

# **‘English a foreign tongue’: The 2011 Census in England and the misunderstanding of multilingualism**

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Abstract

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The 2011 UK Census was the first decennial census to ask a question about language in England. The period during which the census was planned coincided with a period of intense politicisation of the language issue.

The census results showed that 98.3% of the adult population either spoke English as their main language, or could speak it well or very well. These statistics produced a media frenzy focussed on the number of people who supposedly could not speak English. There were misunderstandings among journalists and politicians about what the statistics meant, with ‘not speaking English as a main language’ being interpreted as ‘not speaking English’.

This paper discusses the census in England and its aftermath, revealing a lack of understanding of multilingualism and literacies by the monolingual majority. Not only were the census questions possibly flawed, but the results fed into anti-immigration discourse and were used to reduce services for non-speakers of English.

Keywords: census, multilingualism, bilingualism, England, sociolinguistics

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## **‘English a foreign tongue’: The 2011 Census in England and the misunderstanding of multilingualism**

### **1. Prelude: confusions and clarifications following the 2011 UK census**

A note in the ‘Corrections and clarifications’ column of the major national newspaper *The Guardian* on 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2012 illustrates the public confusions around questions of language in the 2011 United Kingdom census:

A Comment article [in our newspaper] said that the 2011 census showed that across the country there are “around a million households that speak no English”. In fact the census showed that just over a million households in England and Wales do not include a person who has English (or Welsh) as their main language. Many of those are likely to include people who can speak some English.

The ‘correction’ relates to a feature by a senior journalist (Ashley 2012) which discusses how the main opposition party, the Labour party, should deal with issues of immigration. The confusion that required this correction concerned a recently released statistic, which showed that in 1,002,072 households in England and Wales ‘no people in household have English as a main language’. The *Guardian* journalist had mistaken this to mean that in those households, no one spoke English at all. But the census question about ‘main language’ did not ask about abilities in English, only about whether the respondent considered English or another language to be their ‘main’ language. In fact, other census data shows that even in households where no one regarded English as their ‘main’ language, there were usually people who spoke English reasonably well.

That an article in a major national daily, aimed at influencing immigration policy, should have made such a basic mistake may seem unfortunate. But an almost identical mistake was committed a few months later by a very senior journalist of the national broadcasting corporation, the BBC. In a feature titled ‘How has immigration changed Britain?’ Nick Robinson, the BBC’s political editor, reported that in Peterborough, a small city in South-East England, ‘10% of households have no-one at home who speaks English’<sup>1</sup>.

No source was provided for this statistic but it seems certain to have been based on the 2011 UK Census figures, which showed that the number of local households where no one spoke English as a *main* language was 7438, or 10% of the total. But these figures did not show that

10% of households had no one who spoke any English. Based on the census figures, the maximum possible number of households in Peterborough where *no* English is spoken would only be 1.9% of the total<sup>2</sup> and the actual number was likely to be lower.

Not one, but two such prominent misunderstandings of the census data by senior journalists suggest that the misinterpretation may be widespread. The articles have several common features. Firstly, 'speaking a foreign language' is being used in both as a proxy for *immigration*, a major preoccupation of politicians in recent years. This also accounts for the prominence given to these statistics, which were clearly intended to shock. Secondly, the expression 'does not speak English as a main language' has been understood to mean 'cannot speak English at all'. This suggests that for those who made this interpretation, the notion barely exists that a person could speak English satisfactorily *alongside* another language which is their main language. In other words, the possibility of fluency in two or more languages is effectively dismissed.

If these are misunderstandings, they are nevertheless rooted in ideologies about language. The assertion in the original article that 'it's impossible to fully participate [in British society] if you don't speak and understand English' (Ashley 2012) reveals an ideology according to which speaking English is an essential part of citizenship in Britain. At the same time, the emphasis on English *only* displays an ideology of monolingualism which devalues bilingualism and linguistic diversity, leading to a 'blind spot' where 'main language' becomes 'only language'.

It is not surprising that census statistics are used here as part of essentially ideological arguments. The act of census-taking itself is profoundly ideological: as Leeman puts it, (2004, 509), 'the entire process of census-taking, from elaboration of the survey instrument through enumeration to tabulation and dissemination of results, is fraught with ideology'. Furthermore, media discussions of multilingualism are ideological and value-laden, even at the same time as they 'exploit the newsworthiness of multilingualism and multiculturalism, and thereby make linguistic and cultural diversity visible' (Kelly-Holmes and Milani 2011, 477).

