

How many languages are spoken at LaGuardia? There is no simple answer.

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Abstract

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How many languages are spoken at LaGuardia? 100? 150? You may have heard figures like these thrown around, but this question is not so easy to answer.

LaGuardia Community College's Institutional Profile 2019 (Lerer, 2019) shows that our students spoke 106 different languages as of 2014 and 98 different languages in 2018. The American Community Survey, a sampled version of the U.S. Census administered every year, asks questions about language in their surveys and their latest data in 2019 indicate that there are over 80 languages and language groups (such as Niger-Congo languages) in the borough of Queens¹. Both data sets include largely the same set of major languages in Queens such as Spanish (495,560 or 22.3% according to ACS), Chinese (142,416 / 6.1%), Korean (39,821 / 2.1%), Bengali (74,462 / 2.7%), Filipino and Tagalog (38,826 / 1.4%), and Russian (34,413 / 1.5%). Just to illustrate this point, I have shown the top 30 languages in Queens (with the ACS data through IPUMS (Ruggles et al., 2018)) and LaGuardia Community College (with the Institutional Research data) in Tables 1 and 2.

¹The U.S. Census Bureau has recently developed a new web-based interface for analyzing the census data. The URL is <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>.

Table 1: Top 30 languages spoken in Queens (Americian Community Survey [1 year]) between 2010-2019

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Ave. percent
English	891,780	915,494	942,900	947,431	942,773	943,094	972,077	987,375	931,524	934,112	41.0%
Spanish	511,736	503,011	511,276	516,204	518,883	531,021	502,049	516,432	503,156	495,560	22.3%
N/A or blank	131,375	136,749	136,817	141,592	145,257	147,001	142,861	144,061	139,656	134,806	6.1%
Chinese	101,984	124,347	135,368	157,246	151,710	136,210	148,130	160,435	144,190	142,416	6.1%
Korean	59,735	55,039	55,096	45,408	38,118	51,134	46,562	47,058	43,087	39,821	2.1%
Mandarin	59,261	28,412	19,568	23,252	25,933	33,985	40,178	28,818	33,569	39,724	1.5%
Italian	37,033	27,761	24,256	24,802	21,041	21,191	23,143	20,445	20,574	16,058	1.0%
Bengali	36,242	53,535	56,530	63,502	65,860	59,954	65,838	76,374	74,566	74,462	2.7%
French or Haitian Creole	35,633	30,331	33,014	27,915	23,799	26,164	29,504	28,226	23,091	33,648	1.3%
Filipino, Tagalog	34,077	26,652	28,807	27,006	33,867	32,383	33,366	34,048	26,580	38,826	1.4%
Russian	33,895	37,516	35,430	39,900	31,992	41,514	28,225	30,800	32,524	34,413	1.5%
Greek	25,405	31,558	29,688	27,520	28,572	24,424	22,164	22,653	24,157	20,790	1.1%
Polish	22,829	25,981	20,819	22,905	24,502	26,434	29,988	23,487	25,939	25,269	1.1%
Cantonese	22,493	20,470	18,563	18,732	19,786	24,112	26,096	27,195	21,384	26,020	1.0%
Urdu	21,803	19,303	16,602	13,596	24,821	18,349	11,197	13,572	15,196	15,874	0.7%
Panjabi	21,528	23,412	27,756	17,136	29,906	18,446	22,867	23,861	23,356	19,954	1.0%
Hindi	20,409	16,160	17,979	18,544	14,494	29,479	23,428	19,023	20,075	14,541	0.8%
Arabic	15,601	13,621	10,680	14,936	17,001	17,525	15,896	10,075	17,370	12,849	0.6%
French	12,212	14,977	14,402	12,092	12,283	8,189	14,130	10,197	11,670	11,204	0.5%
Hebrew, Israeli	9,807	12,975	8,173	8,273	10,409	8,945	12,961	8,255	9,128	6,349	0.4%
German	7,764	6,243	6,294	6,253	6,233	5,608	4,655	5,514	3,093	4,337	0.2%
Nepali	7,571	6,307	4,355	3,760	6,228	5,900	7,890	8,253	9,654	7,627	0.3%
Rumanian	7,513	8,300	7,905	8,301	9,591	7,471	7,143	6,609	10,412	5,537	0.3%
Kru	6,591	7,892	5,097	5,660	10,170	11,274	0	0	0	0	0.2%
Portuguese	6,389	8,645	6,861	7,382	7,236	6,322	7,642	6,261	8,820	4,530	0.3%
Other Asian languages	6,359	4,816	5,898	6,445	10,154	8,130	378	1,096	982	1,147	0.2%
Croatian	6,258	4,854	3,427	3,527	4,668	4,507	3,959	3,311	3,462	3,139	0.2%
Japanese	5,894	3,498	5,139	5,760	6,678	6,394	5,150	6,102	6,533	4,771	0.2%
Gujarathi	5,545	5,904	7,612	5,730	3,775	5,415	6,138	6,185	4,482	2,270	0.2%
Formosan, Taiwanese	4,653	4,983	2,393	4,740	2,098	3,007	0	0	0	0	0.1%
Malayalam	4,550	2,607	2,308	3,204	4,799	4,155	2,761	3,854	2,735	3,119	0.1%
Others	59,867	65,037	72,204	67,094	69,093	73,008	77,674	78,915	86,791	80,433	3.2%
Total	2,233,792	2,246,390	2,273,217	2,295,848	2,321,730	2,340,745	2,334,050	2,358,490	2,277,756	2,253,606	100.0%

