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**Questioning the Language Questions:
Federal Policy and the Evaluation of the U.S. Census Bureau's Statistics on Language**

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Abstract

The U.S. Census Bureau's language statistics, like those of other national statistical agencies, are put to a wide range of public and private uses, but many users may be unaware of how or why these statistics are produced. After presenting a taxonomy of census language questions and their policy uses from around the world, this article examines how and why the U.S. Census Bureau asks about language. Specifically, I explain the federal policies that led to the development of the current three-part language question, analyze how policy has changed since it was introduced, and synthesize the survey methodological research that has been used to evaluate the validity and reliability of the resulting data. I conclude with a discussion of a recent qualitative study that investigated the basis of respondents' answers to the language question, as well as the criteria that respondents use when evaluating the English-speaking ability of other household members.

Keywords:

Language questions, English-speaking ability, Limited English Proficient (LEP), Language statistics, Multilingualism

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QUESTIONING THE LANGUAGE QUESTIONS: FEDERAL POLICY AND THE EVALUATION OF THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S STATISTICS ON LANGUAGE.

1. INTRODUCTION.

The U.S. Census Bureau is the primary producer of statistics in the United States, and the Census Bureau's statistics on language are used by a wide array of researchers, including linguists, demographers, and sociologists, among many others. They are also regularly utilized by various private interests, such as language advertising agencies and specialty retail outlets that use information about minority languages speakers to plan their marketing and sales strategies. So too, professional associations and the news media use the Census Bureau data to educate the public about multilingualism; see for example, the Modern Language Association's *Language Map* (MLA n.d.), or *Slate's* maps and reporting on the most common non-English languages in each state (Blatt 2014). However, users of the Census Bureau language statistics may not be aware of how or why the underlying data about languages are collected and they may make inaccurate assumptions about their meaning.

In this article, I examine why the Census Bureau asks about language, how the Census Bureau asks about language, and what the answers to the Census Bureau's questions about language mean, paying special attention to the connection between federal policy and the language questions. As I will discuss, in contrast with surveys conducted by individual scholars, academic institutions and non-profit organizations, the Census Bureau's questions are largely constrained by federal legislation, congressional mandates, and the explicit needs of federal agencies. I begin with an overview of the different kinds of language questions utilized by various statistical agencies around the world at different historical moments in which I highlight the policies that undergird those questions. This taxonomy will provide the context for the subsequent examination of the U.S. Census Bureau's statistics on language, including a consideration of the history of U.S. census language questions and their policy uses. I then turn to an examination of the U.S. Census Bureau's current three-part language question. Specifically, I explain the federal policies that led to its development, analyze how policy has changed since it was introduced, and synthesize the survey methodological research that has been used to evaluate the validity and reliability of the resulting statistics. Finally, I present the results of a recent qualitative study that investigated the basis of respondents' answers to the Census Bureau language question, as well as the criteria that respondents use when evaluating the English-speaking ability of other household members.

2. TYPES AND USES OF CENSUS LANGUAGE QUESTIONS

Although the history of censuses can be traced back thousands of years, they became increasingly widespread with the development of the modern nation state. In the 19th century, growing interest in censuses led to the establishment of the International Statistics Congress, which sought to establish cross-national standards and best practices for census-taking (Kertzer and Arel, 2002; Wright & Marsden 2010). Nowadays, most nations conduct some type of census and many include a question, or multiple questions, about language. While the specific wording of census language questions varies, scholars have identified three main foci or types of census language questions: 1) mother tongue; 2) current language use; and 3) language knowledge or

proficiency, which is typically asked about the official or national languages (deVries 1985, Lieberman 1966). Taxonomies of census language questions rarely include inquiries on literacy, either in general or specifically in the national language(s), but they may be considered a fourth type of language question (Christopher 2010).

National statistical agencies play a key role in public administration, and decisions about the type(s) of language questions to include are shaped largely by the state's reasons for collecting such data, and particularly the policies for which the resulting statistics are destined. In the 19th century, the desire of states to institutionalize national identities, as well as to delimit and quantify colonial and ethnoracial Others, led to a growing interest in classifying populations according to social and cultural criteria (Kertzer and Arel, 2002). But while there was agreement about the value of collecting information on ethnic and cultural identity, the question of HOW to do so was a matter of some debate, as there was concern that individuals might not think of themselves in such terms. Participants at the International Statistics Congress sessions in the second half of the 19th century ultimately agreed that language was a readily accessible proxy for ethnocultural identity.

