How bilingual is Queens?

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Bilingualism is deeply interwoven into the identity of New York City. Known as the world's most famous immigration hub, New York City represents an unparalleled level of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity that few places in the world have. As Tonnelat and Kornblum (2017) note, one good place to observe dynamic language practices in New York City is the 7 train, which runs through Eastern Queens to West Manhattan. Sitting on a seat with eyes closed, we can listen to a whole range of different languages spoken in the city, from Mandarin and Korean near Flushing, to a range of Spanish dialects near Junction Blvd, a melangé of South Asian languages at Roosevelt Ave, and a group of languages spoken in small communities such as Portuguese, Greek, Arabic, and Japanese at Queensboro Plaza. Finally, additional languages spoken by tourists contribute to this tremendous level of linguistic diversity on the 7 train after the East River into Manhattan.

It is probably well-known that the U.S. as a whole is gradually becoming a bilingual nation. The number of bilingual speakers has steeply increased after the passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated the national-origins quota for U.S. immigration and opened the door to people in non-Western nations such as South America, Asia, and Africa (Hugo-Lopez, Passel, & Rohal, 2015). It is safe to say that the current bilingual capacity in the U.S. owes a lot to the influx of immigrants after 1965. According to the American Community Survey in 2015 (Gambino, 2018), 65.5 million or about 20% of people in the U.S. speak languages other than English at home. Also, my own study (Nagano, 2015) shows that the number of heritage language speakers (those who speak English as the primary language and speak an additional language at home, typically second-generation immigrants born to parents speaking minority languages) has also increased by leaps and bounds from 13.9 million speakers in 1980 to 28.7 million speakers in 2010.

Year	# of HL speakers
1980	14,083,320
1990	18,736,328
2000	24,404,745
2010	28,713,690

Table 1: The Numbers of HL Speakers in the U.S. in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 (adapted from Nagano, 2015)

While the increase of bilingual speakers is frequently discussed, it is less well-known that we are also witnessing an unprecedented level of expansion in the number of languages spoken in the U.S. The previous patterns of bilingualism in the U.S. tend to be associated with mass migration from a specific region or a small number of ethnic communities such as Irish mass immigration in the

1830's - 1840's, immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe in the 1880's, and immigration from Latin America in the late 20th century. As a consequence, bilingual speakers in the past spoke a relatively small set of languages in the U.S. such as German, French, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish. What we have been witnessing in the past few decades is, however, a large number of languages spoken by relatively small numbers of people.

A comparison of the U.S. census data between 1980 and 2010 (Nagano, 2015) can illustrate this fact. As mentioned above, the total number of heritage speakers increased from 13.9 million speakers to 28.7 speakers (an increase by 107%) between 1980 and 2010. The table below shows languages that increased in number of speakers at more than the average rate. For example, Spanish, which is by far the largest heritage language group, shows a growth of 163%. However, Spanish is not among the languages that show the fastest growth. In fact, nearly a half of contemporary bilingual speakers in the U.S. speak languages other than Spanish, including languages that were barely attested in 1980 (such as Dravidian languages, Amharic and other Ethiopian languages, and Tibetan).

Language	1980	2010	Increase
Dravidian	26,900	423,649	1475%
Amharic, Ethiopian, etc.	8,180	108,221	1223%
Tibetan	5,880	75,687	1187%
Albanian	7,000	77,777	1011%
Sub-Saharan Africa	35,820	335,973	838%
Indonesian	11,040	97,439	783%
Other ES Asian	8,760	67,401	669%
Hindi and related	163,760	1,185,354	624%
Russian	88,000	481,380	447%
Vietnamese	113,800	540,677	375%
Rumanian	20,140	76,918	282%
Turkish	18,460	66,476	260%
Chinese	375,800	1,233,957	228%
Arabic	146,140	439,744	201%
Spanish	6,465,280	17,013,399	163%
Korean	187,700	487,432	160%
Filipino, Tagalog	354,800	789,915	123%
ALL	13,869,680	28,713,690	107%

Table 2: The Numbers and Increase Rates of HL Speakers by Language in 1980 and 2010 (adapted from Nagano, 2015)

What we see on the 7 train is an epitome of this unprecedented level of linguistic diversity in Queens, which is the host of many of these new languages in the U.S. For example, a Tibetan community in Jackson Heights is one of the few ethnic enclaves for Tibetan speakers in the U.S. that have emerged since 1965. In order to visually illustrate these linguistic enclaves of less commonly spoken languages in Queens, I have represented different languages spoken in each of Queens

community district (see the following links for the language maps for Manhattan [https://bit.ly/3mBtkwG], Bronx [https://bit.ly/3a263Py], and Brooklyn [https://bit.ly/3uKOdIv]).

