

CHAPTER V

Language Issue

HISTORY OF LANGUAGE LEGISLATION

In the first American colonies more than twenty languages were spoken in daily life, including Dutch, French, German, and numerous Native American languages. Even the Articles of Confederation were printed in English and German.

Languages other than English have always been a part of an American history and culture; however, the debate over establishing a national language also dates back to the country's beginnings. In 1780, John Adams proposed to the Continental Congress that an official academy should be created to “purify, develop, and dictate usage of English.” His proposal was rejected as undemocratic and as a threat to individual liberty.

The dominance of English was established only at the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790. Estimates of the population's ethnic origins indicated language diversity even at that time, when roughly half of the population was of English origin; nearly 19 percent was of African origin; 12 percent was Scottish or Scottish-Irish and Irish accounted for about 3 percent of the total. People of Dutch, French, and Spanish origin represented an aggregate 14 percent. The first U.S. Census largely ignored Native Americans.

So Americans were tolerant of linguistic diversity up until the late 1800s, when an influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans, as well as Asians prompted the enactment of restrictive language laws. California rewrote its state Constitution in 1879 to eliminate Spanish language rights. In 1897, Pennsylvania made English proficiency a condition of employment in its coalmines, to exclude Italians and Slavs. During World War I, security fears led to unprecedented bans on public use of the German language.

The ability to speak English was made a condition for citizenship in 1906. In 1910, of the 92 million people in the United States, 23 percent did not speak English.

A 1911 a Federal Immigration Commission report proposed that the “old” Scandinavian and German immigrants had assimilated quickly, while the “new” Italian and Eastern European immigrants were “inferior” to their predecessors, less willing to learn English, and more prone to political subversion.

In 1915, in response to the uncertain times, English literacy requirements were established for public employment, naturalization, immigration and suffrage. In 1919, Nebraska passed a law prohibiting the use of any other language than English through the eighth grade. Oregon required that foreign-language periodicals provide an English translation of their entire contents. More than thirty states passed laws prohibiting or restricting foreign-language instruction in primary schools.

In 1983, Senator S.I. Hayakawa founded an organization known as U.S.-English. Its primary purpose was to promote English as the official language of the United States. U.S. English now has 1.5 million members nationwide.

STATES WITH OFFICIAL ENGLISH LAWS

Twenty-seven states have already adopted English as their official language:

Louisiana (1811)	North Dakota (1987)
Nebraska (1920)	South Carolina (1987)
Illinois (1969)	Colorado (1988)
Massachusetts (1975)	Florida (1988)
Hawaii (1978)	Alabama (1990)
Virginia (1981 & 1996)	Montana (1995)
Indiana (1984)	New Hampshire (1995)
Kentucky (1984)	South Dakota (1995)
Tennessee (1984)	Wyoming (1996)
California (1986)	Alaska (1998)
Georgia (1986 & 1996)	Missouri (1998)
Arkansas (1987)	Utah (2000)
Mississippi (1987)	Iowa (2002)
North Carolina (1987)	

However, many of these state laws are largely symbolic, similar to the proclamation of a state bird or a state flower.

THE MYTH OF GERMAN AS THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IN THE COUNTRY

Could German have become the official language in the United States?

Although the German authors of travel literature, some American teachers of German and German teachers of English have propagated this idea since the 1840s, the proposition was never brought to the congressional floor and a vote was never taken.

German was not able to hold its ground as a language of daily usage even in Pennsylvania, except within small Mennonite, Amish and other sectarian

communities. During both the War of Independence and the War of 1812, at times when anti-English feelings were running high, Americans of German descent comprised less than 9 percent of the total population of the United States. And even in Pennsylvania, where the Germans had settled most densely, they accounted for only a third of the entire population.

German immigrant children naturally could speak German and learned to read and write it at school. They were more familiar with English, however, which they considered to be the language of the country. The majority of Germans accepted this assimilation process as perfectly natural. An atypical example may be the use of Pennsylvania German, better known as Pennsylvania Dutch, which reached its climax between 1870 and 1880 when it was the everyday language of about 750,000 people, of whom some 600,000 lived in Pennsylvania.

