	**30,975,474**	**10,962,722**	**9,011,298**	**4,494,991**
Spanish or Spanish Creole	34,547,077	18,179,530	6,322,170	6,344,110	3,701,267
Other Indo-European languages	10,320,730	6,936,808	2,018,148	1,072,025	293,749
Asian and Pacific Island languages	8,316,426	4,274,794	2,176,180	1,412,264	453,188
Other languages	2,260,252	1,584,342	446,224	182,899	46,787
PERCENT					
Population 5 years and older	**100.0**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**
Spoke only English at home	80.3	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
Spoke a language other than English at home	19.7	55.9	19.8	16.3	8.1
Spoke a language other than English at home	**100.0**	**55.9**	**19.8**	**16.3**	**8.1**
Spanish or Spanish Creole	62.3	52.6	18.3	18.4	10.7
Other Indo-European languages	18.6	67.2	19.6	10.4	2.8
Asian and Pacific Island languages	15.0	51.4	26.2	17.0	5.4
Other languages	4.1	70.1	19.7	8.1	2.1

(X) Not applicable.

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table 1 at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>. For more information on the ACS, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Four Major Language Groups

Spanish includes Spanish, Spanish Creole, and Ladino.

Other Indo-European languages include most languages of Europe and the Indic languages of India. These include the Germanic languages, such as German, Yiddish, and Dutch; the Scandinavian languages, such as Swedish and Norwegian; the Romance languages, such as French, Italian, and Portuguese; the Slavic languages, such as Russian, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian; the Indic languages, such as Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Urdu; Celtic languages; Greek; Baltic languages; and Iranian languages.

Asian and Pacific Island languages include Chinese; Korean; Japanese; Vietnamese; Hmong; Khmer; Lao; Thai; Tagalog or Pilipino; the Dravidian languages of India, such as Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam; and other languages of Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippine, Polynesian, and Micronesian languages.

All Other languages include Uralic languages, such as Hungarian; the Semitic languages, such as Arabic and Hebrew; languages of Africa; native North American languages, including the American Indian and Alaska native languages; and indigenous languages of Central and South America.

just an interesting portrait of a changing nation. Routinely, these data are used in a wide variety of legislative, policy, and research applications. Legal, financial, and marketing decisions regarding language-based issues all rely on information that begins with data on non-English language use and English-speaking ability.[1]

Table 1 provides some basic information from the 2007 ACS about speakers of non-English languages and their English-speaking ability. Of 281.0 million people aged 5 and over, 55.4 million people (20 percent of this population) spoke a language other than English at home. While the Census Bureau codes 381 detailed languages, data tabulations are not generally available for all of these detailed groups. Instead, the Census Bureau collapses languages into smaller sets of "language groups." The simplest collapse uses four major groups: Spanish; Other Indo-European languages; Asian and Pacific Island languages; and All Other languages. These four groups are further explained in the text box.

Of the 55.4 million people who spoke a language other than English at home, 62 percent spoke Spanish (34.5 million speakers), 19 percent spoke an Other Indo-European language (10.3 million speakers), 15 percent spoke an Asian and Pacific Island language (8.3 million speakers), and 4 percent spoke an Other language (2.3 million speakers). The majority of speakers across all four of these major language groups reported speaking English "very well." The percentage of these groups reporting an English-speaking ability of "very well" ranged from around 50 percent of Asian and Pacific Island language speakers to 70 percent of speakers in the Other language group.

People speaking at a level below the "very well" category are thought to need English assistance in some situations.[2] Around 24.5 million people reported their English-speaking ability as something below "very well" (that is, "well," "not well," or "not at all"). Higher percentages of people needing English assistance were present for speakers of Spanish (47 percent) and Asian and Pacific Island languages (49 percent) than among Other Indo-European languages (33 percent) or Other languages (30 percent).

FINDINGS

Characteristics of People Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home

While the majority of people spoke only English at home, important differences exist across some social characteristics. Figures 2a to 2c show the number of people speaking a language other than English at home for the four major language groups by English-speaking ability by age, nativity, and educational attainment. Figure 2a shows that the group aged 41 to 64 had the largest number of English-only speakers (78.3 million), compared to 42.3 million speakers aged 5 to 17, 72.4 million speakers aged 18 to 40, and 32.6 million speakers aged 65 and over. Conversely, foreign-language speakers numbered 10.9 million (21 percent) among 5 to 17 year olds, 23.1 million (24 percent) among 18 to 40 year olds, 16.1 million (17 percent) among 41 to 64 year olds, and 5.3 million (14 percent) among older people.

Across the four major language groups, a disproportionately large number and proportion of all people who spoke a language other than English at home were those aged 18 to 40 who spoke Spanish. Among all 55.4 million speakers of non-English languages, 15.3 million (28 percent) met this description.

About half of speakers of non-English languages also reported that they did not speak English "very well." The proportion of older Spanish speakers who reported lower levels of English-speaking ability, however, was even higher—57 percent of people 41 to 64 years old and 65 percent of Spanish speakers 65 years old and over reported their English-speaking ability as less than "very well."

Figure 2b focuses on the native-born and foreign-born status of individuals. This figure shows that among Spanish speakers, nearly as many were native born as foreign born (17.0 million compared to 17.5 million). This is not the case for the other three language groups—all three had more foreign born.

Spanish speakers who were foreign born were more likely to speak English less than "very well" than native-born Spanish speakers (73 percent compared to 21 percent). Among the remaining three groups, the foreign-born Asian and Pacific Island language group was the only one where those speaking English less than "very well" outnumbered those speaking "very well."

Of those speakers of a non-English language who were foreign-born, 12.6 million were citizens and 19.3 million were noncitizens.

[1] Self-reported data on English-speaking ability have demonstrated the measure to be highly reliable and usable. See "How Good Is How Well? An Examination of the Census English-Speaking Ability Question," <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/lang_use.html>.

[2] For example, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 uses these criteria to determine the need for bilingual election materials.

Figure 2a.

Major Language Groups and English-Speaking Ability by Age: 2007

(Population 5 years and older, in millions. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Figure 2b.

Major Language Groups and English-Speaking Ability by Nativity and Citizenship: 2007

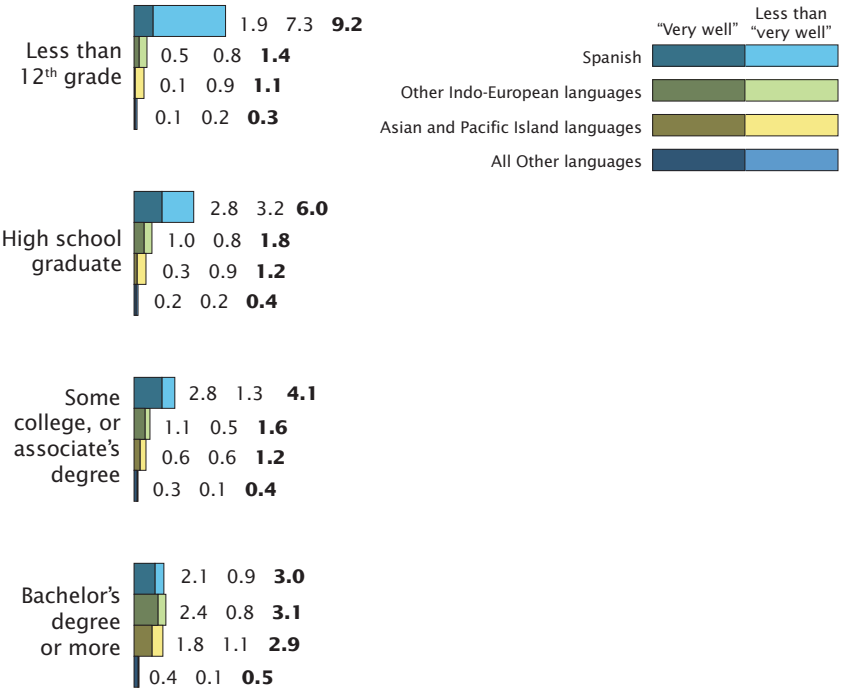
(Population 5 years and older, in millions. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Figure 2c.