Thus, the purpose of many early census language questions was to provide numerical documentation of ethnoracial or cultural nationality groups, rather than to collect data about language per se. In such cases, census takers often opted for a question about mother tongue, which was thought to reflect 'an assumed primordial inherited nationality' (Christopher 2010: 535). The resulting statistics could provide quantitative support for nationalist movements as well as serve as the basis of a wide range of policies related to minority groups and rights. While these policies were often about language, this was not always the case. For example, when the U.S. Senate voted that the 1910 census should classify the foreign-born (White) population by race, Congress mandated the inclusion of a mother tongue question to be asked only of the foreign born and their children (Leeman 2004, Perlmann 2001). Because language was seen as a quasi-biological and hereditary characteristic of individuals, U.S.-born children were classified as having the same mother tongue as their foreign-born parents, without taking into consideration whether they even knew that language, let alone spoke it (Leeman 2004). The production of statistics on the racial make-up of the White foreign-born population and their children was not related to language policy, but instead was part of a Congressional move to impose limits on immigration.

When language data are collected for the implementation of language policy, the second type of question, on current language use, is often employed. The specific wording of such questions varies, and includes queries about individuals' main language, the language they most commonly use, the language in which they most often think, and the language they use in the home. Though far less common, censuses also sometimes include questions about the language(s) used in other specific domains, such as the workplace (see for example, the Canadian census of 2006). Multilingual nations with territory-based language policies typically rely on language use statistics to define specific regions linguistically, generally according to the language of the majority, while those with person-based policies use language statistics to determine whether the percentage of minority language speakers meets a minimum threshold that would require government services in that language (Arel 2002, Prévost and Beaud 2002). For example, the Austrian constitution of 1867 outlined certain linguistic rights, including the right to education

and government services in Czech and other minority languages, based on statistics derived from the census language question. Specifically, rights were granted when 20% of the population of a given area declared the same minority language as their ‘language of use’ (Arel 2002). Questions about language use are also used to assess language maintenance and shift among linguistic minorities (Cardinal 2005). For example, Statistics Canada added a question to the 1971 census about the language usually spoken at home which, in conjunction with the question on mother tongue, was designed to allow officials to quantify language shift as well as to determine the direction of that shift in different locations (Prévost and Beaud 2002, Veltman 1986).

Statistics produced based on the third kind of census language question, about knowledge of national or official languages, are also used to assess linguistic assimilation among immigrants as well as speakers of local minority languages. In the case of nations or regions whose language policies include the preservation and/or revitalization of minority languages, statistics about language maintenance and/or shift among the native population and about the language to which immigrants assimilate are used to measure the success of revitalization and promotion programs.

The fourth kind of language question, about literacy, is frequently used as a measure of social progress or educational achievement and is often asked about literacy in general, rather than a specific language (Christopher 2010). Statistics on literacy are sometimes used as measure of development or social progress, or to assess the level of education or social status of social groups, such as women or immigrants.

Regardless of the specific policies for which data are collected, all census questions also embody particular ideologies about the constructs being measured. As Urla (1993, p. 819) notes, census statistics ‘operate simultaneously as technologies of scientific knowledge, of government administration, and of symbolic representation’. For example, the myriad ways that national statistics agencies classify populations by ethnicity and race (Morning 2008), as well as the ever-shifting ways in which ethnoracial identity has been measured on the U.S. census (Nobles 2000, Rodriguez 2000), reflect sociohistorically contingent understandings of social difference. Similarly, changes in the language questions on the U.S. census reflect changing ideologies of language, including shifting understandings of the relationship of language to racial and national identity (see Leeman 2004, 2013 for analysis of this history).

In the next section I turn to the case of the U.S. and a consideration of the history of the U.S. census and the federal policies that have shaped the Census Bureau’s inclusion of various language questions over the years.

3. THE HISTORY OF CENSUS LANGUAGE QUESTIONS IN THE U.S.: CHANGING POLICIES & DATA NEEDS.

The U.S. government conducted its first census in 1790, with a count of the population conducted every ten years since, as mandated by the Constitution (Article 1, Section 2). While the enumeration’s original purpose was the apportionment of taxation and representation in the House of Representatives, for which the Constitution required separate counts of free and enslaved persons, the population was also classified by race, gender and age. Thus, from the outset, census questions and classifications have reflected both specific policy mandates and

categories salient in U.S. public life (Nobles 2000). Over the years, additional questions have been added in response to new legislation and policies, as well as to congressional requests for data on a wide variety of topics, as new social issues and categories have gained ideological salience or political importance.

