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AAPI DATA

Language Diversity and English Proficiency

Part of the "State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders" Series

By Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad May 27, 2014

An important feature of Asian American and Pacific Islander, or AAPI, communities is their language diversity and variations in their levels of English proficiency across groups. English proficiency is important because it is significantly related to outcomes such as earnings, occupational mobility, quality of health care, and the ability to participate in civic and political life.[1]

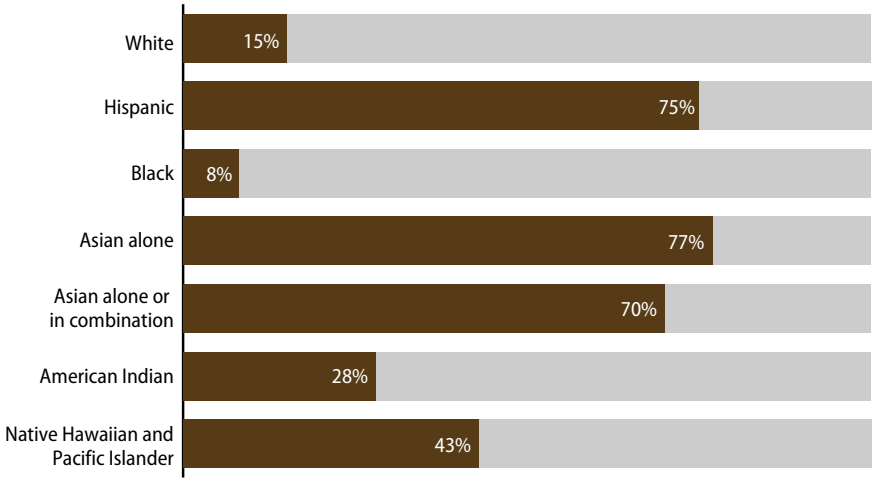
Linguistic diversity is a key feature of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have significant national origin or ethnic group diversity, and this is also reflected in the linguistic diversity of these populations. The Asian American population in the United States has the highest proportion of residents who speak a language other than English at home. This proportion is somewhat higher among the Asian alone population, at 77 percent, than among the population that is Asian "alone or in combination with other races," where it makes up 70 percent. By comparison, 75 percent of Latinos speak a non-English language at home, as do 43 percent of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, or NHPIs, and 28 percent of American Indians and Alaskan Natives (see Figure 3.1).

Looking at the specific languages spoken at home among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, we see that Chinese is by far the most common language spoken at home, with more than 2.7 million speakers, followed by about 1.6 million Tagalog speakers, 1.4 million Vietnamese speakers, and 1.1 million Korean speakers (see Table 3.1). The linguistic diversity of South Asian immigrants is also evident in the language data, as there are about 638,000 Hindi speakers and a range of 231,000 to 377,000 speakers each of Bengali, Telugu, Panjabi, Gujarati, and Urdu. Finally, there are many other Asian languages spoken at home with more than 100,000 speakers each. By contrast, Spanish is by far the most dominant language for Latinos, accounting for 99 percent of the population that speaks a language other than English at home.[2]

FIGURE 3.1

Percent who speak a language other than English at home



Note: Among ages 5 and older.
Source: Authors' analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

TABLE 3.1

Prevalence of Asian languages spoken at home

Chinese*	2,720,325	Formosan	77,630
Tagalog	1,599,040	Other Indian	69,733
Vietnamese	1,367,910	Marathi	69,732
Korean	1,130,727	Indonesian	65,700
Hindi	638,307	Samoan	63,861
Japanese	449,309	Burmese	55,068
Urdu	377,153	Kannada	46,261
Gujarati	368,925	Tongan	28,823
Panjabi	255,280	Bisayan	28,226
Telugu	235,307	Sinhalese	26,281
Bengali	231,468	Hawaiian	25,408
Hmong	217,921	Chamorro	19,975
Mon-Khmer, Cambodian	205,761	Mien	17,268
Tamil	177,345	Other Pakistani	15,269
Thai	155,242	Sebuano	14,770
Laotian	150,600	Malay	12,396
Malayalam	137,679	Other Indo-European languages	52,621
Ilocano	88,769	Other Asian languages	69,607
Nepali	78,360	Other Pacific Island languages	61,996

Note: Among ages 5 and older. *Of the 2.7 million Chinese speakers, about 472,000 and 454,000 specified Mandarin and Cantonese, respectively.