Major Language Groups and English-Speaking Ability by Educational Attainment: 2007

(Population 25 years and older, in millions. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Foreign-born Spanish speakers were more likely to be noncitizens than any of the three other groups (72 percent compared to 46 percent of Other Indo-European speakers, 45 percent of Asian and Pacific Island speakers, and 51 percent of All Other speakers). In addition, a much larger number and proportion of foreign-born Spanish speakers who were not citizens reported speaking English less than "very well" (79 percent), more than any other language group, whether citizen or not.

Figure 2c shows the four major language groups and the English-speaking ability of their members by four levels of educational attainment for the population 25 years old and over: less than a 12th grade education, high school graduate, some college experience, and a bachelor's degree or more. Most Spanish speakers 25 years old and over had not completed high school (41 percent)—a larger percentage than for the other three major language groups (15 percent for Other Indo-European language and 17 percent for both Asian and Pacific Island language speakers and for Other language speakers). Conversely, while the college completion level (bachelor's degree or more) for the three non-Spanish language groups ranged from 34 to 45 percent, only 14 percent of the Spanish-speaking population attained this level of education.

For all four language groups, those who had not completed high school had larger proportions of speakers with limited English-speaking ability than for those who reported speaking English "very well." In addition, individuals who were high school graduates and also spoke Asian and Pacific Island languages had a higher proportion speaking English less than "very well."[3]

Languages Spoken in the United States: A Historical Look

As Appendix A shows, census questions about language have varied over the years. In some censuses, questions were asked of "mother tongue" (the language spoken in the household when the respondent was growing up) or were asked only of the foreign-born population. Since the 1980 census, however, the same three questions have been asked of everyone aged 5 and over in the household.

Table 2 provides a detailed list of 17 different languages spoken in the home for the period 1980 to 2007.[4] This list provides data for only those languages that were available in all four time periods.

Table 2 shows the growth of some languages since 1980 as well as the real and relative decline of others. In 1980, 23.1 million

[3] For people 25 years old and over who were not high school graduates, those who spoke Other Indo-European languages "very well" (38.9 percent) was not statistically different from those who spoke All Other languages "very well" (37.6 percent). Reciprocally, those who spoke less than "very well" for both languages were not statistically different from each other (61.1 percent and 62.4 percent, respectively).

[4] Data from 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from decennial censuses, whereas the data from 2007 come from the 2007 American Community Survey. For more information about language use and English-speaking ability differences between the census and the American Community Survey, read "Comparison of the Estimates on Language Use and English-Speaking Ability from the ACS, the C2SS, and Census 2000 (Report)." This report can be accessed at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/Language_Comparison_Report_2008-03.doc>. Corresponding tables are accessible at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/Language_Comparison_Tables_2008-03.xls>.

Table 2.

Languages Spoken at Home: 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2007

(For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Characteristic	1980	1990	2000	2007	Percentage change 1980–2007
Population 5 years and older	**210,247,455**	**230,445,777**	**262,375,152**	**280,950,438**	**33.6**
Spoke only English at home	187,187,415	198,600,798	215,423,557	225,505,953	20.5
Spoke a language other than English at home[1]	23,060,040	31,844,979	46,951,595	55,444,485	140.4
Spoke a language other than English at home[2]	**23,060,040**	**31,844,979**	**46,951,595**	**55,444,485**	**140.4**
Spanish or Spanish Creole	11,116,194	17,345,064	28,101,052	34,547,077	210.8
French (incl. Patois, Cajun, Creole)	1,550,751	1,930,404	2,097,206	1,984,824	28.0
Italian	1,618,344	1,308,648	1,008,370	798,801	–50.6
Portuguese or Portuguese Creole	351,875	430,610	564,630	687,126	95.3
German	1,586,593	1,547,987	1,383,442	1,104,354	–30.4
Yiddish	315,953	213,064	178,945	158,991	–49.7
Greek	401,443	388,260	365,436	329,825	–17.8
Russian	173,226	241,798	706,242	851,174	391.4
Polish	820,647	723,483	667,414	638,059	–22.2
Serbo-Croatian	150,255	70,964	233,865	276,550	84.1
Armenian	100,634	149,694	202,708	221,865	120.5
Persian	106,992	201,865	312,085	349,686	226.8
Chinese	630,806	1,319,462	2,022,143	2,464,572	290.7
Japanese	336,318	427,657	477,997	458,717	36.4
Korean	266,280	626,478	894,063	1,062,337	299.0
Vietnamese	197,588	507,069	1,009,627	1,207,004	510.9
Tagalog	474,150	843,251	1,224,241	1,480,429	212.2

[1] The languages highlighted in this table are the languages for which data were available for the four time periods: 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2007.

[2] The total does not match the sum of the 17 languages listed in this table because the total includes all the other languages that are not highlighted here.

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table 2 at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>. For more information on the ACS, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 and 1990 Census, Census 2000, and 2007 American Community Survey.

people spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 55.4 million people in 2007 (a 140 percent increase, during which the U.S. population grew 34 percent). The largest numeric increase was for Spanish speakers (23.4 million more in 2007 than in 1980). Vietnamese speakers had the largest percentage increase (511 percent). Eight languages more than doubled during the period, including four that had fewer than 200,000 speakers in 1980: Russian, Persian, Armenian, and Vietnamese.

Some languages declined since 1980. Italian, the second-most frequently spoken non-English language in 1980 (after Spanish), had a net decline of about 800,000 speakers (50 percent decline). It is now the ninth-ranked language on the list of languages other than English spoken at home. Other languages, such as Polish, Yiddish, and Greek, also had large proportionate decreases. While increased immigration led to gains for some language groups, other groups experienced aging populations and dwindling migrant flows into the United States.

Languages Spoken in the United States

Most of the detailed language information the Census Bureau provides uses a list of 39 individual languages and language groups. These 39 languages and the respective English-speaking ability of their speakers are detailed in Table 3. In 2007, seven of these languages had more than a million speakers. With 34.5 million speakers, Spanish was by far the most commonly spoken non-English language. Chinese was the only other detailed language with at least 2 million speakers. Even at this detailed level, however, there were still five other specific languages with over a million speakers: French, Tagalog, Vietnamese, German, and Korean.

The English-speaking ability of the speakers of these specific language groups varied greatly; in some cases, certain groups reported speakers with higher levels of English-speaking ability, while other groups had speakers who were less adept with English. Some groups,

Table 3.