Given that in the 19th century, language was not the basis of legislation or policy, nor a particularly salient social characteristic, early censuses did not include language questions. In 1850 the first language-related inquiry, a question on the literacy of free adults was added, in accordance with a Congressional mandate to include inquiries on ‘the pursuits, industry, education, and resources of the country’ (U.S. Census Bureau n.d.) In 1890, a yes/no question on English speaking ability was added, and all decennial censuses from 1890 to 2000 except one inquired about language (Gauthier 2002).¹ However, the focus and the formulation of the language questions has varied widely over the years. In fact, all four kinds of language questions discussed in the previous section have appeared on the U.S. Census at one time or another. The first type, a mother tongue question, was first introduced in 1910 and various iterations have appeared on some censuses since then. The second type of question, about home language use, is included as part of the Census Bureau’s current three-part language question (discussed later in this article). Examples of the third type (about language knowledge) include the 1890 yes/no English-speaking ability question, as well as the last part of the current question, which asks respondents to report how well they speak English. Finally, the fourth type, about literacy, is exemplified in the question about the ability to read and write, introduced in 1850, as well as subsequent questions that inquired about these skills separately.² In addition to asking about different aspects of language knowledge or use, over the years the questions have been asked about different sectors of the population: in some cases, they were asked of all residents; in others, only of the foreign born or those with foreign-born parents (Gauthier 2002, Stevens, 1999).

The addition and reformulation of language questions in the history of the U.S. census reflect changing policies and ideologies about language, as well as shifting social realities. For example the addition of the English ability question in 1890 reflected both the growing importance of English in the understanding of United States national identity as well as lawmakers’ concerns regarding the linguistic assimilation of recent immigrants (Leeman 2004). After strict limits on immigration were imposed in the 1920s, the percentage of immigrants who reported an inability to speak English was only 7% in 1930. Immigration essentially came to a halt in the 1930s, and the English ability question was eliminated for the 1950 census.

As noted above, the 1910 introduction of a mother tongue question for the foreign-born and their children was also related to concerns about immigration, specifically the racial make-up of the immigrant population. Modified versions of the mother tongue question appeared through the 1940 census but were eliminated for the 1950 decennial survey. In 1960, a mother tongue question was reintroduced, slightly different from previous versions and this time asked only of immigrants, with the goal of ‘determining nationality or ethnic or linguistic origin of the foreign born, especially of those persons born in certain Eastern European areas which [had] experienced changes in national sovereignty’ (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1963:xlvi, cited in Stevens 1999). The mother tongue was modified yet again for the 1970, as the policy goals continued to evolve. Rather than determining the origins of Eastern European immigrants, the 1970 mother tongue

question, which was asked of both the native-born and the foreign-born, was designed ‘to assist in identification of the various ethnic groups in the population; in particular, the Spanish-language population’ the Census Bureau again modified the language question (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1976:5-16, cited in Stevens 1999), a growing concern among activists and policy-makers alike.

In the 1960s and 70s, growing acknowledgement of discrimination against Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, increased political activism, and a mounting politicization of the census undercount brought multi-faceted calls for better statistics about these groups, which (Anderson & Fienberg 1999; Choldin 1986). In turn, this led to efforts by the Census Bureau to explore various ways to define and identify Latinxs, including a language question. While many members of Latinx subgroups tended to think of themselves primarily in terms of their specific national origins, a pan-ethnic identify was also emerging, as is reflected by the tendency of some Mexican American leaders as well as the English language media to use pan-ethnic labels such as ‘Spanish’ and ‘Spanish American’ (Mora 2014). In addition to any assumed cultural similarities or shared history, the pan-ethnic label was based in part on assumptions of a shared linguistic identity, as is seen in the sometimes interchangeable use of ‘Spanish’, ‘Spanish American’ and ‘Spanish-speaking’ (Leeman 2013, Mora 2014). At the same time, however, there was also recognition among activists and government officials that not all ‘Spanish Americans’ spoke Spanish, and that English monolingualism was not uncommon (Mora 2014). Thus, the 1970 language question, rather than asking about current use, which would have excluded English monolinguals, inquired about mother tongue. Moreover, the wording of the question – ‘What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?’ – meant that not only would individuals who had undergone language shift to English be included, but so would individuals who had NEVER spoken a non-English language herself as long as it had been spoken by others in the household. This was consistent with the goal of ethnoracial identification.

In addition to the mother tongue question, the Census Bureau also experimented with other methods of the tabulation of ‘Spanish surnames’ and a self-identification question which asked a 5% sample whether an individual was of ‘Spanish or Hispanic origin’, ultimately settling on the latter as the preferred method of identifying what would subsequently come to be known as the ‘Hispanic or Latino population’ (Rodríguez 2000). In 1976, Congress passed PUBLIC LAW 94–311, officially recognizing discrimination against ‘Americans of Spanish origin or descent’ and mandating the production of social, health and economic statistics on this population, and a self-identification question was asked of the entire population beginning with the 1980 census (Rumbaut 2006).