Linguistic Diversity in New York City (2019): Queens
58.6% are bilingual speakers

Queens CD4: Elmhurst & South Corona
Extremely bilingual (86.3%)
Spanish: 65,344 (46.8%)
Chinese: 9,479 (6.8%)
Bengali: 6,491 (4.6%)
Mandarin: 5,863 (4.2%)
Filipino, Tagalog 5,635 (4.0%)
Nepali: 2,259 (1.6%)
Cantonese: 2,028 (1.5%)
Hindi: 1,240 (0.9%)
Russian: 1,103 (0.8%)
Korean: 1,085 (0.8%)
Tibetan: 989 (0.7%)

Queens CD3: Jackson Heights & North Corona
Extremely bilingual (84.1%)
Spanish: 98,803 (57.6%)
Bengali: 7,232 (4.2%)
Chinese: 5,270 (3.1%)
Hindi: 1,769 (1.0%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 1,653 (1.0%)
Cantonese: 1,539 (0.9%)
Urdu: 1,450 (0.8%)
Tibetan: 1,337 (0.8%)
Mandarin: 1,328 (0.8%)
Panjabi: 1,173 (0.7%)

Queens CD7: Flushing, Murray Hill & Whitestone
Extremely bilingual (74.7%)
Chinese: 65,782 (27.1%)
Spanish: 34,445 (14.2%)
Korean: 19,945 (8.2%)
Mandarin: 8,993 (3.7%)
Cantonese: 5,827 (2.4%)
Greek: 5,476 (2.3%)
Italian: 4,037 (1.7%)
Hindi: 2,685 (1.1%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 1,745 (0.7%)
Chinese, Cantonese, Min, Yueh 1,614 (0.7%)

Queens CD11: Bayside, Douglaston & Little Neck
Highly bilingual (61.5%)
Chinese: 19,433 (16.4%)
Korean: 12,148 (10.3%)
Spanish: 9,391 (7.9%)
Mandarin: 5,112 (4.3%)
Cantonese: 3,723 (3.1%)
Greek: 3,712 (3.1%)
Italian: 1,865 (1.6%)
Russian: 1,311 (1.1%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 1,206 (1.0%)

Queens CD1: Astoria & Long Island City
Highly bilingual (54.3%)
Spanish: 31,812 (19.4%)
Greek: 8,639 (5.3%)
Bengali: 5,547 (3.4%)
Italian: 3,353 (2.0%)
Arabic: 3,328 (2.0%)
Chinese: 2,821 (1.7%)
Portuguese: 2,320 (1.4%)
Korean: 1,959 (1.2%)

Queens CD8: Briarwood, Fresh Meadows & Hillcrest
Highly bilingual (63.3%)
Spanish: 23,019 (14.0%)
Chinese: 10,807 (6.6%)
Bengali: 10,665 (6.5%)
Russian: 8,111 (4.9%)
Mandarin: 4,589 (2.8%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 4,584 (2.8%)
Hebrew, Israeli: 3,721 (2.3%)
Korean: 3,022 (1.8%)
Urdu: 2,690 (1.6%)
French or Haitian Creole 2,355 (1.4%)
Cantonese: 2,007 (1.2%)

Queens CD2: Sunnyside & Woodside
Extremely bilingual (70.1%)
Spanish: 34,560 (25.6%)
Chinese: 7,762 (5.7%)
Bengali: 7,165 (5.3%)
Filipino, Tagalog 4,844 (3.6%)
Korean: 3,281 (2.4%)
Mandarin: 2,633 (1.9%)
Nepali: 2,590 (1.9%)
Cantonese: 2,316 (1.7%)
Tibetan: 1,953 (1.4%)
Hindi: 1,920 (1.4%)
Japanese: 1,534 (1.1%)
Rumanian: 1,326 (1.0%)

Queens CD12: Jamaica, Hollis & St. Albans
Moderately bilingual (33.5%)
Spanish: 23,019 (14.0%)
Chinese: 10,807 (6.6%)
Bengali: 10,665 (6.5%)
Russian: 8,111 (4.9%)
Mandarin: 4,589 (2.8%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 4,584 (2.8%)
Hebrew, Israeli: 3,721 (2.3%)
Korean: 3,022 (1.8%)
Urdu: 2,690 (1.6%)
French or Haitian Creole 2,355 (1.4%)
Cantonese: 2,007 (1.2%)

Queens CD5: Ridgewood, Glendale & Middle Village
Highly bilingual (59.1%)
Spanish: 47,307 (25.3%)
Polish: 16,203 (8.7%)
Chinese: 5,454 (2.9%)
Italian: 4,725 (2.5%)
Albanian: 3,701 (2.0%)
Rumanian: 2,949 (1.6%)
Arabic: 2,183 (1.2%)

Queens CD13: Queens Village, Cambria Heights & Rosedale
Moderately bilingual (36.9%)
Spanish: 18,342 (9.1%)
French or Haitian Creole: 14,511 (7.2%)
Panjabi: 4,926 (2.4%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 2,898 (1.4%)
Bengali: 2,529 (1.2%)
Hindi: 2,514 (1.2%)
Gujarathi: 1,893 (0.9%)
Niger-Congo: 1,845 (0.9%)