Detailed Languages Spoken at Home by English-Speaking Ability for the Population 5 Years and Older: 2007

(For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Characteristic	Number of speakers	Percentage of speakers of a non-English language	English-speaking ability			
			Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
Population 5 years and older	**280,950,438**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**	**(X)**
Spoke only English at home	225,505,953	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)	(X)
Spoke a language other than English at home	55,444,485	100.0	55.9	19.8	16.3	8.1
Spoke a language other than English at home	**55,444,485**	**100.0**	**55.9**	**19.8**	**16.3**	**8.1**
Spanish or Spanish Creole	**34,547,077**	**62.3**	**52.6**	**18.3**	**18.4**	**10.7**
Other Indo-European languages	**10,320,730**	**18.6**	**67.2**	**19.6**	**10.4**	**2.8**
French	1,355,805	2.5	78.2	14.5	6.8	0.4
French Creole	629,019	1.1	56.7	24.3	14.8	4.3
Italian	798,801	1.4	71.8	17.2	9.6	1.4
Portuguese	687,126	1.2	56.6	22.0	14.9	6.4
German	1,104,354	2.0	82.8	12.6	4.4	0.3
Yiddish	158,991	0.3	70.3	18.3	9.5	1.9
Other West Germanic languages	270,178	0.5	76.2	19.7	3.4	0.7
Scandinavian languages	134,925	0.2	86.4	11.3	2.2	0.1
Greek	329,825	0.6	73.0	16.5	9.6	1.0
Russian	851,174	1.5	49.8	25.2	18.2	6.7
Polish	638,059	1.2	56.8	24.0	15.2	4.1
Serbo-Croatian	276,550	0.5	58.4	24.4	14.3	2.9
Other Slavic languages	312,109	0.6	61.6	23.0	12.5	2.9
Armenian	221,865	0.4	55.1	21.7	14.9	8.2
Persian	349,686	0.6	61.7	22.6	12.4	3.3
Gujarati	287,367	0.5	64.1	21.5	10.6	3.9
Hindi	532,911	1.0	79.6	15.3	4.0	1.1
Urdu	344,942	0.6	70.1	19.1	8.3	2.4
Other Indic languages	616,147	1.1	61.4	24.4	10.2	4.0
Other Indo-European languages	420,896	0.8	62.5	22.9	11.5	3.2
Asian and Pacific Island languages	**8,325,886**	**15.0**	**51.4**	**26.2**	**17.0**	**5.4**
Chinese	2,464,572	4.5	44.4	25.7	19.6	10.3
Japanese	458,717	0.8	53.8	29.1	15.7	1.4
Korean	1,062,337	1.9	41.8	29.3	24.2	4.7
Mon-Khmer, Cambodian	185,056	0.3	46.3	25.6	21.4	6.7
Hmong	181,069	0.3	52.9	24.1	15.5	7.4
Thai	144,405	0.3	48.4	34.8	14.7	2.1
Laotian	149,045	0.3	51.1	23.5	19.9	5.4
Vietnamese	1,207,004	2.2	39.3	29.0	25.2	6.5
Other Asian languages	634,608	1.1	70.1	20.2	7.5	2.2
Tagalog	1,480,429	2.7	69.0	23.8	6.5	0.6
Other Pacific Island languages	358,644	0.7	63.1	26.0	10.0	0.8
Other languages	**2,250,792**	**4.1**	**70.1**	**19.7**	**8.1**	**2.1**
Navajo	170,717	0.3	75.3	14.4	7.3	2.9
Other Native American languages	200,560	0.4	86.4	10.0	3.2	0.4
Hungarian	91,297	0.2	71.6	20.0	7.3	1.0
Arabic	767,319	1.4	66.2	22.1	9.7	2.0
Hebrew	213,576	0.4	81.6	14.7	3.1	0.5
African languages	699,518	1.3	66.2	22.6	8.8	2.3
All other languages	107,805	0.2	62.3	19.0	11.6	7.0

(X) Not applicable.

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table 3B at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>. For more information on the ACS, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

such as Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese, showed higher proportions of those speaking English less than "very well" while other languages, such as French, German, Scandinavian, and Hebrew, reported higher than average levels of speaking English "very well."

As the number of languages spoken rises and falls over time, to some degree these patterns reflect historical immigration and settlement patterns, along with other unique situations. For example, English is routinely taught in Scandinavian schools, and many speakers of Native American languages were born and raised in the United States and have routinely interacted with English their entire lives. Nevertheless, Table 3 demonstrates that English-speaking ability varied widely across different language communities.

Language Concentration in States

Languages spoken at home are not evenly distributed throughout the nation. Some areas have high percentages of speakers of non-English languages, while others have lower levels. Table 4 shows the proportion of people who spoke a language other than English at home across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as the English-speaking ability levels in those states.

As can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 3, the percentage of people who spoke a language other than English at home varied substantially across states; just 2 percent of West Virginians 5 years old and over reported speaking a language other than English at home, while 43 percent of people in California reported the same. Moreover, Figure 3 shows that relatively high levels of other language speakers were common in the Southwest and in the larger immigrant gateway states of the East, such as New York, New Jersey, and Florida. With the exception of Illinois, relatively lower levels of foreign-language speakers prevail in most of the Midwest and in the South.

Similarly, levels of English-speaking ability were also different across states. Figure 4 shows the percentage of foreign-language speakers who reported their English-speaking ability was less than "very well." In Montana, a relatively small percentage of foreign-language speakers (19 percent) reported having difficulty speaking English. In Arkansas, however, about half of all people speaking another language at home (51 percent) reported they had trouble with English.

Quite often, concentrations of specific language groups were found in certain areas of the country. In the short term, the factors creating these concentrations include points of entry into the United States and family connections facilitating chain migration (Palloni, et al. 2003).[5] In the longer term, internal migration streams, employment opportunities, and other family situations help to facilitate the diffusion of language groups within the country.

Figures 5a to 5h are a series of maps that show the geographic distribution of the most commonly spoken languages in the United States.[6] These maps show the percentage of people 5 years old and over in each state who spoke Spanish, French, German, Slavic languages, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.[7] The intervals shown on each map are determined by dividing the range of values for each language into four equal intervals.

For Spanish speakers, three states (Texas, California, and New Mexico)[8] were in the highest interval, but the southwest corridor of the United States also had a sizable percentage of the population speaking Spanish (see Figure 5a). Louisiana and Maine had the highest percentage of French speakers, but Florida and many states in the Northeast had a substantial percentage as well. The presence of French Creole speakers in Louisiana and of Haitian Creole speakers in Florida contributed to the higher levels of French speakers in these states (see Figure 5b).

Figure 5c shows German speakers spanning the Canadian border of the United States, with the highest percentages in the Dakotas.[9] Pennsylvania had a sizable number of speakers of Pennsylvania Dutch, which is a West Germanic language. Indiana, with a relatively large number of people of German ancestry, also had a high percentage of German speakers.[10] Slavic languages, which include Russian, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian, had the highest percentage of speakers in Illinois, New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.[11] A substantial level of Slavic

[5] Palloni, A.; D.S. Massey; M. Ceballos; K. Espinosa; and M. Spittel. 2001. "Social Capital and International Migration: A Test Using Information on Family Networks." *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 5: 1262–1298.

[6] Figures 5a to 5h illustrate the proportions of these languages by state, but many of the percentage of speakers in each state are relatively small comparable to the total population of the state. The percentages for these maps can be found in Appendix Table A at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>.

[7] French includes French Creole; German includes other West Germanic languages; and Slavic languages include Russian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, and other Slavic languages.