With the adoption of the self-identification question, the Census Bureau moved away from reliance on language as an indicator of ethnoracial identity. At the same time, however, federal courts began to recognize that discrimination against ethnic minorities and national origin groups was sometimes enacted linguistically, such as by providing services only in English. New federal policies making explicit reference to language were enacted, mandating accommodations for persons with limited proficiency in English, as is discussed in more detail below. These policies lead to new requirements for reliable statistics to be used in implementation and evaluation, and in turn, new ways of asking about language, as will be discussed in the following section.

4. POLICY NEEDS AND THE CURRENT LANGUAGE QUESTION.

In contrast with the multiple versions of the mother tongue question in which language was used as a proxy for national origin or ethnoracial background, the current language question was designed to produce statistics about language itself. The federal need for language statistics can be traced to the 1974 landmark Supreme Court case *LAU V. NICHOLS*, which revolved around the San Francisco school system's lack of any special instructional provisions for Chinese-speaking students who did not speak English. The Supreme Court ruled that the failure to address the needs of such children constituted a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination based on the ground of race, color, or national origin, thus establishing a legal precedent linking language to national origin (Moran 2009).

In the wake of the Lau ruling, Congress passed the EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES ACT as an amendment to the ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT, which explicitly mentioned 'failure by an educational agency to take 'appropriate action' to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs' as an example of illegal denial of educational opportunity (Berenyi 2008). Thus, Congress generalized the Lau finding to all school districts and established an obligation for schools to provide instructional support for children with limited English-speaking ability (Stewner-Manzanares 1988). In 1974, Congress also reauthorized the BILINGUAL EDUCATION ACT, which provided federal guidelines and funding for bilingual programs. In terms of data collection needs, a key provision was a Congressional mandate for a study of the need for bilingual education (Macías 1993).

Attention to language barriers and to the role of language in national origin discrimination was also growing in other policy domains. Indeed, Public Law 94-311, which, as noted above, recognized discrimination against 'Americans of Spanish origin or descent' and mandated the production of statistics about the social, economic and health status of this segment of the population, directed the Census Bureau to produce Spanish-language census questionnaires and to hire Spanish-speaking census interviewers in order to reduce language barriers to participation. In the realm of electoral access and the right to vote, in 1975 Congress added SECTION 203 to the VOTING RIGHTS ACT, declaring that enforcement of the 14th and 15th amendments necessitated the elimination of practices and procedures excluding citizens of language minorities from participation in the electoral process (U.S. Department of Justice n.d.) In addition to providing the U.S. Department of Justice with statistics on the racial make-up of political districts, the law also required the Director of the Census Bureau to determine the proportion of residents who were members of language minorities historically excluded from the political process, defined in the law as persons of Spanish heritage, American Indians, Asian Americans and Alaskan Natives. These statistics, together with statistics on literacy and voter registration rates, as well as the (non)availability of minority language voting materials, were to be used in the identification of electoral districts that had engaged in discriminatory electoral practices and were thus subject to additional monitoring (Section 4b), as well as in the determination of districts that would be required to provide voting materials in non-English languages (Section 203). In contrast with the Bilingual Education Act and its focus on 'limited English-speaking children', the 1975 amendments to the Voting Rights Act based protections on

the percentage of minority language citizens in a given area, regardless of their English ability. In the 1982 amendment, however, Section 203 would be modified to exclude language minority citizens who were proficient in English, as is discussed in more detail in the next section.

These new federal policies and congressional mandates created a need for federal statistics about language spoken and knowledge of English, leading to a 1975 field-test on the current population survey (McArthur 1981) and ultimately to the introduction on the 1980 census of a three-part language question focusing on home language use and English-speaking ability (Macías 1993). The first part asked whether household members who are five years old or older ‘speak a language other than English at home’. If the answer was yes, respondents were asked to identify the non-English language, and then to report how well the individual speaks English in (see Figure 1). If the answer was no, the respondent was to skip to the next question.

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

Yes No, only speaks English — *Skip to 14*

b. What is this language?

(For example — Chinese, Italian, Spanish, etc.)

c. How well does this person speak English?

Very well Not well

Well Not at all

Figure 1. 1980 Census language question (Long form only)

Together, the first and second parts of the question can be considered a type two question, about current language use, while the third part is a type three question, about knowledge of the national language. The reason to use a filter question and thereby limit the question on English-speaking ability to those who reported speaking a non-English language was to reduce the burden on the majority of the population who spoke only English and who might be confused by the question (Kominski, personal communication, 2009). Similarly, limiting the language use question to those who speak a non-English language ‘at home’ was intended to exclude ‘languages which were not a part of one’s regular use’ (Kominski 1989, p. 1). As for literacy, the last time a direct question about the ability to read and write had been asked was in 1930. Rather than reintroducing such a question, the decision was made to use completion of five years of schooling as a proxy for literacy, regardless of the language or location of schooling.