Particularly from the 1880s, resistance to German as a principal or co-equal language of instruction increased markedly. Illinois and Wisconsin tried in 1889-90 to limit its use, even in the private schools, although without much practical success. For example, the Bennett Law in Wisconsin required a minimum of 16 weeks in the school year be dedicated to English-language instruction, with subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic and American history taught wholly in English.

Typically, by about 1900, German was no longer used as a primary or co-equal language of instruction in the larger cities, although it was very popular as a foreign language elective, even among children who were not of German ancestry. In Chicago only 15,000 of the 40,000 taking German in 1900 were of German background.

In 1910, an estimated nine million people in the United States still spoke German as their mother tongue. Many considered the language the only way children could understand the German way of life, the German spirit and traditions.

The First World War drew a sharp cutoff line for German-language instruction countrywide. The use of German in any public place fell under a total ban at this time, including in church and school and even on the phone, which hit some groups particularly hard.

In April 1919, the state legislature of Nebraska declared: "No person, individually or as a teacher, shall, in any private, denominational, parochial or public school teach any subject to any person in any language other than the English language." One state representative typified the majority opinion when he said: "If these people are Americans, let them speak our language. If they don't know it, let them learn it. If they don't like it, let them move." The U.S. Supreme Court subsequently declared the Nebraska law unconstitutional,

however it was not until 1923 that most Americans could learn and be instructed in a foreign language.

In 1970, more than six million Americans reported that they had learned German as their first language. This statistic gives no clue to their current ability to speak, read, or write in German. An indicator may be the number of people subscribing to German-language newspapers and magazines. For example, demand in 1980 generated two daily papers, 23 weeklies, 15 monthlies and 12 other periodicals.

ENGLISH AS THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

The United States is a country of many cultures and languages. People come from all over the world, some feeling the urge to learn English as a part of being American and some not. Although every immigrant who wishes to become a citizen must prove proficiency and literacy in English (the citizenship exam is administered in English) a number of people are still more comfortable speaking their native languages.

In previous eras no such legislative muscle was thought necessary to expedite the process of immigrant acculturation, because alternatives to eventual assimilation were simply unimaginable. However, according to the 1990 Census, more than 32 million Americans did not speak English at home but used any of approximately 150 different languages instead. One public school in New York had children from 47 countries using 27 different languages.

Seventy-five percent of immigrants speak English with high proficiency within ten years of their arrival. Among second-generation Latino children only one in ten relies mainly on Spanish as a medium of communication. America is called a "language graveyard" because the native languages of immigrants die out after a few generations.

At present, one in seven U.S. residents speaks a language other than English at home. A century ago the proportion of non-English speakers was nearly five times as large. As the population becomes increasingly diverse, so newcomers are learning English faster than any earlier generation of immigrants. The demographer Calvin Veltman has observed that the traditional three-generation period for a complete shift to English is being shortened to two generations.

English as a common language

Pros

Ethnic “ghettoization” and its retardation of assimilation are more serious now than a hundred years ago. At that time, only rarely did a single ethnic group dominate an area of several city blocks, and even then many immigrants moved out of such areas. Now, ethnic enclaves are huge and still growing; in the city of Miami, for example, 50 percent of the population speaks English poorly or not at all, and 73 percent speak a language other than English at home.¹

Reaffirming the preeminence of English means reaffirming a unifying force in American life. Setting English as the official language would “send a message” to immigrants, encouraging them to join in rather than to remain apart, and to government, cautioning against policies which could retard English acquisition.

Supporters of the adoption of English as a national official language believe it would ensure taxpayers that their money is not wasted printing government forms and providing services in many languages. The U.S. government could instead allocate these funds to teach English to immigrants, so the newcomers can find jobs and assimilate into American society.

Cons

“Americans are generous people, appreciative of cultural diversity, and the existence of a common language has enabled us to develop a stable and cohesive society that is the envy of many fractured ones, without imposing any strict standards of homogeneity.” (The former Kentucky Senator Walter Huddleston)

Some Americans believe that making English the official language of the United States would fundamentally exclude certain people from voting or understanding U.S. laws. Critics also point out that immigrants have made vast social, political, and economic contributions to U.S. society.