Table 2: Top 30 languages spoken at LaGuardia Community College between Fall 2016 and Fall 2019 (Those who did not respond to the language question were excluded from the percentage)

Year	Fall2016	Fall2017	Fall2018	Fall2019	Ave. percent
English	5,868	4,392	4,823	3,002	53.9%
Spanish	2,298	1,626	1,775	1,169	20.5%
Chinese	411	364	325	211	3.9%
Bengali	373	295	285	191	3.4%
Nepali	218	258	255	146	2.6%
Arabic	181	149	163	91	1.7%
Korean	130	91	98	49	1.1%
Polish	119	82	73	42	0.9%
Tagalog	114	76	114	75	1.1%
Creole	97	78	91	60	1.0%
Tibetan	96	61	88	58	0.9%
French	89	61	65	32	0.7%
Urdu	73	53	48	32	0.6%
Russian	69	59	62	39	0.7%
Albanian	47	33	41	25	0.4%
Japanese	45	28	24	13	0.3%
Hindi	44	20	24	15	0.3%
Portuguese	39	29	37	31	0.4%
Punjabi	39	29	40	23	0.4%
Greek	38	21	30	23	0.3%
Romanian	37	27	23	10	0.3%
Burmese	34	36	39	26	0.4%
Cantonese	31	0	0	0	0.1%
Ukrainian	28	16	18	12	0.2%
Serbo-Croatian	25	16	18	10	0.2%
Pilipino	24	24	28	14	0.3%
Turkish	21	14	10	11	0.2%
Uzbek	20	17	20	7	0.2%
Gujarati	18	7	12	8	0.1%
Thai	18	10	12	8	0.1%
Yoruba	15	10	13	5	0.1%
Others (about 70 languages)	258	205	231	148	2.5%
No response	8529	11169	10351	12947	
Total (with responses)	10,917	8,187	8,885	5,586	100.0%

So, can we settle that a slightly more than 100 languages are spoken in Queens and at LaGuardia Community College? The answer is not quite that simple.

