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978-0-521-74533-8 - Language Diversity in the USA
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Language Diversity in the USA

What are the most widely spoken non-English languages in the USA? How did they reach the USA? Who speaks them, to whom, and for what purposes? What changes do these languages undergo as they come into contact with English? This book investigates the linguistic diversity of the USA by profiling the twelve most commonly used languages other than English. Each chapter paints a portrait of the history, current demographics, community characteristics, economic status, and language maintenance of each language group, and looks ahead to the future of each language. The book challenges myths about the “official” language of the USA, explores the degree to which today’s immigrants are learning English and assimilating into the mainstream, and discusses the relationship between linguistic diversity and national unity. Written in a coherent and structured style, *Language Diversity in the USA* is essential reading for students and researchers in sociolinguistics, bilingualism, and education.

KIM POTOWSKI is Associate Professor of Hispanic Linguistics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her previous publications include *Language and Identity in a Dual Immersion School* (2007).

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521745338

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Language diversity in the USA / edited by Kim Potowski.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-521-76852-8 (hardback)

1. Language and culture – United States. 2. Multilingualism – United States.

3. Sociolinguistics – United States. I. Potowski, Kim. II. Title.

P35.5.U6L36 2010

306.440973 – dc22 2010018303

ISBN 978-0-521-76852-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-74533-8 Paperback

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CARL L. BANKSTON III is Professor of Sociology, Chair of the Department of Sociology, and Co-Director of the Asian Studies Program at Tulane University. A former teacher of English, Bankston lived and worked in Southeast Asia for eight years. His areas of research and teaching include international migration, Asian American communities, and sociology of education. He is co-author of seven books, including *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (1998). He also edited or co-edited eight other books, and has published over one hundred journal articles and book chapters.

MARIA CARREIRA is Associate Professor of Spanish linguistics at California State University, Long Beach. Her publications focus on Spanish as a world language, Spanish in the USA, and teaching Spanish to bilingual Latinos. She is the co-author of a beginning college-level Spanish textbook (*Nexos*, 2005) and the co-author of a book for teaching Spanish to bilingual Latinos (*Si se puede*).

ANA MARIA CARVALHO is Associate Professor at the University of Arizona, where she directs the Portuguese Language Program. Her research interests include language variation and change, language contact, language attitudes, and dialect and language acquisition. She has published extensively on the contact between Portuguese and Spanish in bilingual communities in northern Uruguay – her most recent publications include the edited volume *Português em Contato* (2009) – and about the acquisition of Portuguese by Spanish speakers.

VY THUC DAO is completing her PhD in Sociology at Tulane University and received her MA in Sociology at the University of Houston. Her areas of research center upon the study of formal organizations, social networks, and ethnic organizations. Currently, she is planning a comparative study of the economic, social, and organizational patterns of recovery and rebuilding by the Vietnamese communities in post-Katrina New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of Mississippi.

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ANNA DE FINA is Assistant Professor and Co-ordinator of the Language Program in the Italian Department at Georgetown University. Her research focuses on narrative, language and identity, and language contact. Her most recent publications include *Identity in Narrative* (2003) and the co-edited volumes *Italiano e italiani fuori d'Italia* (with F. Bizzoni, 2003), *Dislocations, Relocations, Narratives of Displacement* (with Mike Baynham, 2005), and *Discourse and Identity* (with D. Schiffrin and M. Bamberg, Cambridge University Press, 2006).

KATHLEEN DILLON is Associate Director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center and Associate Director of the University of California Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching. She has published articles on teaching Russian as a heritage language, and in the literature field she has published on Russian poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is a recipient of the excellence in teaching award from the American Association of Teachers of Russian and Eastern European Languages. She is also co-editor of the *Heritage Language Journal*.

KATARZYNA DZIWIŃ is an Associate Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Washington in Seattle. Her publications focus on Polish syntax and semantics, with particular emphasis on cross-cultural differences in expression of emotion. Her most recent project (with Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk) is *Complex Emotions and Grammatical Mismatches*.

LUCIANA FELLIN directs the Italian Language Program at Duke University. Her work focuses on language ideologies as linked to language obsolescence, maintenance, and revival. She has co-authored textbooks for Italian as a second language, published book chapters and articles on second language acquisition and maintenance and, most recently, on language vitality among Italian immigrant communities in Australia. Presently, she is working on an ethnographic project investigating language and identity in Italian-American communities.

ELVIRA C. FONACIER is the Project Team Leader at the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Sydney, Australia, where she manages the development and delivery of education programs for adult learners. Her research focuses on the teaching and learning of language and literature with special attention to assessment and program evaluation. She also teaches linguistics courses at the University of Western Sydney.