The remainder of this paper will discuss the ideologically fraught process of the 2011 census in England. This census was unusual in that questions about language were asked for the first time, and in a context where language had recently become more contentious. The paper is

organised as follows: in Section 2 I will discuss the role of language questions in national censuses and their underlying ideological nature. In Section 3 I will discuss the availability of language statistics in England before the 2011 census. Section 4 focusses on the increasing politicisation of language in the United Kingdom after 2001. Section 5 discusses the history of the questions which eventually appeared on the census forms in 2011, while Section 6 is about the media response following the release of data almost two years later. Section 7 and 8 contain discussion and conclusions.

## **2. Language questions in national censuses**

Many countries currently include language questions in their national censuses, or have done so in recent times: (Aspinall 2005, Arel 2002). Numerous scholars have discussed the ideological nature of censuses and census categorisation, especially with regard to ethnicity and language. Kertzer and Arel (2002) point out how census categories produce top-down impacts on identity formation through the imposition of (inter alia) racial, cultural, ethnic and linguistic categories. For them, ‘the project of dividing populations into separable categories of collective identities’ is ‘a product of the ideology of colonial and modern states’ (p. 10); the use of such identity categories in censuses ‘creates a particular vision of social reality’. Leeman (2004) shows how the U.S. decennial census has used language as a way of racializing speakers of other languages, promoting specific ideological positions and ‘officializ[ing] the hegemonic ideologies which they reflect’ (2004, 530).

Even the assumption that languages have determinable numbers of speakers is not objective ‘fact’ but an ideological construct. Makoni and Mashiri (2007, 65-66), argue that ‘census ideology is the backbone’ of the ‘enumerative modality’ (Cohn 1996, 8) which ‘is predicated on the belief that languages in general, but African speech forms in particular, can be contained and controlled’. For enumeration to take place, languages must be labelled, despite the naming of languages being a concept embedded in Western formal education, which is largely absent in Africa (Makoni and Mashiri 2007, 66; see also Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 240 on the Western notion of language ‘ownership’ being imposed on African languages).

An insight into the ideological nature of language questions comes from the history of the census in Belgium, the first European country to ask about language in a decennial census (Arel 2002, 94). Language information was collected in censuses from 1846 onwards, but when the 1947 census showed that French was expanding at the expense of Dutch in the area

surrounding Brussels, it alarmed Flemish nationalists, who were faced with a reduction in the territory of Flanders. At this point ‘the problem had become politically untenable’ (Arel 2002, 106) and the language question was dropped from 1947 onward.

Thus while enumeration may serve the state’s purpose of categorising and labelling populations, a refusal to enumerate may equally serve ideological purposes. Haug (2003) points out the ‘close relationship’ between a country’s policy on minorities and the availability of official statistics. Where minorities have no official recognition, national statistical institutes usually collect no data on them, or any ‘statistical information which could run counter to the homogeneity proclaimed by the State’ (Haug 2003).

To summarise, census-taking is not a neutral activity, but is ideologically charged at each stage: as Urla puts it (1993, 819)

Who or what gets counted, by whom, and for what purposes are questions of immediate consequence to the distribution of economic and political power and to the experience of everyday life in modern civil society; furthermore, such is the authority of statistics, that what is at stake are ‘not only competing claims to resources but also competing claims to truth.

### **3. Language statistics for England before 2011**

The United Kingdom decennial census, though it happens everywhere simultaneously, takes somewhat different forms in the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom. Outside of England, language questions have been asked in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup> in previous censuses. However, a question about language was never asked in a census in England until 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2009).<sup>4</sup>

The introduction of language questions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland, Scotland and Wales reflected an acknowledgement of the presence of monolingual and bilingual speakers of indigenous languages – Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh – which could give rise to issues of concern to government, for example, regarding national identity or education. The fact that no language question was asked in England, which contains around 84% of the population of

the UK (2011 census figures) suggests that there was no sense of pressing language issues and that language was not substantially bound up with the national identity (cf. Leeman (2004, 514) on the lack of language questions in the 19th century U.S. census).

Statistics relating to speakers of any language were hard to obtain for England. The Linguistic Minorities Project (LMP 1985) estimated numbers of speakers of minority languages by using country of birth as a proxy for language (e.g. for Chinese speakers, p. 50 and Italians, p. 81). This strategy involved guesswork but was viable because at that time many of the communities consisted mainly of first-generation immigrants and their children. More accurate information was obtained through school language censuses conducted by some local authorities (LMP 1985, 113). However, such statistics could only provide an indication of numbers of young speakers, and of the linguistic diversity of an area. They did not provide information about the extent to which English, or any other language, was known and used. One study aimed at finding out about English proficiency among minority linguistic communities in England was carried out by Carr-Hill et al. (1996), who concluded that there were ‘many many thousands of people, both outside and in London, who are functionally illiterate in English [and] cannot participate fully in English society’ (Carr-Hill et al. 1996, 113).