Source: Authors' analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

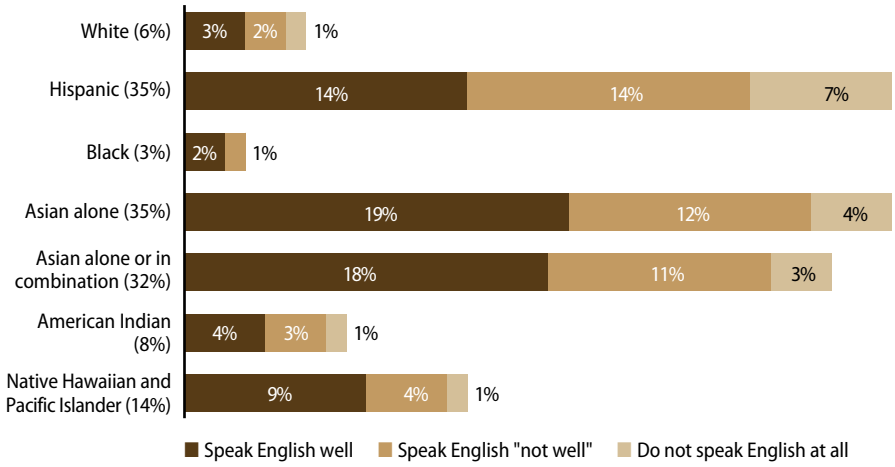
Asian Americans are among the most likely to be limited English proficient

In addition to having a population with significant language diversity, the problem of limited English proficiency is significant for Asian Americans and, to a lesser extent, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, or NHPIs. The Census Bureau defines limited English proficiency, or LEP, as those who speak a language other than English at home and who speak English "less than very well."[3] Using this definition, we see that, at 35 percent, the Asian alone population has the highest rates of limited English proficiency—with 4 percent not speaking English at all, 12 percent speaking English "not well," and 19 percent only speaking English "well" but short of "very well." The overall LEP figures among Asian Americans are on par with LEP rates among Latinos (see Figure 3.2).

Not surprisingly, nativity bears a strong relationship to English proficiency, as only 9 percent of the native-born "Asian alone" population is LEP, while the comparable figure for the foreign-born "Asian alone" population is 47 percent. There are some significant gender differences as well: At 48 percent, LEP rates are slightly higher among first-generation immigrant women than among first-generation men, who have a rate of 45 percent.

FIGURE 3.2

Limited English Proficient (LEP) population by English-speaking ability



Note: Among ages 5 and older. Figures add up to the total limited English proficient population (those who speak English less than "very well")
Source: Authors' analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

English proficiency varies widely by national origin, reflecting variations in Asian colonial histories

Significant differences in English proficiency exist between Asian subpopulations. Twenty-two percent of Indian Americans have limited English proficiency compared to 53 percent of Vietnamese Americans (see Figure 3.3a). Factors that influence these differences include the share of each group that is foreign born, the legacies of British or American colonialism in the home country, average levels of educational attainment for the group, and reasons for migration to the United States, such as arriving for highly skilled employment or as a refugee.[4] For example, a large proportion of Vietnamese Americans are foreign-born refugees with relatively low levels of educational attainment. Compare this to the 72 percent of Indian Americans who have a bachelor's degree or higher—many of whom came to the United States on employment-based visas and from a country with English as a fairly common language among the upper middle class.[5]

FIGURE 3.3a

Group differences in limited English proficiency (Asian American)

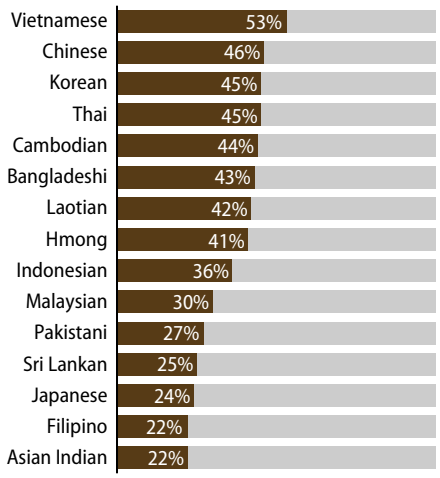
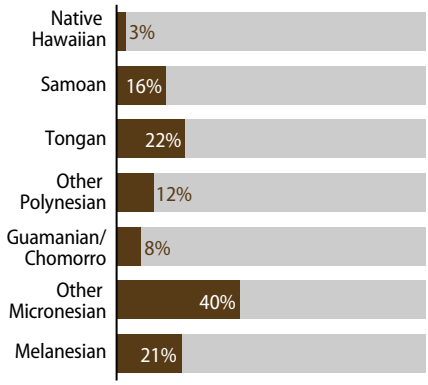