[8] The percentage of Spanish speakers living in California (28.5 percent) was not statistically different from the percentage of Spanish speakers living in New Mexico (28.2 percent).

[9] The percentages of German speakers living in North Dakota (1.8 percent) and in South Dakota (1.5 percent) were not statistically different from each other.

[10] For more information on ancestry, visit the Ancestry Web site at <www.census.gov/population/www/ancestry/index.html>.

[11] The percentage of Slavic speakers living in New Jersey (1.8 percent) was not statistically different from the percentage of Slavic speakers living in Connecticut (1.7 percent).

Table 4.

Population 5 Years and Older Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home by English-Speaking Ability by State: 2007

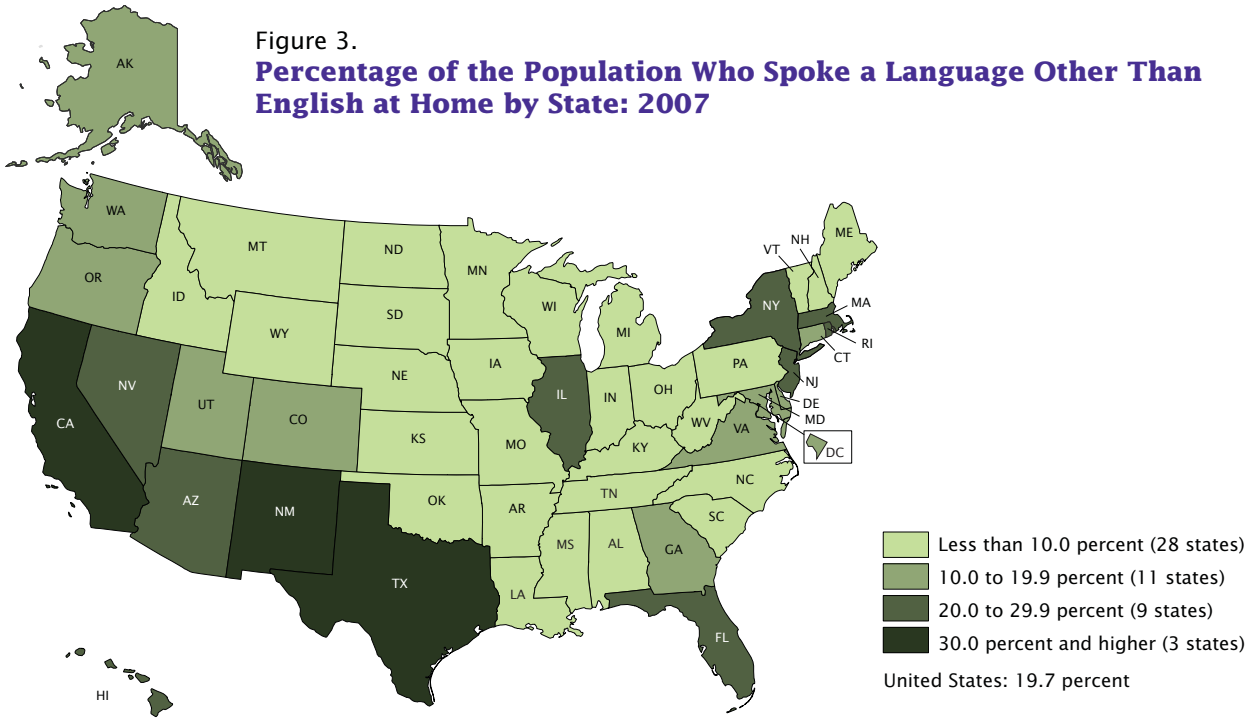
(For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

State	Population 5 years and older	Spoke a language other than English at home	Percent who spoke a language other than English at home	English-speaking ability			
				Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
United States	**280,950,438**	**55,444,485**	**19.7**	**55.9**	**19.8**	**16.3**	**8.1**
Alabama	4,318,848	183,831	4.3	53.6	16.6	20.4	9.3
Alaska	632,806	100,508	15.9	60.6	25.7	11.7	2.0
Arizona	5,839,788	1,662,549	28.5	55.8	17.7	15.5	11.0
Arkansas	2,637,847	167,962	6.4	48.8	21.2	20.7	9.2
California	33,891,325	14,441,651	42.6	53.2	19.8	17.2	9.8
Colorado	4,512,195	755,749	16.7	55.3	19.0	17.9	7.8
Connecticut	3,290,325	639,586	19.4	60.5	21.0	13.7	4.8
Delaware	805,602	96,929	12.0	62.7	17.6	15.5	4.3
District of Columbia	551,980	80,195	14.5	68.6	15.8	11.4	4.2
Florida	17,105,241	4,465,787	26.1	54.1	19.8	16.5	9.5
Georgia	8,818,349	1,056,615	12.0	51.9	21.1	18.9	8.1
Hawaii	1,195,661	305,212	25.5	57.1	25.8	14.7	2.3
Idaho	1,382,539	135,893	9.8	59.5	17.5	17.0	6.0
Illinois	11,961,769	2,603,244	21.8	54.8	21.5	17.1	6.6
Indiana	5,903,675	437,434	7.4	60.0	19.9	14.5	5.6
Iowa	2,790,906	183,743	6.6	59.8	19.9	15.4	5.0
Kansas	2,580,638	256,109	9.9	56.1	18.6	18.1	7.2
Kentucky	3,963,318	164,024	4.1	55.3	21.1	18.4	5.1
Louisiana	3,996,750	328,041	8.2	68.2	17.4	10.9	3.5
Maine	1,247,427	92,291	7.4	74.8	16.5	7.3	1.4
Maryland	5,243,703	775,267	14.8	59.5	21.1	14.6	4.9
Massachusetts	6,072,036	1,228,856	20.2	57.3	21.5	14.5	6.7
Michigan	9,435,733	850,865	9.0	62.0	19.9	13.6	4.5
Minnesota	4,844,316	464,630	9.6	58.2	20.9	15.3	5.7
Mississippi	2,705,640	91,779	3.4	59.0	16.0	15.8	9.2
Missouri	5,484,696	316,838	5.8	61.0	20.2	14.1	4.7
Montana	898,614	37,055	4.1	80.9	12.6	5.4	1.0
Nebraska	1,645,880	148,297	9.0	57.0	19.8	15.6	7.6
Nevada	2,371,632	650,338	27.4	52.9	23.0	16.6	7.5
New Hampshire	1,240,806	98,008	7.9	69.8	18.5	10.7	1.0
New Jersey	8,130,371	2,262,008	27.8	58.2	20.5	15.5	5.8
New Mexico	1,828,867	652,880	35.7	72.9	14.0	8.6	4.5
New York	18,097,578	5,229,102	28.9	54.3	20.9	17.4	7.4
North Carolina	8,429,207	814,645	9.7	51.8	19.2	20.3	8.7
North Dakota	599,205	35,387	5.9	73.5	15.7	9.4	1.3
Ohio	10,727,127	646,477	6.0	64.7	20.3	11.8	3.2
Oklahoma	3,357,386	276,163	8.2	54.8	19.4	18.7	7.1
Oregon	3,511,093	504,621	14.4	53.4	19.1	18.7	8.8
Pennsylvania	11,703,178	1,107,017	9.5	62.1	20.1	13.8	4.0
Rhode Island	996,158	207,071	20.8	56.2	18.9	16.6	8.3
South Carolina	4,113,842	241,144	5.9	54.5	20.8	17.8	6.9
South Dakota	740,248	46,384	6.3	75.9	14.6	7.6	1.8
Tennessee	5,750,581	335,560	5.8	54.6	20.6	18.0	6.9
Texas	21,924,924	7,437,834	33.9	56.6	17.6	15.6	10.1
Utah	2,392,633	331,682	13.9	57.0	19.1	16.4	7.5
Vermont	588,849	30,174	5.1	76.5	14.8	6.5	2.1
Virginia	7,201,765	956,248	13.3	59.7	20.8	14.7	4.8
Washington	6,046,464	1,012,440	16.7	54.0	22.5	16.5	7.1
West Virginia	1,707,922	39,153	2.3	69.2	15.8	13.5	1.6
Wisconsin	5,245,596	428,790	8.2	60.7	19.5	15.1	4.7
Wyoming	487,399	30,419	6.2	68.1	16.0	10.9	5.0

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table 4B at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>. For more information on the ACS, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Figure 3.
Percentage of the Population Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home by State: 2007



Note: Population 5 years and older. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

speakers also was found in the West Coast states (see Figure 5d).