Thus at the end of the century there were still no reliable statistics about language use in England, and no plans to use the census to collect any. A record from the preparations for the 2001 census notes (ONS 1998, 3) that a question on language, ‘to collect information about people who have difficulty with English’ was tested, but dropped.

#### **4. The ‘Language Question’ in politics after 2001**

Despite the fact that immigration was a contentious issue in Britain from the 1960s onwards, notably in the 1960s and 1980s, it was seldom linked directly to language. Language diversity, especially in schools, was at times regarded as a challenge, and how to respond was politically controversial, but it never became a major issue in national politics (see, e.g. Ager 1996, 91ff, Martin-Jones 1984, Edwards 1979).

‘Sufficient knowledge’ of English (or Welsh, or, later, Gaelic) had been a requirement for some categories seeking to acquire British citizenship since 1914 (Ryan 2009, 278) and was gradually extended to almost all foreign nationals, but there was at first no formal procedure

for measuring it. At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, knowledge of English was not a requirement for obtaining a visa or a permanent residence permit either.

Around the turn of the millennium, there was a ‘dramatic and sustained increase’ in public concerns about immigration and race issues (Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014, 8). Inner-city disturbances in spring and summer of 2001 were widely seen as ethnically based, and ‘integration’ and ‘cohesion’ became major concerns of central government, especially following the 9/11 bombings in New York in 2001 and the London bombings of July 2005. These fueled media fears of a ‘fifth column’ of South Asians, legally settled but unintegrated into British society, undermining its values from within (see Blackledge 2006, 63ff on ‘Islamophobia’ and its language-related consequences).

In 2001 the Labour Party government set up a Community Cohesion Review Team, whose report stressed the need for establishing a new set of national values, including ‘a universal acceptance of the English language’. The Review Team declared: ‘[W]e would expect the new values to contain statements about the expectation that the use of the English language, which is already a pre-condition of citizenship [...] will become more rigorously pursued, with appropriate support’ (Home Office 2001, 19).

Language was not discussed in the Cohesion Review Team’s report in depth, nor was it made clear how wide the support was for the ‘new values’ regarding language. Nonetheless, the ‘more rigorous pursuit’ of the expectation to use English began almost immediately. The Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announced early in 2002 that people wanting to become British citizens would have to take an English language test, coupled with an exam on British life and history<sup>5</sup>. Later that year he published an essay in a national newspaper in which he emphasised the importance of minorities speaking English to enable ‘parents to converse with their children in English, as well as in their historic mother tongue’. He claimed that ‘in as many as 30% of Asian British households, according to the recent citizenship survey, English is not spoken at home’ (Blunkett 2002).

Blunkett’s apparent call for British Asians to speak English in their own homes provoked controversy, and his picture of Asian British households where no English is spoken was dismissed as ridiculous by members of his own party (see Blackledge 2006, 77ff for further discussion and interpretation of Blunkett’s essay).

It is pertinent here that these, and other claims about the proportions of English speakers were made in ignorance. Blunkett's claim that 'in as many as 30% of Asian British households English is not spoken at home' seems not to be derivable from statistics found in his department's 2001 Citizenship Survey. In any case, the survey asked only about the home language; as pointed out by Amar Singh, editor of *Asian Express*, many of the people concerned would 'speak the Queen's English at work and school and choose to speak what they want at home' (Singh 2002). It seems to be another case of miscommunication of some fairly basic facts about multilingualism: 'speaking English' need not mean speaking *exclusively* English, and multilinguals may use different languages in different domains.

A new phase of government interventions on language began in 2007, with attacks on the provision of multilingual versions of documents. Many local authorities routinely provided information in multiple versions, in the most widely spoken local languages. In 2007 the government set up a new Commission on Integration and Cohesion, which recommended that 'Translation should be reduced except where it builds integration and cohesion' (Commission on Integration and Cohesion 2007, 168).

Shortly after this, the Communities Minister was reported to have warned that 'too much translation of public information was reinforcing the language barrier, acting as a brake on opportunity and undermining efforts to integrate non-English speaking residents in the UK' (LGC 2007). She issued guidance requiring authorities to 'think twice before continuing with, or providing new, written translation materials – considering the impact on both those who actually use them, and also thinking through how English speakers will perceive the special provision of written materials that do not feature any English' (Department for Communities and Local Government 2007, 10).