Following the field test, the three-part language question was added to the 1980 census long form, a more extensive census survey distributed to a sample of the population that contained a wide range of questions on household and individual characteristics such as number of rooms,

availability of running water, place of birth, educational attainment, health insurance coverage, and labor market participation, among many others. The three-part question remained on the long form through 2000, with two small changes: 1) in 1990 the negative response option to Part A ('Do you speak a language other than English at home?') was changed from 'no, only English' to simply 'no', and 2) in 2000, the example languages were changed from Chinese, Italian, Spanish, and Vietnamese to Korean, Italian, Spanish, and Vietnamese (Gauthier 2002) (see Figure 2). In 2010, the Census Bureau eliminated the long form census and replaced it with the American Community Survey (ACS), an obligatory household survey administered continuously (rather than every ten years) to a large sample of the population, which allows it to serve almost like a 'rolling sample-based census.' Like the other questions previously on the census long form, the three-part language question was moved to the ACS, where it has remained ever since.

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

Yes

No → *SKIP to question 15a*

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

Figure 2. ACS language question (2012)

Since the introduction of the three-part question, federal language policy has evolved, and new and revised legislative mandates have led to new data needs. Rather than modifying the language question, Census Bureau researchers have investigated its suitability for producing statistics to be used in the implementation of these new policies. Such research is the focus of the next section.

5. EVOLVING LANGUAGE POLICIES AND THE VALIDITY OF THE THREE-PART QUESTION.

One area where educational language policy has changed since 1975 is in the attention to English language literacy, rather than simply English speaking ability. In fact, even before the 1980 census containing the three-part language question was carried out, the 1978 reauthorization of the Bilingual Education Act had stopped using the term LIMITED ENGLISH-SPEAKING to refer to the children to be served by the act, replacing it with LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT (LEP) and adding 'reading and writing' to the definition (Macías 1993).

The 1982 reauthorization of the 1965 Voting Rights Act also brought heightened attention to the measurement of broader English language proficiency (rather than just speaking ability), and to

the validity of the existing three-part question for new policy uses regarding minority language speaking adults (rather than just children). Specifically, an amendment included in the reauthorization changed the formula for determining which districts were required to provide ballots and electoral information in languages other than English. Whereas under the 1975 amendment, Section 203 had utilized a count of language minority citizens without considering their English ability, the 1982 reauthorization included only persons 'unable to speak or understand English adequately enough to participate in the electoral process'. The definition did not explicitly mention literacy, but the fact that voting materials and ballots were typically printed seemed to imply that the ability to read should be taken into account. In consultation with the Department of Justice, the Census Bureau sought to determine whether the three-part question could be used to produce the required statistics (Kominski 1985). In particular, the new policy raised two key issues: whether part B, the sub-question that asks how well the respondent 'speaks' English, could be used to assess English language proficiency more broadly defined to include literacy, and if so, which of the response options (i.e. VERY WELL, WELL, NOT WELL, or NOT AT ALL) should be used as the cut-off point.

In order to assess the validity of the census English-speaking ability question as a measure of English proficiency (including literacy), Census Bureau researchers conducted a new analysis of data from the 1982 English Language Proficiency Study (ELPS), which the Census Bureau had carried out for the Department of Education in order to fulfill a Congressional mandate for state-level counts of LEP children and adults. The original study involved the administration of English proficiency tests to individuals in households where at least one person had been reported as speaking a language other than English at home on the 1980 Census (U.S. Department of Education 1987), with a smaller sample of households that did not report any such individuals also included as a control. In order to gain a better understanding of how census responses correlated with actual English proficiency, researchers had visited the households in the study and administered a total of 29,230 proficiency exams (7,296 of these were administered to adults, and 18,207 were an age-specific children's version). In the reanalysis, researchers examined the proficiency test scores of individuals in the four response option categories and found that those who were reported as speaking English very well passed the proficiency test at rates similar to those reported to speak only English (Kominski 1989). In contrast, individuals who were reported to speak English well, not well, or not at all passed the test at significantly lower rates. Census Bureau officials thus concluded that the existing English-speaking sub-question was valid for the determination of districts covered by Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act and that a reported ability of less than very well should be considered inadequate for electoral participation (Kominski 1985, 1989; Wilson 2014).