Recently a group of linguists working on the preservation of less common languages has proposed that many more languages are spoken in New York City than previously recorded. Daniel Kaufman and Ross Perlin at Endangered Language Alliance (<https://elalliance.org>) argue that a large number of indigenous and endangered languages (languages spoken by so few people that they

may not be transmitted to the following generation) exist in New York City². According to their measure, there are over 800 languages in New York City and many of them are found in Queens, the most linguistically diverse borough among the five boroughs.

In order to understand this wide gap in the estimated numbers of languages, we need to visit to the basic concept of “language” and a fundamental question of what makes one version human communicative code a language rather than a dialect (or vice versa).

A Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich once said “A language is a dialect with an army and navy” to illustrate the conventional perception about languages. For many people, language is a socio-political construct, which is inherently rooted in the imperialistic, nation-state ideology of human civilization. In other words, a language has strong affiliation with the identity of a nation state and, therefore, its boundary with another language largely overlaps the national or regional boundary. Consider so-called the Chinese language, which serves as a good example of this imperialistic notion of language. The Chinese language is, in reality, a group of a large number of dialects/languages, many of which are not mutually intelligible. The idea of the Chinese language as a single language is widely accepted and the Chinese language is sometimes considered as synonymous to Mandarin. However, the idea of Mandarin as the national language of China dismisses other major dialects/languages such as Cantonese (spoken by over 60 million speakers), Shanhaihinese (over 70 million speakers), and Taiwanese (over 15 million speakers).

Also, this conventional notion of language often entails linguistic codification, a process of standardizing language varieties by selecting “correct” use of a language from other “incorrect” usages. The prescribed and standardized orthography, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciations are considered as essential for a language, which consequently dismisses many languages without standardized written forms.

Linguists often employ a less-common but more linguistically oriented approach called “mutual intelligibility” to identify languages among different human communication codes. If two speakers use different varieties of communication code and if they do not understand each other (i.e., lack mutual intelligibility), these two communication codes are considered to be two independent languages. If the two speakers sufficiently understand each other (i.e., have mutual intelligibility), these two communication codes are considered to be two dialects of one language. Mutual intelligibility is usually established in oral language and it is a convenient measure for a large number of languages/dialects that lack any standardized written language tradition, which would be otherwise remain unrecognized as languages in the conventional sociopolitical definition of language.

All in all, linguists use a combination of sociopolitical considerations and mutual intelligibility in order to define languages. For example, *Ethnologue* (<https://www.ethnologue.com>), the most comprehensive database of languages, identify 7,117 languages in the world (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). International Organization for Standardization (ISO)’s latest language codes (ISO

²See various articles featuring their language preservation effort in the New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/nyregion/29lost.html>), New Yorker (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/a-loss-for-words>), Aljazeera (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/05/17/dying-languages-living-in-new-york/>), and BBC (<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20716344>)

639-3; <https://iso639-3.sil.org>) has 7,968 entries for human languages.

One example in this comprehensive catalog of languages is *Mamuju*, a language spoken in the Sulawesi province of Indonesia. It is estimated that there are about 62,900 speakers of Mamuju. According to Ethnologue, Mamuju is considered a threatened language since native speakers of Mamuju are not actively transmitting this linguistic heritage to the next generation of the community. Many speakers of Mamuju more frequently use Mandar and Indonesian, two dominant languages of the region and the country. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to locate an active speaker of Mamuju even in Indonesia.

Mamuju, a dying language in a remote area in Southeast Asia, was one of the least recognized languages in New York City – until Daniel Kaufman of Endangered Language Alliance unexpectedly met Husni Husain, a native speaker of Mamuju, at his friend’s wedding party in New York City (Roberts, 2010). Husni had lived in the U.S. for several decades by then, but he had not been using his native tongue. Neither his wife nor his children used Mamuju. Husni is probably the only speaker of Mamuju in New York City and he is contributing this rare language to the linguistic diversity of Queens – by himself.

So, how many languages are spoken at LaGuardia? Maybe the answer to this question depends on one of your classmates who secretly speaks an extremely rare and underrecognized language.

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