Thus the planning process for the 2011 census coincided with a period when language was very much part of the public policy agenda. Official policy had turned strongly in favour of 'integration' of minorities through using English, against the admission of 'migrants' for settlement who did not already know English, and against 'undermining' integration by allowing minorities to rely on translation and interpretation paid for by taxpayers. All these policy evolutions had taken place without anyone actually knowing how many people spoke languages other than English or, for those who could speak English, how well they spoke it.



## 5. The language questions in the 2001 census in England

Given the importance of language in the government's policy agenda after 2001, it is perhaps surprising that the Office for National Statistics initially resisted putting a language question in the 2011 census for England because they 'believed that there was insufficient evidence of user demand to justify inclusion' (ONS 2006, 14).

However, by this time in fact many organisations had identified a need for language data and were prepared to argue for a language question in the next census. Stakeholders cited a range of reasons for needing language information, including monitoring and analysis of disadvantage (e.g. in education and the labour market), improving service provision, and monitoring the use of indigenous British languages (including Sign Language). (ONS 2009, 9-10). Several cited a government study which concluded 'There are no reliable data on the number of people whose first language is not English. This causes serious problems with the planning and delivery of provision' (Schellekens 2001, vi). Estimates of the numbers of people with poor English varied from 400,000 to 1.7 million (Aspinall, 2005, 363), with Schellekens giving an estimate of between 1 and 1.5 million (Schellekens 2001, vi).

The ONS now decided that although a question on language would be included in the 2011 census, there would *not* be a question about proficiency in English, because what service providers most needed was to know what languages were used *instead* of English (ONS 2006, 16). However, in a second consultation a strong case was also made for information about English proficiency, on various grounds, including its potential to be used as 'an indicator of integration' (ONS 2007, 57).

Following a series of pilots and trials of different question formats, the ONS settled on two language questions: 'What is your main language?' for all respondents, followed by a question on English proficiency for those with a main language which was not English. According to ONS, 'Main language was considered a useful concept in meeting the essential user need of allowing data users to understand which languages services should be provided in' (ONS 2009, 35). The second question, 'How well can you speak English?' was based on a question asked in the US census. There were to be four possible responses: 'Very well', 'Well', 'Not well' and 'Not at all'. According to the ONS, analysis of the US census responses indicated that these were clear enough to users and could be used to present the

results with a two-part distinction, ‘very well’ or ‘well’ indicating a satisfactory level of proficiency for most purposes, and ‘not well’ and ‘not at all’ indicating a need for assistance (e.g. interpreters or translations of documents) (ONS 2009, 38-39).

This two-stage question on language was placed on the 2011 census questionnaire for England.

## **6. The 2011 census outcome and the media response**

The Office for National Statistics released its initial ‘Key Statistics’ bulletin on 11th December 2012. It showed that 92% of residents in England spoke English as their main language, and among those who did not, less than 1.7% of all the population did not speak English well or at all. Furthermore, in 91% of households all the adults had English as their main language, although in 4.4% of households no one had English as a main language.

In the following week, national newspapers in the UK published a total of 213 articles with the word ‘census’ either in the headline or the leading paragraph. Of these, 64 included at least one of the words ‘immigration,’ ‘migrant’ and ‘foreign’. With the detailed language data not yet available, at least 12 of the articles included the word ‘language’ (see Table 1, Appendix A), and seven of these also mentioned immigration<sup>6</sup>.

Some of the headlines certainly involved a large amount of interpretation, for example the claim made by both *The Daily Telegraph* and *MailOnline*, ‘English a foreign tongue,’ appears to be based on the ONS statement that in London ‘26 per cent (848,000) of households contained a usual resident whose main language was not English’ (see Appendix B for full text).

The release of more detailed statistics in January 2013 led to another spate of headlines, most of them focussing on the number of Polish speakers (See Table 2, Appendix A). Some of these also involved a large degree of interpretation, for example the report headed ‘MIGRANTS SHUN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: 4 million people living here hardly speak it’ (*The Express*, 31.1.2013, p.1). The report began: ‘MORE than four million migrants in Britain cannot or rarely speak English’. This can only be interpreted as a dishonest representation of the census figures, which showed that of 4,068,830 residents in England for whom English was not a main language, 3,224,985 or 79.3% said they spoke English ‘well’ or ‘very well’ (although the census did not record how frequently they spoke it).

The attention-grabbing headlines were sometimes, but not always, followed by a less sensational and more factual text. An article in a provincial newspaper, the *Evening Gazette* (Pain 2013), is an example. The headline is: 'Residents' English language struggle; Thousands can't speak native tongue'. The article begins 'THOUSANDS of people living on Teesside struggle to speak English, it has emerged' but goes on to explain that in the region a total of 3,059 people can't speak English well, while 478 people can't speak it at all. Taken together these figures represent 0.003% of the local population, less than the national average of 0.008%, according to the article – but these figures are wrong; the correct ones being 0.68% and 1.65%, based on the ONS statistics<sup>7</sup>.