In addition to comparing responses to the English speaking ability sub-question with direct measures of English proficiency, the Census Bureau also compared them to self-reports on the ability to carry out a range of oral and literacy-based tasks such as reading a newspaper or filling out a driver's license application form in English. Specifically, following the 1980 Census, researchers reinterviewed respondents and asked them more detailed questions. Results showed that 1) respondents' self reported ability for specific tasks correlated with responses on the English-speaking ability sub-question, and 2) the highest percentage of those who reported speaking English very well on the 1980 Census also reported being able to fill out a form without

difficulty (96 percent), in comparison with those who reported speaking well (78 percent), not well (38 percent), or not at all (5 percent) (Siegel, Martin and Bruno 2001).

Similar to the 1980 reinterview study, the 1986 National Content Test and the corresponding reinterview asked respondents whether they could read a newspaper or write a postcard in English, as well as several questions on contexts of language acquisition and use. Of those who reported speaking English very well, 98 percent reported being able to read a book and 97 percent said they could write a postcard in English (Kominski 1989). However, a high percentage of those who reported speaking English only well also reported being able to read a book and write a postcard in English (93 percent and 91 percent, respectively). Even 69 percent of those who reported speaking English not well reported being able to read a book in English, and 58 percent of them reported being able to write a postcard. In addition, there were relatively few individuals in the dataset who reported very low English speaking ability (45 reported speaking not well, and 10, not at all) compared to the number who reported speaking very well or well (452 and 140, respectively).

In sum, while the need for data on English-speaking ability led to the introduction of the three-part language question, changes in the Bilingual Education Act and the Voting Rights Act created a policy need for data on English language proficiency, rather than just speaking ability. Rather than change the English speaking ability sub-question, Census Bureau researchers have carried out a series of studies to assess the validity of that question for something other than its original intent. Satisfied that it was valid, they then used the reanalysis of the ELPS data to determine that ‘very well’ should be the cut-off point for the Voting Rights Act, with those reporting lower proficiencies classified as LEP (Kominski 1989). This decision was subsequently supported by the results of the National Content Test reinterview study (Kominski 1989).

As is discussed the next section, the decision to set the cut-off point at ‘very well’, which has been influential both in data reporting and in the implementation of other federal policies, was recently reaffirmed by another study comparing self-reported English-speaking ability to reading and writing literacy scores (Vickstrom, Shin, Collazo and Bauman 2015).

6. EXPANDING USES FOR STATISTICS ON LEP POPULATIONS AND THE NEED FOR GOOD DATA.

As the number and proportion of minority language speakers increased in the 1980s and 1990s, so did awareness of the lack of access of LEP persons to a wide range of public services. In addition, policy makers, service providers and demographers hypothesized that access to information and services might be determined not only by an individual’s English proficiency but by the proficiency of other members of the household. Specifically, they reasoned that an LEP person living in a household without any English proficient adults might have less access than a similar LEP person who shared a household with proficient speakers of English, who could facilitate his/her access to emergency communications, information and services. Thus, following the 1980 census, the Census Bureau developed the construct of LINGUISTIC ISOLATION, which was derived using data from the existing language question. Specifically, households where no one over the age of 14 who spoke only English or who spoke English very well were classified as linguistically isolated. While it was envisioned that estimates of the number and characteristics of linguistically isolated households would be useful for federal agencies involved

in emergency planning and management, the new construct was intended primarily for researchers (Bauman & Davis 2011, Siegel, Martin and Bruno 2001).³

The growing awareness of language barriers to a wide range of public services is also reflected in EXECUTIVE ORDER 13166 IMPROVING ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY, which was signed by President Clinton in 2000. Rooted in the CIVIL RIGHTS ACT's provisions against national origin discrimination, EO13166 requires federal agencies to develop and implement language access plans, and it mandates that all federally conducted and federally assisted programs take 'reasonable steps' to ensure 'meaningful access' by LEP persons. Neither EO13166 nor the Department of Justice's guidelines and compliance standards mandate a specific way to identify and assess the needs of LEP populations. However, language access policies clearly require data about LEP populations and the languages they speak, and many federal agencies turn to the Census Bureau's language statistics. Indeed, the federal interagency website www.LEP.gov recommends that covered programs consider using demographic data to assess the number or proportion of LEP persons from each language group in their service area in order to determine the language assistance to be provided, and Census Bureau data and reports figure prominently among the resources listed. Local and state-level governments also use Census Bureau language statistics in the implementation of language access programs, as do business interests marketing goods and services to targeted demographic groups (Powers, Beede & Telles 2015). As for the implementation of the Voting Rights Act, individuals reporting speaking English less than very well are classified as LEP.