Queens CD6: Forest Hills & Rego Park
Highly bilingual (63.8%)
Russian: 13,671 (11.8%)
Spanish: 12,917 (11.1%)
Chinese: 9,254 (8.0%)
Hindi: 3,770 (3.3%)
Mandarin: 2,894 (2.5%)
Polish: 1,868 (1.6%)
Cantonese: 1,847 (1.6%)
Filipino, Tagalog: 1,715 (1.5%)
Hebrew, Israeli: 1,490 (1.3%)
Korean: 1,259 (1.1%)

Queens CD9: Richmond Hill & Woodhaven
Highly bilingual (63.5%)
Spanish: 49,986 (33.7%)
Bengali: 6,133 (4.1%)
Panjabi: 6,131 (4.1%)
Chinese: 3,132 (2.1%)
Hindi: 1,937 (1.3%)
Russian: 1,806 (1.2%)
Urdu: 1,617 (1.1%)
Filipino, Tagalog 1,571 (1.1%)
Cantonese: 1,455 (1.0%)
Polish: 1,358 (0.9%)

Queens CD14: Far Rockaway, Breezy Point & Broad Channel
Moderately bilingual (38.0%)
Spanish: 22,079 (17.2%)
Russian: 2,075 (1.6%)
Niger-Congo: 2,039 (1.6%)
Hebrew, Israeli: 1,459 (1.1%)
Polish: 1,399 (1.1%)
French or Haitian Creole: 848 (0.7%)

Queens CD10: Howard Beach & Ozone Park
Highly bilingual (40.2%)
Spanish: 25,357 (19.1%)
Bengali: 4,592 (3.5%)
Panjabi: 4,122 (3.1%)
Italian: 2,822 (2.1%)
Chinese: 1,348 (1.0%)
Urdu: 1,256 (0.9%)
Polish: 949 (0.7%)

The number of speakers of languages other than English in different Community Districts. Amercian Community Survey [5 years] data in 2019 were retrieved via IPUMS (https://usa.ipums.org/usa/). Errors or inquireies to Tomonori Nagano at tnagano@lagcc.cuny.edu
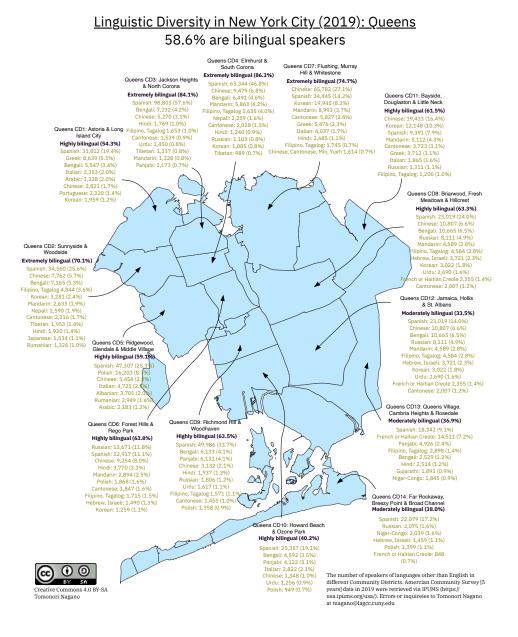
Figure 1: Linguistic Diversity Map of Queens (The number of speakers of languages other than English in different Community Districts. American Community Survey [5 years] data in 2019 were retrieved via IPUMS (https://usa.ipums.org/usa/). PDF version at https://bit.ly/3wJwkf9).

The map shows extremely rich linguistic communities in the immediate neighborhood of LaGuardia Community College, including such languages as Arabic (Astoria/Long Island & Ridgewood, Glendale/Middle Village), Bengali (Jamaica, Hollis/St. Albans & Briarwood, Fresh Meadows/Hillcrest),

Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Min, Yueh) (Flushing, Murray Hill/Whitestone & Bayside, Douglaston/Little Neck), Filipino (Tagalog) (Elmhurst/South Corona & Sunnyside/Woodside), French or Haitian Creole (Queens Village, Cambria Heights/Rosedale & Jamaica, Hollis/St. Albans), Hindi/Urdu (Forest Hills/Rego Park & Jamaica, Hollis/St. Albans), Italian (Ridgewood, Glendale/Middle Village & Flushing, Murray Hill/Whitestone), Japanese (Sunnyside/Woodside), Korean (Flushing, Murray Hill/Whitestone & Bayside, Douglaston/Little Neck), Nepali (Sunnyside/Woodside & Elmhurst/South Corona), Polish (Ridgewood, Glendale/Middle Village), Russian (Forest Hills/Rego Park), and Tibetan (Sunnyside/Woodside & Jackson Heights/North Corona).

When you take the 7 train next time, close your eyes and try listening to this astounding collection of language that cannot be seen anywhere else in the world.

Resources to learn more about linguistic diversity in Queens and NYC

- Clayman, Chris & Lee, Meredith (2010). *ethNYcity: The Nations, Tongues, and Faiths of Metropolitan New York*. New York, NY: Metro New York Baptist Association.
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