Some of the media coverage put a more positive spin on the statistics, for example: 'Almost eight out of 10 Northamptonshire residents who have a foreign mother tongue speak a good standard of English, according to figures released today [...] with just under three per cent [of those whose main language was not English] unable to speak English at all' (Spoors 2013).

However, even where the media gave a more balanced picture there was a tendency to dramatise the statistics. In the Guardian article which motivated the correction cited at the beginning of this paper, the political commentator Jackie Ashley used the incorrect statistic as one of several to emphasise the effects of immigration:

Though the effects are spread across most of urban Britain, they are most dramatic in London. There, just under 45% of people are white British. Across the country less than 90% are white. Some 7.5 million people are foreign born; there are apparently around a million households that speak no English. These are dramatic numbers. (Ashley 2012)

Unfortunately, as we have seen, one of her dramatic numbers was incorrect. The Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, published his commentary in the *Sun* newspaper a month later, once again attacking the provision of translation and interpreting services (which he blamed on the previous government, though in fact they had started dismantling the services while still in office):

The trouble with Labour's approach - of concentrating on what divides us instead of unites us - was that it never trusted people to get to grips with English. Instead it preferred to pay for interpreters and foreign language translation [...] It's left us addressing a frankly incomprehensible situation [...] where, according to the 2011 census, no one speaks

English as their main language in five per cent of households [...] So language is a big part of our plans to bring people together and help Britain prosper in 2013. [...] Instead of millions lost in translation services, we'll be ploughing in £6 million to encourage people to improve their lot. (Pickles 2013)

Pickles communicated the statistic correctly – ‘no one speaks English as their main language in five per cent of households,’ but used it to imply that people in such households have inadequate knowledge of English and need encouragement – in the form of the withdrawal of translation services – to learn it and thereby ‘improve their lot’. He, too, ignored the statement that accompanied this statistic from the ONS: ‘People who did not report English as a main language may be fluent English speakers’ (see Appendix B); nor did he mention the fact that overall only 0.3% of the population could not speak English at all, and only 1.7% could not speak it ‘well’ or ‘very well’.

## **7. Discussion**

After decades of *not* asking about language, the census for England was expanded in 2011 to include two questions, one about main language and another about proficiency in English. The decision to do this was taken around 2007, in response to pressure from public user bodies, but also – coincidentally or not - just at the time the Government’s pro-‘integration’, anti-multilingualism agenda became manifest.

The publication of the resulting statistics provided an opportunity to clarify some of the uncertainties about language use in England. For example, statistics cited by Schellekens (2001, vi) and Aspinall (2005, 363) suggested between 400,000 and 1.7 million people who had insufficient English skills. The 2011 census showed that 863,150 self-assessed that they could not speak English or could not speak English well: this is double the lower of those estimates, but only half the higher estimate.

The claim made in 2002 by David Blunkett – that ‘as many as 30% of Asian British households’ did not use English at home - turned out to contain a kind of truth, as the census data showed that 24.49% of South Asians *whose main language was not English* had poor English proficiency or none at all. There was wide variation among language groups, from

3.5% of the small group whose main language was Telugu to 45% of the likewise small Pahari-speaking group. Altogether 2,944,498 people declared their Ethnic group to be 'Indian', 'Pakistani' or 'Bangladeshi' in the census. As a proportion of all these, those South Asians who could speak little or no English (313,806) amounted to only 10.7% of the total in England. It would be reasonable to conclude that *not* 'as many as 30%' of British Asian households' did not use English in 2002<sup>8</sup>.

The value of the census figures, however, depends greatly on the extent to which self-assessment is a reliable instrument for determining proficiency. If it isn't, then the statistics may not be useful even for the ONS's limited goal of determining needs for service provision. Furthermore, since the question, taken literally, refers to *speaking* English, while much of the service provision involves *written* English, the usefulness of the statistics is called further into doubt.

Irrespective of the statistics collected, however, we can say that the 2011 Census in England has revealed something about the public understanding or misunderstanding of multilingualism in a country where 'monolingualism' is hegemonic. This is shown most clearly by the interpretation of the published statistics about 'household language'.