FIGURE 3.3b

Group differences in limited English proficiency (Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander)



Note: Data are provided for those identifying with one national origin group and ages 5 and older.
Source: Authors analysis' of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

About one in five Asian American households is linguistically isolated

In addition to English proficiency at the individual level, the Census Bureau also measures the extent to which households are linguistically isolated, which means that there is no one in the household who is 14 years or older who speaks English exclusively or "very well." As we can see from Table 3.2, about one in every five Asian American households is linguistically isolated. This proportion is similar to the linguistic isolation among Hispanic or Latino households, and considerably higher than the proportion of NHPI households, at 6 percent, and white households at 4 percent.

TABLE 3.2

Proportion of households that are linguistically isolated

White	4%
Hispanic	21%
Black	2%
Asian alone	20%
Asian alone or in combination	18%
American Indian	4%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	6%

Source: Authors' analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

Linguistic isolation of households vary widely by national origin

Similar to English proficiency, there are significant differences across national origins when it comes to the prevalence of households that are linguistically isolated. Vietnamese American households have the highest rate of linguistic isolation, at 34 percent, followed by Chinese, Korean, and Bangladeshi Americans. For all of these groups, at least one in four households is linguistically isolated. On the other hand, Filipinos, Asian Indians, and Pakistanis have relatively low rates of linguistic isolation, accounting for about 1 in 10 households. Finally, among NHPI groups, linguistic isolation is highest among Micronesians (27 percent for those who are not Guamanian/Chomorro) and household linguistic isolation is lowest among the Native Hawaiian population.

TABLE 3.3

Proportion of households that are linguistically isolated by subgroup

Vietnamese	34%	Pakistani	11%
Chinese	30%	Asian Indian	10%
Korean	29%	Filipino	8%
Bangladeshi	25%		
Thai	24%	Native Hawaiian	1%
Indonesian	21%	Samoan	5%
Malaysian	21%	Tongan	4%
Hmong	19%	Other Polynesian	7%
Laotian	19%	Guamanian/Chomorro	3%
Cambodian	18%	Other Micronesian	27%
Sri Lankan	16%	Melanesian	8%
Japanese	15%		

Source: Authors analysis' of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates," available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_data/ (last accessed May 2014).

Many jurisdictions do not adequately provide ballot language assistance despite legal requirements

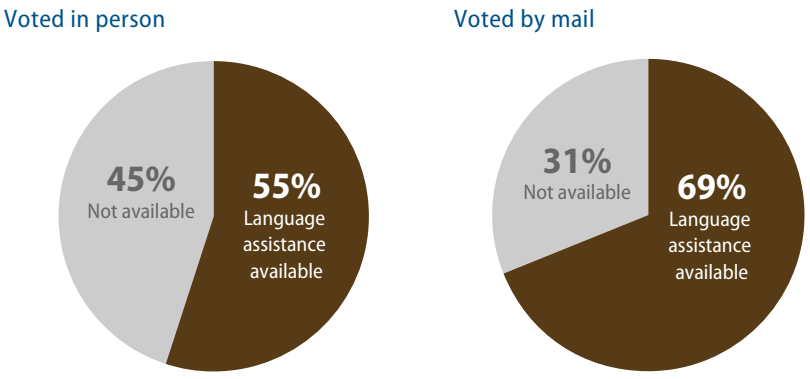
Given the proportion of the AAPI population with limited English proficiency, access to ballot language assistance is an important issue for effective civic participation. In several jurisdictions, Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act requires the provision of language assistance during the voting process. Whether a jurisdiction must do so is determined by a formula that requires the size of the relevant language group is at least 10,000 residents, or 5 percent of the population, and also requires that the group's illiteracy rate is higher than the national average.[6]

