

Mr
John Pullinger
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2021 Census question on languages

Dear Mr Pullinger,

Thank you for your letter dated 26 April 2018 and cited references. We welcome the acknowledgement that stakeholders agree about the value of including a question on language diversity in the Census. This is exactly the position we adopt. The issue we raised was about the wording of the language question, and we are pleased to have the opportunity to offer you additional evidence.

We have also reviewed the documentation you cited, noting that nearly a third of the replies commented on the language issue. What we observed was that the consultation did not confirm that the formulation 'what is your main language' was an optimal one, nor did it note any objections to improving that wording. Indeed, the burden on the respondent around the question 'what is your main language' was found to be 'medium' and many respondents were uncertain whether 'main' related to proficiency or frequency of use. This confirms our point about the ambiguity of the wording.

A further point that we raised, and which does not seem to have been put to consultation with users, is the fact that the question 'what is your main language' did not offer respondents an opportunity to note the use of multiple languages at a similar level of frequency, proficiency, or general preference, and instead directed them to choose just one, thereby obscuring, potentially, the reality of the country's many multilingual households.

As you are aware, we have already published documentation relating to our more detailed critique of the wording 'what is your main language', along with evidence relating to the data gaps that resulted from it in the 2011 Census. Among the pieces of evidence that we listed as examples was the fact that for Manchester the 2011 census showed around 70 languages (a precise number cannot be identified because some are grouped together by regions) while the School Censuses for Manchester for the years 2010-2013 showed fluctuations between 130-160 languages.

In the case of a number of languages, there were substantially more school-age speakers than would be predicted from the numbers of adults who reported that language as their 'main language' in 2011, suggesting that those languages are in regular home use. To cite just one of numerous examples, in the Manchester ward of Ardwick just 2.2% of residents declared Urdu to be their 'main language' while over 13% of schoolchildren in that ward were registered as having Urdu as their 'first language'.

We also referred in publications to the unrealistically low numbers of respondents who identified particular languages in the 2011 Census, compared with our first-hand observations in the relevant speaker communities.

In some cases, the near complete geographical overlap of languages is an indication that in some communities two languages are used in the same household and that respondents, asked to select just one 'main language', randomly picked one rather than the other. This applies for example to Urdu and Panjabi, to Yiddish and Hebrew, to Bravanese and Somali, and more.

A somewhat more anecdotal but nevertheless indicative statement can be found in a documentary film created in July 2013, where a Manchester resident is asked "What is your main language?" and replies: "Main language? Every day I speak three languages all at the same time!" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9MFWM_s-FM, 1:48 mins). This illustrates precisely the kind of confusion triggered by the wording 'what is your main language' that was also acknowledged in the consultation that you cite in your letter.

All this is, we believe, sufficient evidence to justify reconsidering the wording of the question on 'main language'.

We have deliberately avoided offering a specific proposal for an alternative wording because we are aware of various constraints, not least on the technical side of data archiving. However, we propose as clear guiding principles that the ambiguity created by the word 'main' should be avoided, and that respondents should be allowed to list more than one language. Offering respondents the option to list more than one language does not require additional questions and would not inconvenience respondents in any way. As we have pointed out, other countries with an English-speaking majority have adopted various solutions in their national census questionnaires that might serve as a model.

We remain at your disposal for a face-to-face meeting to discuss in detail issues regarding the previous formulation used in the Census and suggestions for improvement, and look forward to receiving an invitation from you.

With kind regards,

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Professor Wendy Ayres-Bennett, University of Cambridge
Dr Mark Sebba, University of Lancaster
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