With hindsight one may wonder why the ONS decided to release, as a 'key statistic' at an early stage, tables showing 'household language'. The census had no question about the way languages were used in the household, only the main language used by *individuals* and their English proficiency. This information was used to compile a table (Table KS206EW) with the categories 'All people aged 16 and over in household have English as a main language', 'At least one but not all people aged 16 and over in household have English as a main language', 'No people aged 16 and over in household but at least one person aged 3 to 15 has English as a main language' and 'No people in household have English as a main language'. It was the last figure in particular that gave rise to errors and misinterpretations, with 'have English as a main language' being misread as 'can speak English'.

However, this set of categories is a very blunt instrument with which to try to dissect the complex linguistic organism of a multilingual household. The fact is that such households are more than the sum of their mono- or multilingual parts. Different members of the household

may draw on similar repertoires but use the languages concerned to a different extent depending on age, generation, gender, occupation or status. The categories used in the census table are not sensitive to these differences.

For example in a household where ‘no people aged 16 and over in household but at least one person aged 3 to 15 has English as a main language,’ ‘at least one person aged 3 to 15’ could refer to a single six year old who speaks English at school but mostly Bengali with adults at home, or to three teenagers who use English most of the day at school and speak it among themselves at home as well. Since the ONS has not to date compiled a table showing English proficiency by household, we still do not know how *well* English is spoken in households where it is not the main language of the whole family, and the census figures will never be able to tell us how *much* it is spoken.

In the public arena, the appearance of the census figures in late 2012 led to something like a moral panic regarding the numbers of people who could not, or did not, speak English. In a country more attuned to multilingualism, the fact that out of over 50 million people there were only 137,000 in England who could not speak the majority language, and another 700,000 who spoke only a little, might have given rise to amazement that such homogeneity was possible. However, the media and politicians tended to treat these figures as evidence of a serious problem, while journalists looking for dramatic statistics made basic mistakes in their interpretations of the data.

This could have been a simple story of journalistic innumeracy, and politicians engaging with the truth only to the extent that it served their own purposes. However, the nature of the mistakes made suggests also that there is a fundamental and systematic lack of understanding of the nature of bilingualism and multilingualism among journalists and politicians, and presumably the public in general. The ONS requirement in the census questionnaire that respondents select one language as their ‘main language’ may have caused difficulties for some respondents, but at the same time it is clear that journalists – and, presumably, the wider public – have difficulty understanding the idea that a person may speak one or more languages fluently in addition to their ‘main language’. Furthermore, a household may be (and often is) a network of people of different generations and genders with differing spoken language preferences and abilities, and different literacies, used in different contexts. The inference that a ‘household where no one speaks English as a main language’ is one where ‘no one speaks English’ can only be made under the assumption that any language which is

not used as a 'main language' is a language which the person in question does not speak well or on a regular basis. Yet this is far from the truth, and is an assumption explicitly (and preemptively) warned against by the ONS itself (see Appendix B).

A lack of research in this area is not to blame for these misunderstandings, as there is ample research showing both the complexity of the multilingual households and the extent to which English is used, especially among younger generations (e.g. Li Wei 1994, Aitsiselmi 2004, Rampton 2005, Creese and Blackledge 2010 and 2011, Mills 2001, Rasinger 2013).

Furthermore, there is good evidence (e.g. Aitsiselmi 2004, Rasinger 2013) that any lack of proficiency in English is a transitional problem, as younger generations take up English as a second main language or as a first language.

One response to this weak understanding – or ideologically motivated ignorance - of multilingual cultures by monolinguals might be to try to educate the monolinguals to a better understanding of how multilinguals communicate, and what their actual needs are. However, there are also signs that the political agenda has shifted: that it is no longer considered enough that people of migrant origin should have a satisfactory knowledge of English, but that now English should become their *main* household language in order to show 'integration'. This may have been hinted at in David Blunkett's comments in 2002, but it certainly seems to be implicit in the Communities Secretary's complaint that it is 'a frankly incomprehensible situation' when 'no one speaks English as their main language in five per cent of households' (Pickles 2013).

The confusion over what it means for minorities to 'speak English' also makes it difficult to interpret public opinion. For example, the 31<sup>st</sup> Report on British Social Attitudes reveals that 95% of those surveyed think that 'to be able to speak English' is important 'for being truly British', and that the perceived importance of this increased by nearly ten percentage points between 2003 and 2013 (Kiss and Park 2014, 64). What is not clear is what the respondents understood by 'being able to speak English'. Was this interpreted to mean that 'truly British' people should speak *only* English? Or would it be enough to speak mainly English, or speak it as one language in a repertoire of several?

