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.

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Language Diversity in the USA

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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
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 LOTEs 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 LOTEs 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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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.

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