Finally, some maintain that having one official language would be a violation of the First Amendment Right. They worry that a tightly enforced English-only law could lead to abuse of the freedoms of speech and expression; pose a threat to educational opportunities and insult the cultural minorities’ heritage. These include groups whose roots in the country go as deep, or deeper, than English speakers’ – as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and American Indians.

¹ 1990 Census

WHERE IS THE TRUTH ON LANGUAGE DIVERSITY?

There are several myths surrounding the discussion of language diversity:

- **The position of English is threatened**

Pros (August Gribbin, Washington Times, May 2000)

By the count made in the year 2000, about 330 languages are spoken in the U.S. and still more and more immigrants are demanding that U.S. society deal with them in their native tongues.

There is a boom in interpreting and translating services and this “market” is expected to grow from \$11 billion in 1999 to \$20 billion by 2004.

Additional Source

Proponents of English as the official language, considering it the “glue” that holds the country together, worry that the dominance of English is threatened. (*“Cultural Survival vs. Forced Assimilation the renewed war on diversity” Jon Reyhmer*)

Cons (T.G. Wiley, California State University)

English has been the dominant language in the United States since its founding. According to the U.S. Census data from 1990, there were approximately 32 million speakers of languages other than English. Only 1.8 million of this group did not speak English at all. The dominance of English is overwhelming.

Additional Sources

1. English, the global lingua franca and the language of wider communication in this country, is not threatened. For two centuries, most immigrants learned English within a generation without any laws compelling them. Current immigrants are doing the same. (*The National Council of Teachers of English*, <http://www.ncte.org/ncte.old/idea/position/national.html>)

2. Research indicates that now immigrants are learning English faster than they ever have before. On the contrary, it is the immigrant whose language is threatened. (*“Cultural Survival vs. Forced Assimilation the renewed war on diversity” Jon Reyhmer*)

3. The “glue” holding the country together is not the English language, but rather the ideas embodied in the Declaration and the U.S. Constitution.

- **Language minorities are not eager to study English or assimilate**

Pros

Language diversity is a recent phenomenon in the United States. Since the 1990, the number of U.S. residents who speak languages other than English at home has increased by 41 percent and the number of those who report some difficulty with English has increased by 40 percent. (*The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey*)

Additional Source

For the last fifteen years, we have experienced a growing resistance to the acceptance of our historic language, and an antagonistic questioning of the melting pot philosophy that has traditionally helped speed newcomers into the American mainstream (*Huddleston, 1983*).

Cons (T.G. Wiley, California State University)

The majority of immigrants feel the need to speak the language of the USA. Second generation immigrants are usually fluent in English and the gap between parents and children is becoming wider. Sometimes it is threatening for the grandparents to see how quickly their grandchildren lose the culture of their ancestors.

Additional Source

According to the statistics of ACLU (*American Civil Liberties Union*), 95 percent of first generation Mexican Americans are English-proficient and more than 50 percent of second generation have lost their native tongue completely. Ninety-eight percent of Latinos said they felt it was essential for their children to learn English perfectly.

Languages spoken at home/Ability to speak English (Percentage of population age 5 and over)	U.S.
<i>Speak only English at home</i>	82.40%
<i>Speak language other than English at home</i>	17.60%
<i>Speak Spanish</i>	10.50%
Percentage of this category who:	
Speak English well or very well	71.90%
Speak English not well or not at all	28.00%
<i>Speak Asian or Pacific Island languages</i>	2.70%
Percentage of this category who:	
Speak English well or very well	77.30%
Speak English not well or not at all	22.70%
<i>Speak other Indo-European languages</i>	3.70%
Percentage of this category who:	
Speak English well or very well	86.90%
Speak English not well or not at all	13.10%
<i>Speak other languages</i>	0.70%
Percentage of this category who:	
Speak English well or very well	90.20%
Speak English not well or not at all	9.80%
Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey	

- **English literacy is the only literacy worth noting**

Pros

Language barriers pose a significant challenge in the United States and other countries. According to the studies made by economist *Madeline Zavodny* in 1999, male workers who were not fluent in English made 9.3 percent less than those who spoke English fluently.