While the stated intention of the ONS in asking the language questions was, inter alia, to find out what languages were needed for the purposes of service provision, ironically it seems that politicians have used the data to do the opposite, by putting pressure on local authorities to withdraw translation and interpreting services. As he had promised, the Communities minister issued a statement in March 2013 requiring local authorities to stop automatically translating documents into foreign languages except on ‘rare occasions in which this is entirely necessary’ such as emergencies (*Hansard*, 12 Mar 2013: columns 5WS-6WS). He asserted that ‘Translation undermines community cohesion by encouraging segregation’.

## **8. Conclusions**

The long-awaited language question in the 2011 Census in England has raised far more questions than it has answered. The data collected was used by the media to feed xenophobia, and by politicians as grounds for *reducing* services for speakers of foreign languages. It is as yet not clear to what extent the data has been useful to public bodies such as local authorities and the health service.

Beyond the immediate context of England, this census and its aftermaths raise a number of issues. Firstly, the collection of language data – of any type – is not a straightforward matter. It is not necessarily the case that a national census can actually deliver the quality of data that users require, given the constraints surrounding the data collection instrument. It is not clear that the providers of services who request this data always understand the complexity of language in its social context any better than the general public: languages are resistant to the ‘enumerative modality’ even though their countability is often taken for granted. The view of languages as ‘repertoires and resources’ (Blommaert 2005, 2010) has yet to gain traction among the public and policy makers, where a ‘structural-functional’ view prevails (see Kelly-Holmes and Milani 2011, 474).

Secondly, there is the ideological nature of the categories involved. There is always a danger that rather than being used simply to provide local agencies with data which will improve delivery of services – which was the ostensible reason for including language questions in the England census – the census will be used for covertly or overtly ideological purposes such as ethnic categorisation, the identification of in- and out-groups, or reducing the resources



available to certain groups. Even if there is no such intention at the time, the data collected may be put to these uses later.

Thirdly, in a political context where migration is a focus of attention for politicians, media and the public, the communication of the results is itself as important as the collection of the data. It is almost inevitable that the data will be interpreted in different ways by groups in accordance with different ideological motivations – Urla's (1993, 819) 'competing claims to truth'. Nevertheless there is an onus on the agencies who collect the data to communicate statistical information in a responsible way, to allow politicians and media as little opportunity as possible for wilful misrepresentation.

Further study of the 2011 census in England may lead to the conclusion that the questions asked should be asked again in the same way, or that different questions (or no questions) would be preferable. Either way, it is important to bear in mind, as Arel (2002, 115) points out, that the census 'is an inherently political instrument, since the choice of particular categories derives from political choices'.

## Appendix A

**Table 1: National newspaper headlines concerning language<sup>9</sup> in the week following publication of key census data (11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> December 2012)<sup>10</sup>.**

HEADLINE	PUBLICATION	DATE
2011 census reveals an alien nation	i-Independent	17.12.2012
All state workers should speak English	MailOnline	14.12.2012
English is foreign tongue for up to a quarter of London households	MailOnline	13.12.2012
English a foreign tongue for 1 in 4 families in parts of the capital	Daily Telegraph	13.12.2012
The census captures Britain's diversity	Guardian	13.12.2012
[Home Secretary]: Immigration has put a strain on communities	i-Independent	13.12.2012
English not first language for 9%	Daily Mirror	12.12.2012
Wave of immigrants drives rising population	Daily Telegraph	12.12.2012
Census shows Labour's betrayal of our country	Express	12.12.2012
Census: Immigration: 'I stand in the school playground and all I hear is Polish'	Guardian	12.12.2012
Census 2011: the families where no adults speak English as a first language	telegraph.co.uk	11.12.2012
Migrants lingo call	Sun	14.12.2012

**Table 2: National newspaper headlines concerning language in the week following publication of detailed language data (30<sup>th</sup> January to 5<sup>th</sup> February 2013)<sup>11</sup>.**

HEADLINE	PUBLICATION	DATE
The 5 Polish phrases every Briton needs	Independent.co.uk	5.02.2013
Poles vault	Sunday Times	3.02.2013
We are just one big happy family; residents on what it's like to live in UK's most multi-cultural street	Daily Star	2.02.2013
Diversity Street; The road where English is a second language	Express	2.02.2013
Half a million in the UK now speak it: in praise of Polish	i-Independent Print Ltd	2.02.2013
Welcome to Britain's most diverse street!	MailOnline	2.02.2013
If we don't have a common language we will all suffer	Express	1.02.2013
Why Poles love coming to Britain	telegraph.co.uk	1.02.2013
Poles vault; Polish leaps up lingo list to be our second tongue	Daily Mirror	31.01.2013
Migrants shun the English Language: 4 million people living here hardly speak it'	Express	31.01.2013
Revealed: Polish is now second most common language in UK	DAILY MAIL	31.01.2013
Polish is the second language of England	Daily Telegraph	31.01.2013
Polish is our 2nd language; 140,000 speak no English	Daily Star	31.01.2013
Leading article: In praise of... the Polish language	Guardian	31.01.2013
Population: England's second language is Polish, census reveals	Guardian	31.01.2013
Polish is second most common language in UK	i-Independent Print Ltd	31.01.2013

