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American Anthropological Association Spurs Elimination of “Linguistically Isolated” as Classification by the U.S. Census Bureau

American Anthropological Association (AAA) experts on Language and Social Justice from the Committee for Human Rights and the Society for Linguistic Anthropology have been working with the U.S. Census Bureau for several years to spur terminology change in the tabulation of household language data. As a result of our extensive communication with the U.S. Census Bureau, and with the support of the Census Advisory Committee on the Hispanic Population, the U.S. Census Bureau agreed to eliminate the phrase “linguistic isolation” from its products issued starting in 2011. In a recent letter, the Bureau writes, “We have changed the terminology to one that we feel is more descriptive and less stigmatizing. The phrase that will appear in all new products will be Households in which no one 14 and over speaks English only or speaks a language other than English at home and speaks English ‘very well.’”

Since 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau had used the age of household members, the language they reported speaking at home, and their self-reported English-speaking ability to identify households as “linguistically isolated” and in need of language assistance. Individuals and families were identified as “linguistically isolated” when every person aged 14 and over spoke a language other than English in the home and reported speaking English “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.” Only those households in which someone over the age of 14 spoke English “very well” were not categorized as “linguistically isolated.” Thus, children under 14 who spoke only English were considered “linguistically isolated.” In 2007, the AAA passed a resolution against this classification due to its inaccuracy, based on unsound data (self-reporting of indeterminate categories) and being discriminatory to non-native English speakers. The term also promoted an ideology of linguistic superiority that foments linguistic intolerance and conflict. The American Association of Applied Linguists and the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed similar resolutions.

The new terminology uses non-stigmatizing, albeit cumbersome, wording which, along with the data, will help the public appreciate the efforts being made by newcomers to learn English. In 2009, most individuals who spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English “very well” (55%). This figure increases to 75% when those who speak English “well” (20%) are included; less than three percent of U.S. residents do not speak English at all. However, all four levels of speakers require financial and programmatic support in order to strengthen their reading and writing skills, an estimation of which is one of the questions missing in the Census. AAA continues to urge the U.S. Census Bureau to expand its language questions and to acknowledge that those who speak English “well” should not be grouped with those who speak it “not well” or “not at all.” Legislators, educators, and all who are involved with or concerned about the linguistic needs of the nation's residents require accurate information in order to meet those needs adequately.

AAA President Virginia R. Dominguez is pleased with the U.S. Census Bureau’s decision to eliminate the linguistically isolated classification, stating, “We believe that this change will allow the U.S. Census Bureau to produce results that are more accurately stated, more in keeping with contemporary scientific research, and more useful in guiding policy at national, state, and local levels.”

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Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world's largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in anthropology, with an average annual membership of more than 10,000. The Arlington, VA-based association represents all specialties within anthropology – cultural anthropology, biological (or physical) anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and applied anthropology.