

Demographics of Adult Heritage Language Speakers in the United States: Different Social Environments by Region and Language

Tomonori Nagano <tnagano@lagcc.cuny.edu>, LaGuardia Community College, The City University of New York



Abstract

Although heritage language (HL) speakers have received scholarly attention in recent years as an interdisciplinary research theme among language educators, linguists, and policy makers, we know very little about their demographic makeup and trends of their demographic change. In this study, I have analyzed regional and chronological changes of HL speakers between 1980 and 2010, using U.S. census data. The results show sharp differences in HL speakers' demographics by language and region.

Method

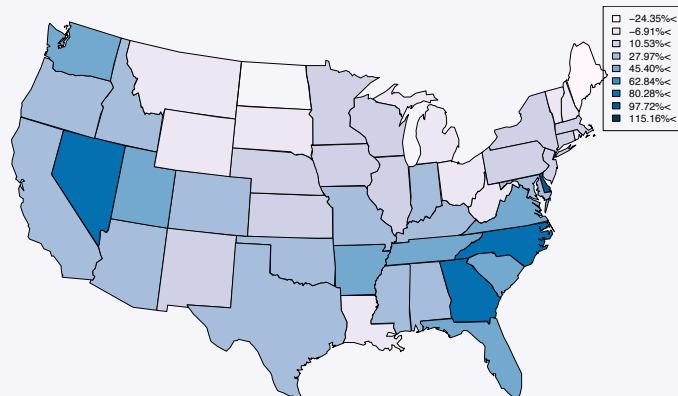
- **Data source:** U.S. Census/ACS data from 1980 to 2010 (via Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS; Ruggles & Sobek, 1997))
- **Data analysis:** IPUMS's individual-level records were analyzed with R scripts
- **Definition of adult HL speakers** (based on the census items)
 - those who are age 18 or above at the point of data collection
 - those who speak a language other than English at home
 - those who are bilingual (i.e., not selecting "Do not speak English" in the question regarding English proficiency), and
 - those who have immigrated to the U.S. before 18 years old if they are foreign born

Question 1

Is the United States rapidly becoming a monolingual country with strong assimilation force into an English-speaking population?

- No, because ...
 - The number of HL speakers grew at a considerably faster rate (26.98% per decade during 1980-2010) than the average growth of the U.S. population (10.88% per decade during 1980-2010).
- Yes, because ...
 - Languages such as French, German, Italian, Greek, Yiddish, and Dutch are experiencing rapid declines (*linguistic graveyard* within three generations (Rambaut, 2009)) [see Table 1]
 - The growth rates of HL speakers radically differ from state to state. In some states, there was even a decline in the number of adult HL speakers. [see Table 2]

Average Increase of HL Speakers per Decade from 1980-2010



Question 2

Are Spanish HL speakers by far the largest HL community in the United States?

- Yes, because ...
 - Spanish and Chinese remain the two most common groups of HLs in the United States, and their prevalence has grown rapidly over the last 30 years (6.4 million Spanish HL speakers in 1980 to 17.0 million in 2010 (38.42% growth per decade))
- No, because ...
 - Although the absolute numbers are rather small, new HLs such as Arabic, Hindi, Dravidian, Vietnamese, Russian, Amharic/Ethiopian, and Tibetan, exhibited substantial growth (e.g., Dravidian 26,900 in 1980 to 423,649 or 152% growth per decade).
 - On the state level, there are quite a few exceptions, such as Alaska (Aleut Eskimo is the most common HL), Hawaii (Filipino/Tagalog and Japanese), Louisiana (French), Maine (French), New Hampshire (French), North Dakota (German), South Dakota (Siouan languages), and Vermont (French) [see the Table 2].

Table 1: The Number of HL Speakers in 2010 by Language and the Increase per Decade

Language	Num	Perc	Increase	Language	Num	Perc	Increase
Spanish	17,013,399	59.25%	38.42%	Thai, Siamese, Lao	108,458	0.38%	39.34%
French	1,256,193	4.37%	3.23%	Amharic, Ethiopian, etc	108,221	0.38%	142.28%
Chinese	1,233,957	4.30%	52.96%	Hebrew, Israeli	106,610	0.37%	23.37%
Hindi and related	1,185,354	4.13%	96.32%	Indonesian	97,439	0.34%	114.77%
Filipino, Tagalog	789,915	2.75%	34.53%	Armenian	95,593	0.33%	15.22%
German	715,471	2.49%	-9.18%	Miconesian, Polynesian	87,711	0.31%	44.20%
Vietnamese	540,677	1.88%	82.96%	Yiddish, Jewish	82,608	0.29%	-17.71%
Korean	487,432	1.70%	47.31%	Dutch	80,717	0.28%	0.25%
Russian	481,380	1.68%	91.27%	Albanian	77,777	0.27%	149.20%
Arabic	439,744	1.53%	45.05%	Ukrainian etc.	77,290	0.27%	18.63%
Dravidian	423,649	1.48%	152.83%	Rumanian	76,918	0.27%	62.42%
Italian	393,700	1.37%	-25.87%	Tibetan	75,687	0.26%	193.67%
Portuguese	345,253	1.20%	18.80%	Other East Southeast Asian	67,401	0.23%	214.22%
Sub Saharan Africa	335,973	1.17%	111.89%	Turkish	66,476	0.23%	53.66%
Polish	310,821	1.08%	-19.59%	Magyar, Hungarian	39,480	0.14%	-23.63%
Japanese	254,039	0.88%	2.47%	Lithuanian	34,534	0.12%	-5.95%
Serbo Croatian etc.	182,954	0.64%	30.30%	Swedish	33,126	0.12%	-17.90%
Greek	159,108	0.55%	-11.85%	Czech	32,438	0.11%	-28.32%
Persian, Iranian, Farssi	146,202	0.51%	27.41%	Norwegian	27,090	0.09%	-29.93%
Navajo Navaho	139,291	0.49%	18.75%	Slovak	21,179	0.07%	-26.19%
				TOTAL	28,231,265	100%	26.98%

Question 3

Are efforts for HL maintenance (e.g., bilingual education) necessary primarily in the major immigration hubs such as California, Florida, Illinois, and New York?