In response to the growing interest in limited English proficiency and language access, Census Bureau researchers carried out a series of new analyses of the census language data (Siegel, Martin and Bruno 2001). In addition, they reviewed previous research investigating the validity of the English-speaking ability sub-question as a measure of proficiency, and they also examined its reliability, or the consistency of responses across time. When Siegel and his colleagues compared survey responses with subsequent reinterviews, they found a high level of inconsistency in responses to the English-speaking ability question, with respondents reported as speaking very well or well more frequently in the original survey than in reinterview; in other words, respondents reported lower English-speaking in the reinterview than in the original survey.

Although the Bilingual Education Act is no longer in effect, ACS statistics are also used by the U.S. Department of Education for its report to Congress on the social and economic status of children in school districts, as well as in the allotment of grants and sub-grants for English language acquisition and language enhancement under Section 3111 of the NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT. And in recent years, recognition of the role of language in public policy and the concomitant need for good language statistics have only increased, leading to new quantitative and qualitative research on the ACS language questions. In only the second Census Bureau study to examine validity by comparing self-reported English ability to direct measures of literacy (rather than self-reports of ability to complete specific literacy-based tasks such as fill out a form), Vickstrom, Shin, Collazo and Bauman (2015) carried out various analyses of data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which has an English-speaking ability question similar to the ACS question. Specifically, they compared responses on that question to scores on a 'prose literacy' assessment consisting of open-ended questions on a variety of texts. Results

showed a clear trend in prose literacy scores, with those who reported speaking English very well having the highest literacy scores and those who reported not speaking English at all having the lowest. In addition, respondents who reported speaking English very well performed most like respondents who spoke only English. The average score for both groups fell within the ‘intermediate’ prose literacy score, which the test defines as able to read and understand moderately dense, less commonplace texts, leading them to conclude that the ‘very well’ cut-off is appropriate. It is worth noting, however, that the English-only group had higher average scores than the group that reported speaking English very well. In addition, since the literacy assessment only includes adults, this study was unable to provide information about the validity of the English-speaking ability for children.

7. EXPANDING THE RESEARCH: QUALITATIVE APPROACHES, SPANISH LANGUAGE SURVEYS AND PROXY REPORTING.

As discussed thus far, the U.S. Census Bureau has conducted multiple studies of the current three-part language question. However, several gaps remained. For example, until recently all such studies had adopted a quantitative approach and there was a lack of qualitative research probing respondents’ about their subjective interpretation of the language question and the basis of their responses. This type of qualitative research, commonly referred to in the field of survey methodology as COGNITIVE INTERVIEWING, had not yet been developed when the question was introduced, but it is now widely considered to be a best practice in survey development. The value of cognitive interviewing as a pretesting methodology is recognized in the CENSUS BUREAU STANDARD FOR PRETESTING QUESTIONNAIRES AND RELATED MATERIALS FOR SURVEYS AND CENSUSES (2003), which mandates that all new questions be pretested prior to implementation.

In addition, although translated versions of the question had been included in the pretesting of Spanish, Chinese, and Korean language versions of the ACS, there was a lack of research in non-English languages focusing specifically on the language question (Kominski 1989, Siegel, Martin & Bruno 2001, Vickstrom et al. 2015). Further, researchers had not investigated how individuals reported the English-speaking ability of other household members. The basis of evaluation in this type of proxy-reporting is important in general, but even more so in cases in which LEP individuals are asked to evaluate and report the English-speaking ability of others, a situation likely to become more frequent with the increased completion of surveys in non-English languages.

In order to address these gaps in the research, Leeman (2015) utilized cognitive interviews to investigate Spanish-speaking respondents’ interpretations of the language questions as well as the basis of their responses. In that study, Spanish-speaking adults completed paper and oral interviewer-administered versions of the survey in Spanish. They were subsequently probed on their reasons for rating themselves as well as other household members as they did.

14 a. **En su hogar, ¿habla esta persona un idioma que no sea inglés?**

Sí

No → PASE a la pregunta 15a

b. **¿Qué idioma es ese?**

Por ejemplo: coreano, italiano, español, vietnamés

c. **¿Cuán bien habla esta persona el inglés?**

Muy bien

Bien

No bien

No habla inglés

Figure 3. ACS language question - Spanish language version (2012)

Perhaps the most striking finding was that 9 of the 48 (19%) participants who completed interviewer-administered surveys answered ‘no’ in response to the first part of the question, which asks if they speak a language other than English at home (see Figure 3 for the Spanish version of the ACS language question).⁴ Subsequent probing revealed that these were false negatives and that all participants in the study spoke Spanish at home. In some cases, the false negatives were due to participants misunderstanding the question as asking whether they spoke English (rather than a language OTHER than English). In the other cases, false negatives can be attributed to the sociopragmatic norms of conversational interaction, which may have led respondents to interpret an implied ‘other than Spanish’, given that the conversation was taking place in Spanish.