Prior to 2010, Section 203 jurisdictions were determined using data from the decennial census. However, in 2010, the census was redesigned to no longer contain a "long form" with data on language use, prompting the federal government to rely on 5-year American Community Survey files to revise the list of covered jurisdictions. As of 2011, there are 22 jurisdictions in the United States that are covered for Asian languages under Section 203, nearly all of which are counties. A total of nine Asian ethnic groups are covered: Asian Indian; Bangladeshi; Cambodian; Chinese; Filipino; Japanese; Korean; Thai; and Vietnamese.[7]

At the same time, data from the 2012 AAPI Post-Election Survey indicate that Asian American voters found the language assistance to be limited in jurisdictions that were mandated to provide them. As we can see from Figure 3.4, among those who voted in person only 55 percent of survey respondents living in covered jurisdictions said that "translated election documents or bilingual election workers" were available at the polls. At 69 percent, the proportion reporting adequate language assistance was higher among those who voted by mail but still fell short of the assistance required by law.

FIGURE 3.4

Access to language assistance among limited English proficient voters in Section 203 jurisdictions



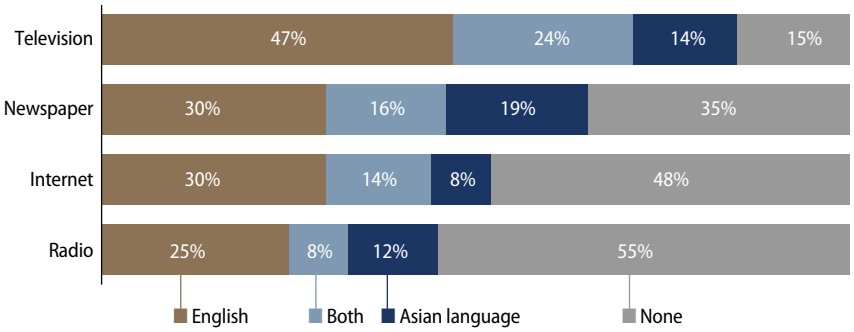
Source: Asian American Justice Center, Asian and Pacific Islander American Vote, and National Asian American Survey, "Behind the Numbers: Post-Election Survey of Asian American and Pacific Islander Voters in 2012" (2013), available at http://naasurvey.com/reports/aapipes-2012.html.

Asian-language news sources are vital to Asian Americans, especially those with limited English proficiency

Asian-language news sources play an important role in how Asian Americans are informed about politics and policy. In the 2008 National Asian American Survey, or NAAS, respondents were asked if they rely on particular types of sources for political information, and subsequently whether those sources were in English, an Asian language, or both. The results reveal that 38 percent of Asian Americans get information from Asian-language television, with 14 percent exclusively getting news from Asian-language television; 35 percent stay informed through Asian language newspapers, with 19 percent doing so exclusively; 22 percent from Asian-language Internet sources; and 20 percent from Asian-language radio. Among the six largest Asian groups, overall ethnic media consumption in the 2008 NAAS was highest among Vietnamese, at 69 percent, Korean, at 65 percent, and Chinese, at 65 percent—all are groups with low rates of English proficiency. Ethnic media consumption was lowest among groups with high rates of English proficiency, including, Asian Indians, at 16 percent, Filipinos, at 25 percent, and Japanese Americans, at 31 percent .

FIGURE 3.5

Where Asian Americans get their political news



Source: Authors' analysis of Karthick Ramakrishnan, Jane Junn, Taeku Lee, and Janelle Wong, "National Asian American Survey, 2008" (Ann Arbor, MI: Resource Center for Minority Data, 2011), available at http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/31481.

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Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

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4 Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad, "Immigration" (2014), available at http://ampr.gs/AAPIreports2014.

5 See Karthick Ramakrishnan and Farah Z. Ahmad, "Education" (2014), Table 4.2a: Educational attainment by Asian national origin, available at http://ampr.gs/AAPIreports2014; Saritha Rai, "India's New 'English Only' Generation," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2012, available at http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/indias-new-english-only-generation/.

6 28 C.F.R. § 55.6, available at http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2013-title28-vol2/xml/CFR-2013-title28-vol2-sec55-6.xml.

7 Two of these language groups (Cambodian and Thai) have been added by the County of Los Angeles, California, to meet the Section 203 requirement of covering additional unspecified Asian language groups, based on data from the 2005–2009 American Community Survey 5-year Estimate. See Asian Americans Advancing Justice, "Voices of Democracy" (2013) and Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, "Help Asian Americans Protect their Voting Rights" (2012).