Figure 5e shows Hawaii having the highest concentration of Korean speakers, followed by California and New Jersey. California and New York housed the highest percentage of Chinese speakers, followed by Hawaii and Massachusetts (see Figure 5f).

As with Korean speakers, higher levels of Vietnamese speakers were evident throughout the country rather than a large concentration among contiguous states. California had the highest percentage of Vietnamese speakers, followed by Hawaii, Washington, and Texas[12] (see Figure 5g). Tagalog, a language of the Philippines, had its highest percentage of speakers in Hawaii. Alaska, California, and Nevada also had high levels, but not as high as Hawaii.[13]

Language Concentration in Metropolitan and Micropolitan Areas

Just as languages were dispersed unevenly across states, metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas also displayed similar effects. Large metro areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago generally had large proportions of foreign-language speakers because of the economic opportunities in these places or because they act as gateway points of entry into the country. Not all of the high levels of language clustering occurred in these three metro areas, however. Table 5 presents the metro or micro areas in which 30 of the 39 detailed languages had the largest number of speakers.[14]

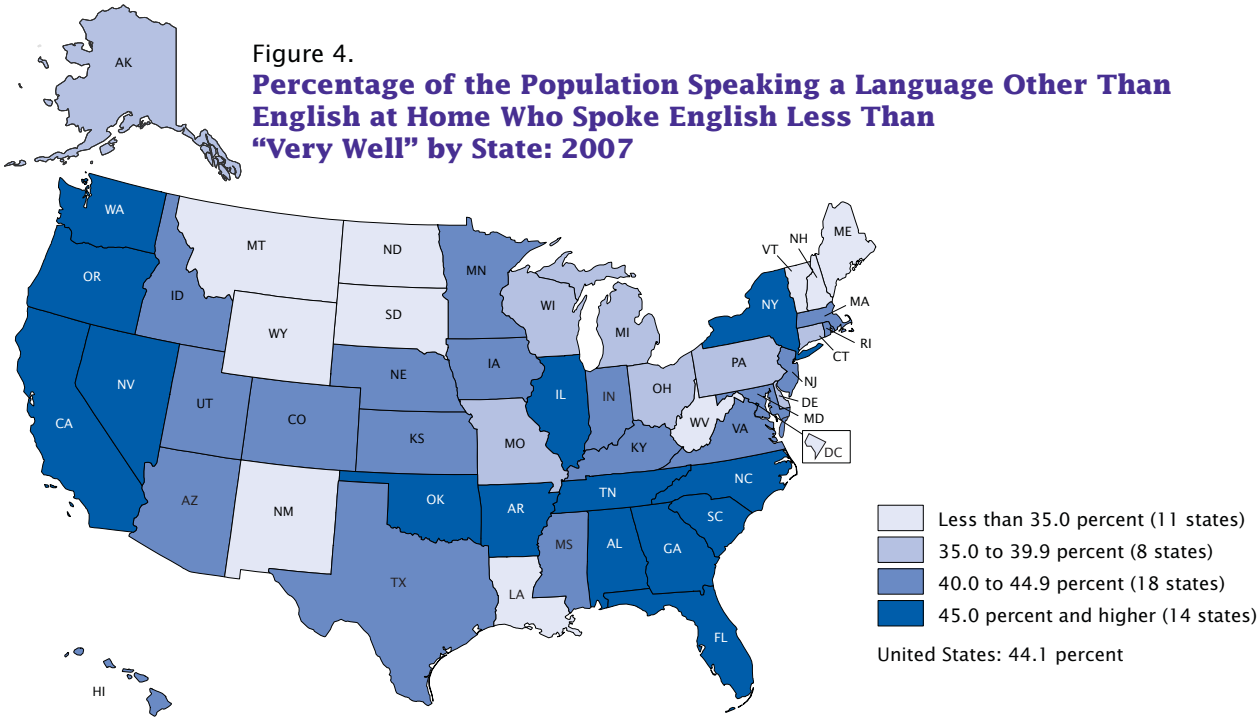
As Table 5 shows, some languages were widely distributed across areas, while other languages had a large proportion of their speakers in just one or two areas. Of these languages, Yiddish is an extreme example of language concentration—76 percent of all its speakers lived in the New York metro area, with another 6 percent in the Poughkeepsie metro area, 4 percent in the Miami metro area, and 2 percent in the Los Angeles metro area. This means that 88 percent of all Yiddish speakers lived in just one of these four metro areas. The remaining 12

[12] The percentages of Vietnamese speakers in Hawaii (0.9 percent), Washington (0.9 percent), and Texas (0.7 percent) were not statistically different from one another.

[13] The percentages of Tagalog speakers in Alaska (2.3 percent), California (2.2 percent), and Nevada (2.2 percent) were not statistically different from one another.

[14] The nine languages that are not on this list are those languages that are aggregated or are groups of languages, such as Other West Germanic languages or All Other languages.

Figure 4.
Percentage of the Population Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home Who Spoke English Less Than "Very Well" by State: 2007



Note: Population 5 years and older. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

percent of Yiddish speakers were spread throughout the rest of the country.

In other similar cases, the two or three largest concentrations account for a large overall proportion of the total number of speakers. Polish, for example, had 31 percent of its speakers in the Chicago metro area, with another 23 percent in the New York metro area. Among Hmong speakers, the Minneapolis-St. Paul (25 percent), Sacramento (13 percent), and Fresno (12 percent) metro areas accounted for half of all speakers of this language in the United States.[15]

By contrast, speakers of Laotian were much more widely dispersed throughout the country. The Minneapolis-St. Paul, Fresno, Nashville, and Los Angeles metro areas each had about 5 percent of all Laotian speakers, leaving the remaining 81 percent of speakers spread throughout the rest of the country.

This high degree of dispersion was actually more common among languages that have long been a part of the nation's history. German, a language spoken by many immigrants to the United States over the last few centuries, was highly dispersed. The four largest concentrations in the United States account for just 15 percent of all German speakers in the country. Similar high levels of dispersion are seen for languages such as French (77 percent outside the four largest metro concentrations) and Scandinavian languages (79 percent).