As immigrants become more comfortable in English use their wages rise.

Cons (T.G. Wiley, California State University)

Millions of people in the States are literate in languages other than English but their competence in these languages is undervalued. Therefore, literacy often becomes confused with English literacy. Doubts are expressed that elderly or recent immigrants, or those who have lacked opportunities to study English, can properly participate in American society. Limited oral proficiency in English, however, does not mean illiteracy.

- **English-only instruction in schools is the best way to promote English literacy**

Pros (Washington Post, August 9, 2001)

The problem is that bilingual programs often involve teaching mainly in the mother tongue (e.g. Spanish), with rather desultory efforts to teach English as a second language on the side.

Though empirical studies deliver a mixed verdict on this question, it appears that students would learn more English if they were immersed in it. A ballot initiative in California did away with bilingual education in 1998, and Arizona followed two years later. The early evidence from California is encouraging. In last year's standardized tests, second-graders classified as having limited English greatly improved their scores in both reading and math. This success has encouraged the proponents of immersion to organize further initiative campaigns in Colorado and Massachusetts. Oregon and Nevada are two other possible targets.

Cons (T.G. Wiley, California State University)

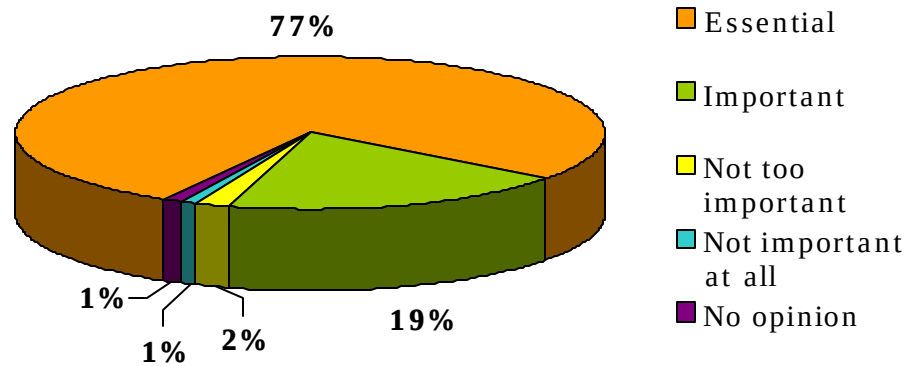
The myth that bilingual education confuses a child and inhibits his cognitive development has been one reason why minority parents did not speak their native language at home. Concerning results of the recent studies, the bilingual education approach is generally more effective than the English-only approach. The "sink or swim" experience of past immigrants left many of them underwater. In 1911, the U. S. Immigration Service found that 77 percent of Italian immigrant children, 60 percent of Russian, and 51 percent of German were one or more grade levels behind compared to 28 percent of American-born white children.

Additional Source

When a school reinforces an English-Only policy, it sends a message to all children that minority languages have less value than English as tools of learning. And because the school is a microcosm of society, this message also suggests that those languages are not an integral part of the American society. This message equally deprives mainstream children of the opportunity to experience the cultural diversity in the country, and robs every child of the chance to learn the full potential of human possibilities (Heath, 1986).

Gallup Poll (March 2001)

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING ENGLISH BY IMMIGRANTS:



Assimilation

“Assimilation happens over time whatever the roots of immigrants are. Previous Americans have wailed at how a way of life was being destroyed by immigrant hordes and it has never happened. It never will. People just accept and adapt.”
(By O. Ricardo Pimentel, The Denver Post, April 15, 2001)