OLGA E. KAGAN is Director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center and Co-ordinator of the Russian Language Program at UCLA. She is also Director of the UCLA Russian Language Flagship Program. She

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has authored seven textbooks, edited two volumes of scholarly articles, and published articles on teaching heritage learners of Russian. She has received two book awards from the American Association of Teachers of Russian and Eastern European Languages (AATSEEL). She co-edits the *Heritage Language Journal*.

HAE-YOUNG KIM is an Associate Professor of Korean at Duke University. Her academic work focuses on heritage language development and maintenance, morphosyntactic development in Korean, content-based language instruction, and curriculum development for college-level Korean. She has published research articles on Korean heritage learners' attitudes and motivations, development of tense and aspect morphology in Korean as a second language, and classroom discourse in a content-based language class.

RENATE LUDANYI is Director of the German Studies Center at Western Connecticut State University. She is President of the German Language School Conference, an umbrella organization for community-supported private German Language Schools in the USA, where students can complete language prerequisite examinations for study at a German university. She was awarded the Cross of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany for her work in many areas of pedagogy and school administration.

TERESA L. MCCARTY is the Alice Wiley Snell Professor of Education Policy Studies at Arizona State University, and director and co-Principal Investigator of a large-scale study of Native American language shift and retention. Her recent books include *"To Remain an Indian": Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (with K. Tsianina Lomawaima), *Language, Literacy, and Power in Schooling*, and *A Place To Be Navajo – Rough Rock and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Indigenous Schooling*.

SCOTT MCGINNIS is the Academic Advisor for the Defense Language Institute, Washington Office. Between 1999 and 2003, he served as Executive Director of the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages. His twenty-two years in the language teaching profession have included a decade as supervisor of the Chinese language programs at the University of Oregon and University of Maryland. He has published extensively on Chinese as a heritage language in the USA.

BOZENA NOWICKA MCLEES is an instructor at Loyola University. She has broad experience developing and teaching Polish at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Her research focuses on connecting the evolving educational systems in Poland with the existing network of Polish-American schools and organizations in Chicago in order to facilitate heritage language

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maintenance. She assisted in the development of the Polish government's Certification of Proficiency in Polish as a Foreign Language by administering examinations at her campus.

KIM POTOWSKI is Associate Professor of Spanish linguistics and directs the Heritage Language Cooperative at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her work on Spanish in the USA investigates language use and identity, including the book *Language and Identity in a Dual Immersion School* (2007), publications about "MexiRican" language and identity, Spanish use in US *quinceañera* celebrations, and linguistic structures such as discourse markers and code-switching. She has also published a book and several articles about Spanish heritage language education.

SUZANNE ROMAINE has been Merton Professor of English Language at the University of Oxford since 1984 and is interested in societal multilingualism, linguistic diversity, language change, language acquisition, and language contact. Her book *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*, co-authored with Daniel Nettle, won the British Association of Applied Linguistics Book of the Year Prize in 2001, and has been translated into a number of languages. She has received honorary doctorates from the University of Uppsala and the University of Tromsø.

SONIA SHIRI is the Arabic Language Program Co-ordinator at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research focuses on Arabic sociolinguistics and teaching Arabic as a foreign and as a heritage language. She is the designer of the introductory computer-assisted Arabic course "Arabic without Walls," which will offer Arabic at a distance to students at UC campuses without Arabic programs.

ALBERT VALDMAN is Rudy Professor of French/Italian and Linguistics (emeritus) and Director of the Creole Institute at Indiana University. His research and professional interests span a broad range of areas in applied and descriptive linguistics, including second language acquisition research, foreign-language teaching, sociolinguistics, creole studies with focus on French-based creoles, notably those of Haiti and Louisiana, and French linguistics. He is one of the leading specialists of French in the USA, particularly Louisiana Regional French.

TERRENCE G. WILEY is Professor of Language Policy and Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University, where he co-directs the Language Policy Research Unit of the Southwest Center for Educational Equity and Language Diversity. His research focuses on literacy/biliteracy and language policy. His numerous publications include *Literacy and Language Diversity in the United States* (2005). Professor Wiley is co-editor of the *Journal of*

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Language Identity and Education and the International Multilingual Research Journal.

YUN XIAO is Associate Professor and Chair of the Modern Languages Department at Bryant University. Her research interests are second language acquisition and pedagogy, heritage language learning, and Chinese teacher education. She has published more than twenty articles and book chapters. Her book projects include the *Readings in Chinese Literature* Series (Volume I, 2007; Volume II, forthcoming); *Chinese as a Heritage Language: Fostering Rooted World Citizenry* (2008) (with Weiyun He), and a forthcoming book series on teaching Chinese as a foreign language (with Michael Everson).