SUMMARY

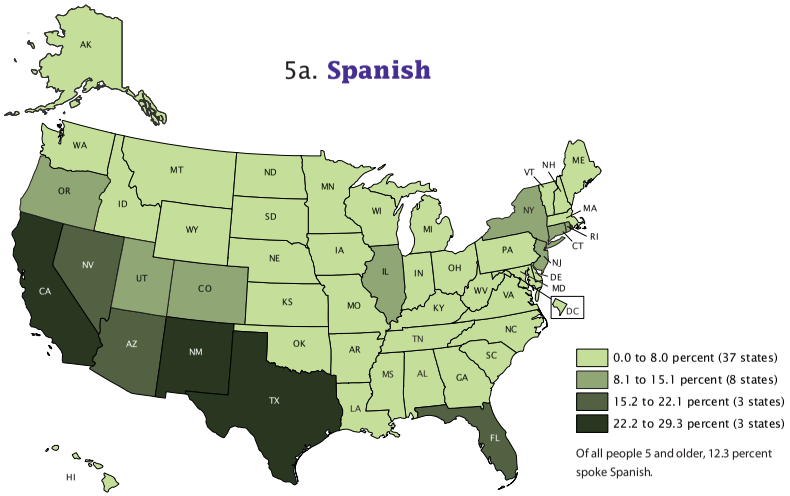
This report provides illustrative evidence of the continuing and growing role of non-English languages as part of the national fabric. Fueled by both long-term historic immigration patterns and more recent ones, the language diversity of the country has increased over the past few decades. As the nation continues to be a destination for people from other lands, this pattern of language diversity will also likely continue. Given the patterns of location and relocation over time, local areas may see specific or diverse changes in the languages spoken in any given locality.

[15] The percentages of Hmong speakers in Sacramento (13 percent) and in Fresno (12 percent) were not statistically different from each other.

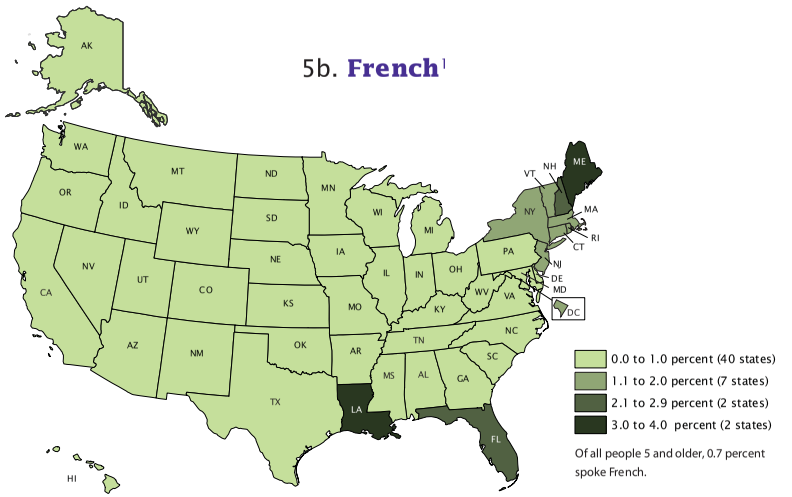
Figures 5a–5d.

Percentage of the Population 5 Years and Older Speaking Specified Languages by State: 2007

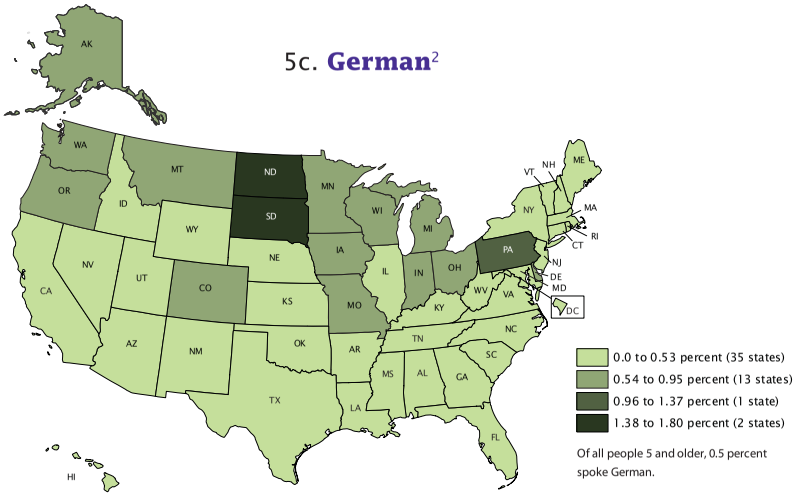
5a. Spanish



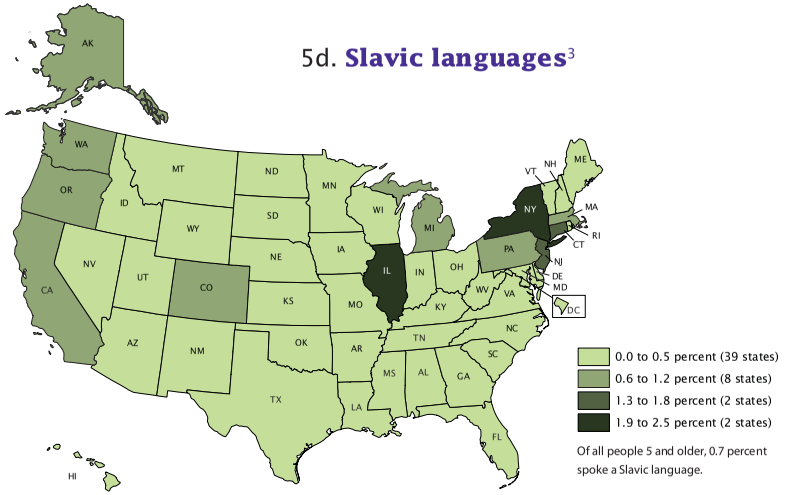
5b. French[1]



5c. German[2]



5d. Slavic languages[3]



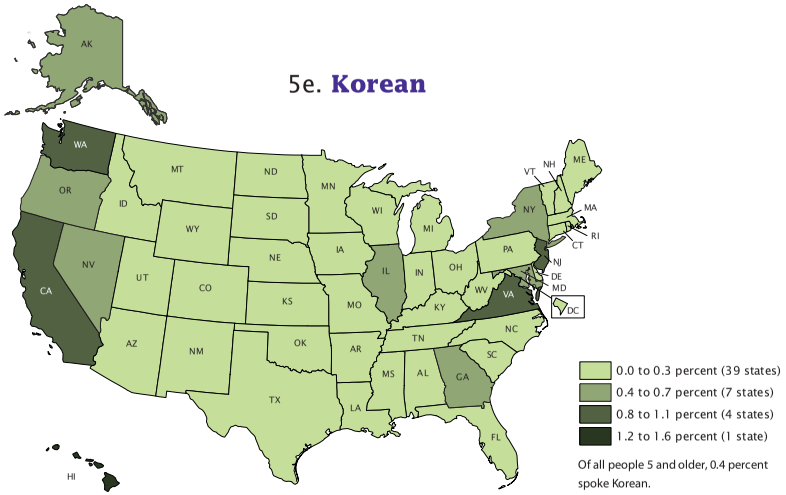
[1] French includes French Creole.
[2] German includes other West Germanic languages.
[3] Slavic languages include Russian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, and other Slavic languages.

For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Figures 5e–5h.