Cognitive interviews also revealed variability among participants regarding their interpretation of the question and the criteria they used in providing their response. Of the 43 cases in which participants said whether or not they would consider reading in their assessment of English ability (either because they mentioned it spontaneously or were asked directly), roughly 2/3 said they would do so. A similar proportion said that they would not take accent into account, although these were not necessarily the same individuals.⁵

As for proxy reporting, only 16 participants were asked to report on all household members, due to time constraints. In many of the proxy reports, participants explicitly compared the ability of household members to themselves or another household member. Of greatest interest were the five cases in which a participant with self-reported limited English-speaking ability reported that another household member spoke English very well. When probed on the basis of their responses, three such participants noted that the household member had been born in the U.S.; while the other two mentioned having observed the household member interacting with English-speakers, and knowing that the household member had had job interviews in English.

While caution is required regarding the interpretation of findings from this study, given the overall small sample size as well as the predominance of participants at the low end of the

English speaking ability scale, results nonetheless highlight the value of qualitative approaches, as well as the importance of conducting research in languages other than English.

8. CONCLUSION.

There is a wide range of questions that researchers inside and outside the Census Bureau, as well as various public and private actors, might like to include on the census or the ACS. However, in contrast with surveys conducted by individual scholars, academic institutions and non-profit organizations, the ACS and census questions are largely constrained by federal legislation, congressional mandates, and the explicit needs of federal agencies. As we have seen, particular ideologies about the connection of language to national origin as well as specific federal policies have shaped both the kinds of language data collected by the Census Bureau and the ways that those data are collected.

As policymakers continue to pay increased attention to the role of language in public life, there is likely to be a concomitant increased interest in language statistics. For example, the finding that English language proficiency and the availability of health-related services in patients' language are correlated with healthcare outcomes (Feinberg et al. 2002, Youdelman 2008) has prompted efforts to require the collection of language data in federal health-related programs and on health-related surveys (Perot and Youdelman 2001). In 2011, the Department of Health and Human Services released the ACTION PLAN TO REDUCE RACIAL AND ETHNIC HEALTH DISPARITIES, a multi-pronged effort that includes efforts to improve data collection on race, ethnicity, and language in healthcare, among other initiatives (Koh, Graham & Glied 2011). These developments highlight the importance of conducting further research to assess the validity and reliability of the current language question both in terms of existing policies and potential new uses.

Future research should include qualitative as well as quantitative studies, and must include research conducted in languages other than English, especially given the growth in non-English surveys and censuses. In particular need of further investigation are false negatives and alternative wordings that might reduce them, particularly but not only in non-English languages, especially as more and more policies rely on estimates of the LEP population for the implementation of various Civil Rights protections and other federal policies. Another crucial area for future research is the validity of responses to the English-speaking ability question for assessing the English proficiency of children, an issue not examined empirically since the 1980s, and one that should entail both a comparison of responses to actual measures of English proficiency and a consideration of how LEP parents assess their children's English. Such studies will help ensure data quality and the production of language statistics needed for the implementation of federal policy as well as other public and private uses.

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¹ The 1880 census' Indian Schedule included a question about language spoken, which was used to classify Native American people by ethnic or tribal affiliation. The English-speaking ability question added in 1890 was on the general population schedule. In 1940 the Census Bureau began asking supplementary questions of a random subset of the population, in addition to the census questions asked of the entire population, through the use of a "short form" and a "long form." Since that time, the language questions have appeared on the long form, distributed to a sample of the population. In 2010, the long form census was replaced by the American Community Survey

² In 1850 and 1860 the literacy question inquired whether free household members age 20 and over could read and write, without mentioning any specific language. In 1870, the census contained two literacy questions: one about ability to read and a separate one about ability to write, again with no specific language indicated (Gauthier 2002). These were merged again for the 1930 census, and then eliminated in 1940. Since that time, there have not been any direct inquiries on literacy.

³ Following objections to the negative connotations of the term (e.g., Zentella, Urciuoli & Graham 2007), in 2011 the Census Bureau stopped classifying households as linguistically isolated. The Census Bureau currently uses the term LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKING HOUSEHOLD.

⁴ In a live interview context, it is possible that interviewers conducting interviews in languages other than English probe respondents who answer that they do not speak a language other than English at home. In the context of the study, they did not probe participants about their answers until that section of the interview was completed.

⁵ The study was conducted in several rounds, with slight modifications in the protocol according to participant comments during earlier rounds. Thus, not all participants were asked whether or not they took reading ability or accent into account.