Polish becomes UK's second language	i-Independent Print Ltd	31.01.2013
The 5 Polish phrases every Briton needs	Independent.co.uk	31.01.2013
Polish makes itself heard as the new voice of Britain	Independent	31.01.2013
Czy mówisz po polsku?* Polish becomes the UK's new lingua franca	Independent	31.01.2013
Revealed: The language map of England which shows where up to 40% of people say English is not their mother tongue	MailOnline	31.01.2013
A bustling community eager to prove immigrants got talent	Times	31.01.2013
Polish talks its way into mainstream to claim title as England's second language	Times	31.01.2013
Polish becomes England's second language	Guardian.com.	30.01.2013
Polish is second most spoken language in England and Wales, as census reveals 140,000 residents cannot speak English at all;	Independent.co.uk	30.01.2013
Polish is the second language of Britain and nearly 140,000 people living here can't speak English at all	MailOnline	30.01.2013
Polish becomes the second language of England after a decade of immigration	telegraph.co.uk	30.01.2013
Census 2011: Polish becomes the second language	telegraph.co.uk	30.01.2013

## Appendix B

### Extract from the ONS Statistical bulletin '2011 Census: Key Statistics for England and Wales, March 2011' released 11 December 2012 (page 18)

#### Household language

The 2011 Census collected information for the first time on main language and English language skills.

In 2011, all usual residents in 91 per cent (21.3 million) of households spoke English as a main language. In a further four per cent (868,000) of households at least one adult spoke English as a main language and in one per cent (182,000) of households no adults but at least one child spoke English as a main language. In the remaining four per cent (1.0 million) of households there were no residents who had English as a main language.

People who did not report English as a main language may be fluent English speakers and were able to report their English language proficiency as 'good' or 'very good'.

[...]

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<sup>1</sup> In Peterborough around 13% of the population are immigrants who have arrived since 2001. This article appeared on the BBC news website at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22339080>

<sup>2</sup> Census tables showing language proficiency data by household have not been released at the time of writing. Individual data on proficiency in English shows that 1401 individuals, or 0.8% of the Peterborough population, claimed that they did not speak English at all. Even if all the individuals who spoke no English at all lived in one-person households (there are an average of 2.4 people in households in Peterborough), such households would only be 1.9% of the 74000 households in Peterborough; but in fact, it is likely that many of those who spoke no English lived with others who did, even if not as a main language. A similar argument can be applied to England as a whole, where there were 980,000 households where no one spoke English as a main language. Using the average number of people per household, there would be a total of around 2.3 million people living in such households, but only 844,000 people in total declared that they could not speak English well or at all.

<sup>3</sup> Until the establishment of a separate state in the south of Ireland, the UK census covered all of Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> The same questionnaire is used for households in England and Wales, but in recent censuses until 2001, in the space where the language question appeared in the version for Wales, the questionnaire for England simply had a blank with the note: 'this question is not applicable in England'.

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<sup>5</sup> English Language Testing for naturalisation was introduced in 2005, and extended in 2007 to apply to applicants for permanent residence visas (see Blackledge 2009 for further discussion.) The requirements were further tightened in 2013.

<sup>6</sup> There is some variation in the actual numbers depending on whether online versions of print newspapers are included.

<sup>7</sup> See Table QS205EW: ‘2011 Census: Proficiency in English, local authorities in England and Wales’. Office for National Statistics.

<sup>8</sup> Source: ONS tables DC2210EW<sub>r</sub> – ‘Main language by proficiency in English (regional)’ and KS201EW – ‘Ethnic group’

<sup>9</sup> the explicit reference to language may be in the lead paragraph rather than the headline.

<sup>10</sup> Search of UK newspapers carried out using Nexis database for the period 10-18 December 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Search of UK newspapers carried out using Nexis database for the period 30th January to 5th February 2013 using keywords “census” and “language” or “tongue” or “lingo”.

### **About the author**

Mark Sebba is Reader in Sociolinguistics and Language Contact at Lancaster University. He has published research on pidgin and creole languages, conversational code switching in bilingual communities, and the Sociolinguistics of Orthography, a relatively unexplored field which examines the cultural and social aspects of spelling and writing systems. His most recent research has been about texts written in multiple languages.