Preface

Take a walk down the streets of any large city in the USA – and increasingly many mid-sized cities and small towns – and you can usually hear more than one language spoken by local residents. Some may think that this linguistic diversity is due entirely to recent immigration. However, as this book seeks to demonstrate, the USA has always been linguistically diverse. And while a large part of our diversity is thanks to immigration, some of it is due to other factors such as land purchases and annexations. In addition, a large portion of today's speakers of Languages Other Than English (often referred to as "LOTEs") in the USA were born and raised in the USA. These are the children and grandchildren of immigrants – they themselves are not immigrants.

Yet it is undeniable that immigration is driving and sustaining our nation's proficiency in many LOTEs today. There are several excellent books about immigrants in the USA, most notably Portes and Rumbaut's (2006) fascinating account of immigrant experiences and the significant roles played by social class, residential patterns, and available networks. These authors note that language is a fundamental dimension of the process of acculturation, and that in the minds of many, the "litmus test of Americanization" is learning English and losing the mother tongue.

Our effort in this volume is to focus precisely on languages other than English in the USA: How did they get here? Who speaks them, to whom, and for what purposes? What changes do these languages undergo as they come into overwhelming contact with English? And more broadly: What factors contribute to LOTEs being retained or lost as the generations progress? Is it even possible to retain a heritage language while also regularly speaking English in the USA?

The first chapter seeks to dispel several persistent myths about linguistic diversity in the USA, particularly the rates of English learning among immigrant groups and the fear that linguistic diversity threatens our national unity. The second chapter explores linguistic and social issues related to languages in contact. The following thirteen chapters begin with a special chapter on Native American languages, followed by a chapter on each of the top twelve LOTEs as listed in order by the number of speakers in the 2007 American Community

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Survey. The authors trace patterns of language loss and also highlight factors that contribute to maintenance of ethnolinguistic vitality in the USA. The concluding chapter offers an analysis of US language policy – that is, it explores the history of the “litmus test” of English monolingualism, the extent to which it still persists today, and what the nation can do to promote a more additive, linguistically diverse climate.

I hope that this volume will be of use to several audiences. Educators – whether teaching English as a Second Language, teaching LOTE as heritage or as foreign languages, designing curricular units about the histories and current demographics of these communities, or offering interdisciplinary courses on immigration – can benefit from details about particular ethnolinguistic groups, and also from having these thirteen groups profiled in one place. Linguists seeking to carry out detailed analyses of particular LOTE in the USA can use these chapters as a starting point. And I truly hope that members of the LOTE-speaking communities themselves will find pleasure and pride in these portraits, which have been painted with much care by the authors, and that new editions might be produced every ten years with the publication of new Census data.

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Acknowledgements

A national portrait of language diversity in the USA, consisting of expert-level detail on thirteen different languages/language groups – combined with equally expert chapters on language contact and future directions for the nation's language policy – would have been impossible for one individual to complete. Thus, my first and foremost thanks are to all the contributors to this book, who lent their considerable expertise and time to this project. They shared a vision that this was indeed an important undertaking, and produced and revised multiple drafts over the course of more than a year. I hope they agree that their individual efforts have combined to produce a collection that is more than the sum of its wonderful parts. Scott McGinnis also provided keen insight as I put together the introductory chapter, as well as the initiative to submit a very well-received panel based on a subset of this material to the 2008 meeting of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages in Orlando, Florida, for which I thank him heartily.

Next: Those who regularly complete manuscript reviews typically understand that they are making a significant contribution to the field, often without public recognition. Thus, I very enthusiastically thank the following experts whose feedback was highly valued by the authors and by me. Heaps of glory and rounds of raucous applause to these reviewers:

Jeff Bale, Arizona State University
 Dennis Baron, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
 Joshua Brown, Texas Tech University
 Nick Clements, the University of Illinois at Chicago
 Caitlin Cornell, the University of Illinois at Chicago
 Jose del Valle, City University of New York
 Erin Haynes, University of California Berkeley
 Herman Heller, City University of New York
 C. N. Le, University of Massachusetts Amherst
 Scott McGinnis, the Defense Language Institute
 Leo Paz, City College of San Francisco
 Maria Polinsky, Harvard University
 Joe Price, Texas Tech University

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Ana Roca, Florida International University
Harold Schiffman, University of Pennsylvania
Sarah Shin, University of Maryland Baltimore County

My editorial assistant, Brad Hoot, did excellent readings of chapter drafts, caught discrepancies, asked good questions, conducted solid research on necessary details, deciphered miniscule printed copy with hand-scrawled markings, and helped keep the project organized, bringing it to conclusion without poking out a single eye.

Andrew Winnard at Cambridge University Press enthusiastically supported this project from the start, and I thank him for his belief in its value and his assistance – along with that of Sarah Green – in bringing it to completion.

Finally, the students in my course on Language Policy and Cultural Identity at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Fall 2007 and Fall 2008) read early versions of many of these chapters and asked good questions, some of which now appear as discussion questions.