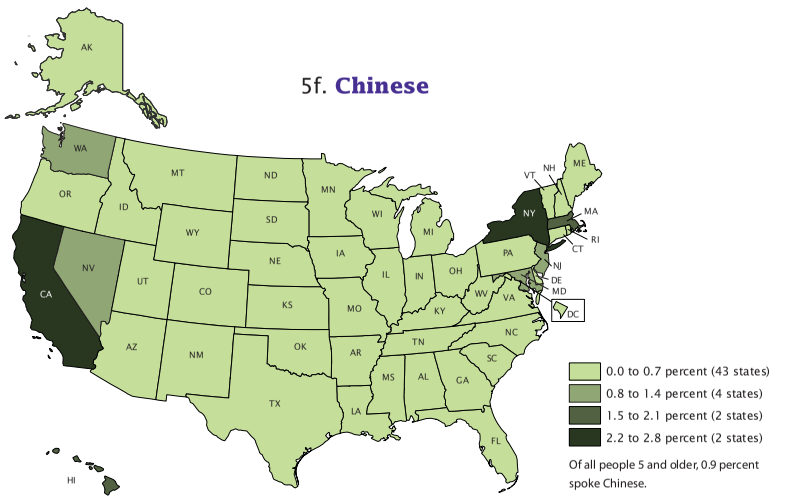
Percentage of the Population 5 Years and Older Speaking Specified Languages by State: 2007

5e. Korean



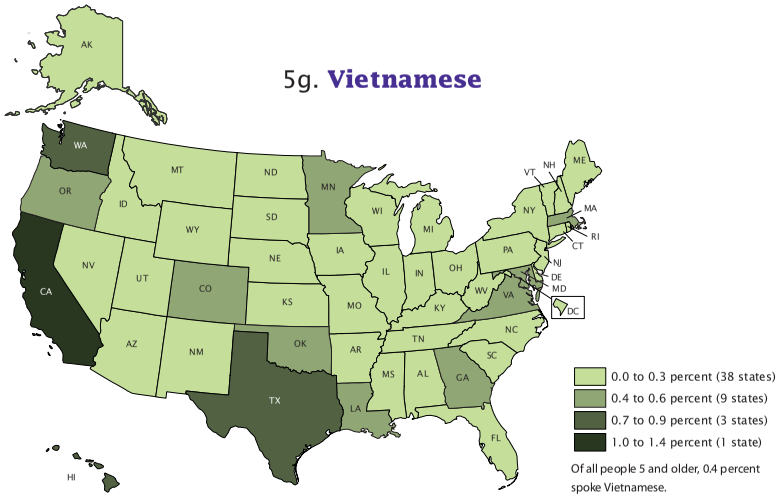
Of all people 5 and older, 0.4 percent spoke Korean.

5f. Chinese



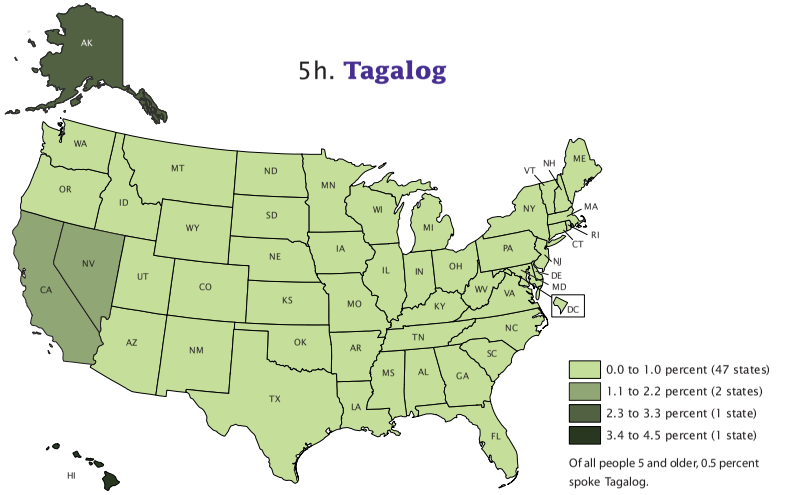
Of all people 5 and older, 0.9 percent spoke Chinese.

5g. Vietnamese



Of all people 5 and older, 0.4 percent spoke Vietnamese.

5h. Tagalog



Of all people 5 and older, 0.5 percent spoke Tagalog.

Note: The data for these maps are available in Appendix Table A. The margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table B. Both tables are available at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>.
For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <www.census.gov./acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

Table 5.

Distribution of Speakers of Specific Non-English Languages Across Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas: 2007

(For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see *www.census.gov/acs/www/*)

Detailed language	Metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas with the largest proportion of speakers of specified language[1,2]										
	Total number of speakers of non-English languages	Percent	1st metro or micro area[1]	Percent	2nd metro or micro area[2]	Percent	3rd metro or micro area	Percent	4th metro or micro area	Percent	Percent in all other areas
Spanish	34,547,077	100.0	Los Angeles	12.8	New York	9.5	Miami	5.6	Chicago	4.3	67.8
French	1,355,805	100.0	New York	10.1	Washington	4.5	Boston	4.1	Miami	4.1	77.2
French Creole	629,019	100.0	Miami	35.9	New York	28.1	Boston	6.5	Orlando	4.2	25.2
Italian	798,801	100.0	New York	32.7	Boston	5.2	Chicago	4.9	Philadelphia	3.9	53.2
Portuguese	687,126	100.0	New York	18.9	Providence	14.9	Boston	12.4	Miami	7.4	46.4
German	1,104,354	100.0	New York	5.8	Chicago	3.6	Los Angeles	3.2	Washington	2.1	85.4
Yiddish	158,991	100.0	New York	76.0	Poughkeepsie	6.2	Miami	3.8	Los Angeles	2.2	11.9
Scandinavian	134,925	100.0	Los Angeles	6.2	New York	6.1	Seattle	5.4	Minneapolis	3.4	79.0
Greek	329,825	100.0	New York	26.1	Chicago	13.6	Boston	6.0	Philadelphia	3.1	51.2
Russian	851,174	100.0	New York	29.5	Los Angeles	6.3	Chicago	4.6	San Francisco	3.8	55.9
Polish	638,059	100.0	Chicago	31.3	New York	22.8	Hartford	3.6	Detroit	3.3	39.0
Serbo-Croatian	276,550	100.0	New York	11.9	Chicago	11.4	St. Louis, MO-IL	4.6	Phoenix	4.5	67.6
Armenian	221,865	100.0	Los Angeles	71.8	New York	4.6	Fresno, CA	2.5	Boston	2.4	18.6
Persian	349,686	100.0	Los Angeles	29.3	New York	9.1	Washington	7.2	San Francisco	6.1	48.2
Gujarati	287,367	100.0	New York	22.5	Chicago	11.2	Los Angeles	5.3	Philadelphia	4.9	56.2
Hindi	532,911	100.0	New York	16.4	San Francisco	6.6	Chicago	5.7	Los Angeles	5.0	66.3
Urdu	344,942	100.0	New York	23.4	Chicago	10.4	Houston	8.6	Washington	7.4	50.1
Chinese	2,464,572	100.0	New York	20.6	Los Angeles	15.4	San Francisco	12.4	San Jose	4.9	46.7
Japanese	458,717	100.0	Los Angeles	16.8	Honolulu, HI	9.7	New York	8.7	San Francisco	4.9	60.0
Korean	1,062,337	100.0	Los Angeles	22.8	New York	15.0	Washington	6.0	Chicago	4.2	52.0
Mon-Khmer, Cambodian	185,056	100.0	Los Angeles	18.5	Boston	9.3	Stockton, CA	5.1	Seattle	4.6	62.5
Hmong	181,069	100.0	Minneapolis	25.2	Sacramento	13.4	Fresno, CA	11.6	Milwaukee	5.2	44.6
Thai	144,405	100.0	Los Angeles	15.7	New York	6.3	San Francisco	4.8	Washington	4.4	68.9
Laotian	149,045	100.0	Minneapolis	5.1	Fresno, CA	4.6	Nashville	4.5	Los Angeles	4.5	81.3
Vietnamese	1,207,004	100.0	Los Angeles	17.0	San Jose	9.3	Houston	6.1	Dallas	4.6	63.0
Tagalog	1,480,429	100.0	Los Angeles	17.5	San Francisco	11.0	New York	9.1	San Diego	5.8	56.6
Navajo	170,717	100.0	Farmington, NM	16.5	Gallup, NM[2]	12.0	Flagstaff, AZ	10.3	Albuquerque, NM	5.4	55.9
Hungarian	91,297	100.0	New York	20.1	Los Angeles	5.8	Cleveland	4.9	Chicago	3.9	65.3
Arabic	767,319	100.0	New York	14.6	Detroit	11.2	Los Angeles	7.0	Chicago	5.7	61.6
Hebrew	213,576	100.0	New York	38.8	Los Angeles	11.6	Miami	8.4	Boston	3.4	37.9