- Yes, because ...
 - States that are typically considered immigration hubs have large numbers of HL speakers (e.g., California 6.2 million HL speakers, Texas 4.2M, New York 2.6M, Florida 2.2M, and Illinois 1.2M)
- No, because ...
 - In terms of the proportion of HL speakers in the state's population, some other states have proportions of HL speakers as large as those in states with high numbers of immigrants (e.g., Arizona (12.7% of the state population are HL speakers), Hawaii (12.1%), Massachusetts (10.4%), Nevada (11.7%), New Mexico (22.7%), Texas (16.4%), and New Jersey (13.1%)).

Question 3 (cont.)

Table 2: The Number of HL Speakers in 2010 by State, Their Proportion to the Total Population, and the Increase per Decade

State	Num	Prop	Increase	State	Num	Prop	Increase
Alabama	132,426	2.77%	42.83%	Montana	26,226	2.65%	0.92%
Alaska	68,312	9.57%	29.57%	Nebraska	81,144	4.43%	19.63%
Arizona	818,736	12.77%	40.07%	Nevada	316,210	11.69%	89.59%
Arkansas	96,167	3.29%	55.23%	New Hampshire	57,229	4.35%	-4.56%
California	6,244,801	16.72%	32.05%	New Jersey	1,148,519	13.05%	22.04%
Colorado	433,319	8.58%	29.99%	New Mexico	469,128	22.71%	16.01%
Connecticut	362,613	10.14%	13.39%	New York	2,559,744	13.2%	10.9%
Washington DC	49,005	8.11%	15.09%	North Carolina	515,301	5.39%	81.69%
Delaware	57,954	6.44%	115.16%	North Dakota	23,851	3.54%	-24.35%
Florida	2,248,038	11.93%	47.63%	Ohio	411,065	3.56%	9.15%
Georgia	611,540	6.3%	94.87%	Oklahoma	178,677	4.75%	29.24%
Hawaii	164,768	12.08%	0.31%	Oregon	253,828	6.61%	44.99%
Idaho	77,843	4.95%	38.73%	Pennsylvania	664,236	5.23%	11.06%
Illinois	1,245,885	9.7%	20.43%	Rhode Island	93,218	8.85%	-2.22%
Indiana	273,218	4.21%	28.05%	South Carolina	159,432	3.44%	49.77%
Iowa	113,609	3.73%	23.27%	South Dakota	34,218	4.19%	-4.15%
Kansas	150,161	5.25%	26.08%	Tennessee	220,546	3.47%	58.73%
Kentucky	109,302	2.51%	45.14%	Texas	4,150,885	16.43%	36.17%
Louisiana	254,745	5.61%	-6.57%	Utah	195,397	7.04%	48.92%
Maine	60,803	4.58%	-9.80%	Vermont	21,094	3.37%	0.75%
Maryland	467,767	8.08%	45.08%	Virginia	589,677	7.35%	58.38%
Massachusetts	682,147	10.4%	15.91%	Washington	560,799	8.31%	49.78%
Michigan	432,989	4.38%	7.5%	West Virginia	22,881	1.23%	-0.45%
Minnesota	281,471	5.3%	24.14%	Wisconsin	234,977	4.13%	12.52%
Mississippi	61,843	2.08%	30.57%	Wyoming	23,346	4.14%	6.53%
Missouri	202,600	3.38%	29.38%				

Question 4

Do recent HL speakers (i.e., recent immigrant families) often settle first in urban, metropolitan areas?

- No, because ...
 - Gini index, a statistics for (in-)equity, shows that Spanish HL speakers are now settling in much wider range of counties than 30 years ago (Gini 0.828 in 1980 to 0.764 in 2010).
 - Ehrenhalt (2013) uses the term *demographic inversion* to describe this trend of new Hispanic immigrants such that first- and 1.5-generation immigrants directly settle in suburbs rather than in central cities.
- Yes, because ...
 - The Spanish HL speakers are the only HL group that exhibited such a pattern (the average Gini index actually increased by 0.026 between 1980-2010). The other HL groups such as Chinese, Filipino/Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese, Korean, Dravidian, and Portuguese, still maintain the traditional outward migration model and reside in the ethnic enclaves with a high density of HL speakers.

Conclusions

- This study finds a wide range of differences in HL speakers' demographics by region and language.
- The findings naturally lead to a question about generalizability of HL studies, which tend to take place with one specific language community in a specific region/state. This study suggests needs of multi-language and multi-region research design to improve generalizability of HL studies.
- This study has been published in *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 99 (4). Please e-mail me if you are interested in the original census data and the analysis scripts.

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