[1] The Office of Management and Budget's statistical area definitions (for metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas) are those issued by that agency in December 2006. Each metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area with a state abbreviation after its name in the table indicates that the full title of that area is displayed. Below are the full titles of metropolitan statistical areas that are abbreviated in the table:

Boston = Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA-NH
Chicago = Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI
Cleveland = Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor, OH
Dallas = Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX
Detroit = Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI
Hartford = Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT
Houston = Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX
Los Angeles = Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA
Miami = Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL
Milwaukee = Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI
Minneapolis = Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI
Nashville = Nashville-Davidson–Murfreesboro–Franklin, TN
New York = New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA
Orlando = Orlando-Kissimmee, FL
Philadelphia = Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD
Phoenix = Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ
Poughkeepsie = Poughkeepsie-Newburgh-Middletown, NY
Providence = Providence-New Bedford-Fall River, RI-MA
Sacramento = Sacramento–Arden-Arcade–Roseville, CA
San Diego = San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA
San Francisco = San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA
San Jose = San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA
Seattle = Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA
Washington = Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV

[2] Gallup, NM, is the only micropolitan statistical area in this table. The other areas displayed in the table are metropolitan statistical areas.

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in Appendix Table 5 at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/language/appendix.html>. For more information on the ACS, see <www.census.gov/acs/www/>.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

SOURCE OF THE DATA AND ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

The American Community Survey

Many of the findings presented in this report were based on the American Community Survey (ACS) data collected in 2007. These data were based on the population living in either households or group quarters (which include correctional facilities, nursing homes, college dormitories, group homes, and overnight shelters) that were included in the ACS sample. The U.S. Census Bureau is both the sponsor and the collector of the American Community Survey.

The 2007 ACS is based on a sample of just under 3 million housing unit addresses and a separate sample of just under 200 thousand people living in group quarters. ACS figures are estimates based on this sample and approximate the actual figures that would have been obtained by interviewing the entire household and group quarters populations using the same methodology. The estimates from the 2007 ACS sample may also differ from estimates based on other survey samples of housing units and group quarters and the people living within those housing units and group quarters.

The Decennial Census

Other findings presented in this report that were not derived from the 2007 ACS were collected from previously published findings based on data from each decennial census conducted by the Census Bureau since 1980. In general, the decennial censuses collected data from the population living in households as well as those living in group quarters such as those described above.

Sampling and Nonsampling Error

Sampling error occurs when the characteristics of a sample are measured instead of those of the entire population (as from a census). Note that sample-based estimates will vary depending on the particular sample selected from the population, but all attempt to approximate the actual figures. Measures of the magnitude of sampling error reflect the variation in the estimates over all possible samples that could have been selected from the population using the same sampling, data collection, and processing methods.

Estimates of the magnitude of sampling errors are provided in the form of margins of error for all key ACS estimates included in this report. The Census Bureau recommends that data users incorporate this information into their analyses, as sampling error in survey estimates could impact the conclusions drawn from the results. All comparative statements in this report have undergone statistical testing, and comparisons are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless noted otherwise. This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between the estimates being compared does not include zero.

In addition to sampling error, nonsampling errors may be introduced during any phase of data collection or processing. For example, operations such as editing, reviewing, or keying data from questionnaires may introduce error into the estimates. The primary source of nonsampling error and the processes instituted to control error in the 2007 ACS are described in further detail in the 2007 ACS Accuracy of the Data document (see Web link below).

Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9, prohibits the Census Bureau from publishing results from which the identity of an individual survey respondent could be determined. For more information on how the Census Bureau protects the confidentiality of data, see the 2007 ACS Accuracy of the Data document, available at <www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/ACS/accuracy2007.pdf>.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Further information from the 2007 ACS is available from the American FactFinder on the Census Bureau's Web site, at <http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en>.

Measures of ACS quality—including sample size and number of interviews, response and nonresponse rates, coverage rates, and item allocation rates—are available at <www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/sse/>.

Additional information about language use is available on the Census Bureau's Web site at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/lang_use.html>.

CONTACT

For additional information on these topics, please call 1-866-758-1060 (toll free) or visit <www.census.gov>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Shin, Hyon B. and Robert A. Kominski. 2010. *Language Use in the United States: 2007*, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-12. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC.

USER COMMENTS

The Census Bureau welcomes the comments and advice of users of our data and reports. Please send comments and suggestions to:

Chief, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-8500

APPENDIX A.
Language Questions Used in Decennial Censuses

2000: *(Collected for all ages; retained for persons 5 years old and over)*

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

1990: *(For persons 5 years old and over)*

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

1980: *(For persons 3 years old and over; tabulated for 5 years old and over)*

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

1970: *(No age for question; tabulations limited)*

What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child? (Spanish, French, German, Other [specify]_____, None—English only)

1960: *(For foreign-born persons)*

What language was spoken in his home before he came to the United States?

1950: *(Not asked)*

1940: *(For persons of all ages; asked under the category of "Mother Tongue [or Native Language]")*

Language spoken at home in earliest childhood.

1930: *(For foreign-born persons; asked under the category of "Mother Tongue [or Native Language] of Foreign Born")*

Language spoken in home before coming to the United States.

1920: *(For foreign-born persons)*

Place of birth and mother tongue of person and each parent.

Whether able to speak English.

1910: *(Mother tongue was collected for all foreign-born persons, to be written in with place of birth; also collected for foreign-born parents. Specific instructions on correct languages to write in and a list of appropriate European languages were provided to the enumerator. Similar instructions may have carried over to 1920.)*

Whether able to speak English; or, if not, give language spoken.

1900: *(For all persons 10 years old and over)*

"Can speak English" was asked after the two questions "Can read" and "Can write."

1890: *(For all persons 10 years old and over)*

"Able to speak English. If not, the language or dialect spoken" was asked after the questions "Able to Read" and "Able to Write."

1790–1880*: (No evidence of language questions or English-ability questions)*

Note: The universe used for data collection may not be the same as in tabulations. In some cases, data were tabulated for foreign-born only or White foreign-born only. Consult publications.