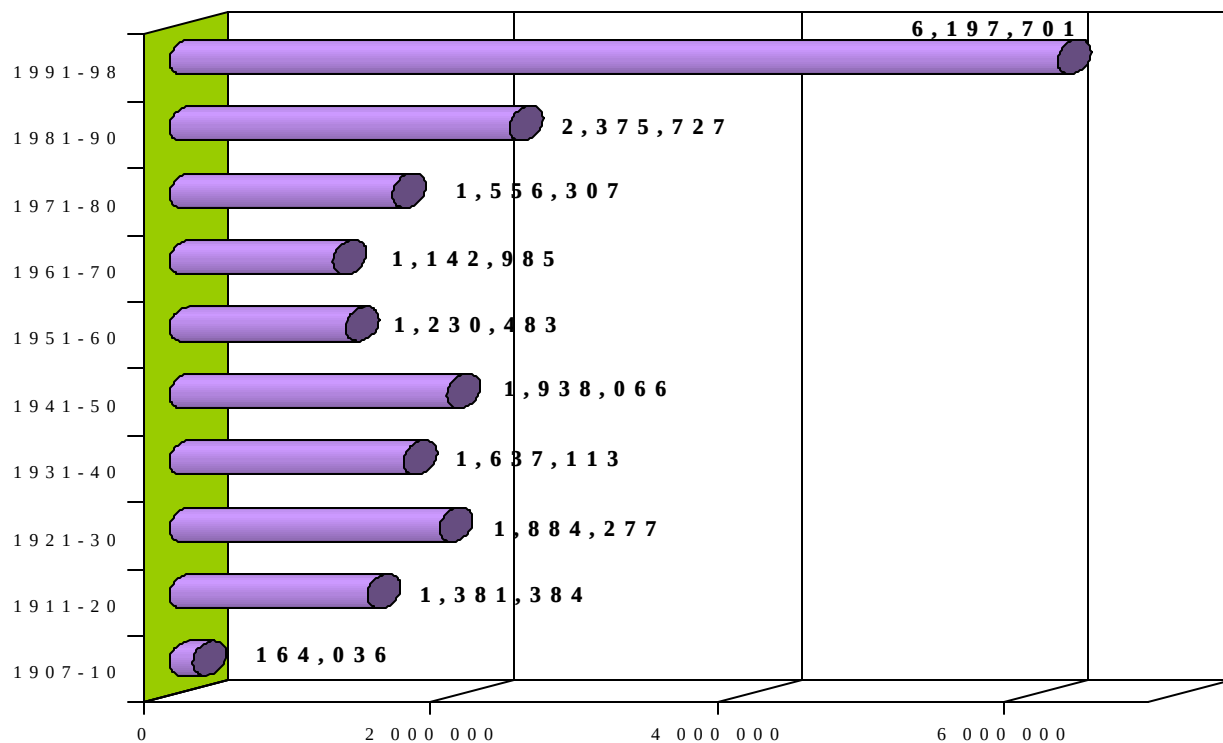
The question of assimilation is not whether racial groups have cut their ties to their homeland completely, but whether they have put down roots in the United States. The most important measures of finding out how the assimilation has changed are:

CITIZENSHIP

American citizenship has never been an automatic choice for immigrants. Only about half of the people who arrived in the United States at the turn of the century chose to become citizens.

The number of persons naturalizing each year lags behind the number of persons immigrating by at least five years due to the five-year residency requirement for most legal immigrants. Until the 1970s, the majority of persons naturalizing were born in Europe because these countries were favored by country quotas in immigration law. By eliminating those quotas, naturalization and immigration shifted from Europe to Asia.

Historically, Asians had higher rates of naturalization than Europeans. Between 1976-1995, Asia was the leading region of birth among person naturalized. Following the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, legal immigration and naturalization from North America increased. In 1996, North America became the leading region of birth for persons naturalizing. (Data from 1998)

PERSONS NATURALIZED, FY 1908-98 (Statistical Yearbook 1998, INS)**HOME OWNERSHIP**

It is another powerful symbol of attachment to American life. Half of all immigrant homes were owner-occupied in 1990. This is a much lower figure than the one for native-born Americans. But the longer immigrants stay in the country, the more likely they are to join the home-owning classes. In 1996, 75 percent of immigrants who had been in the United States for at least 25 years owned their homes, compared to 70 percent of native-born Americans.

The 2000 Report of the Center for Immigration Studies, the organization generally seeking to limit immigration, reported that more recent immigrants were poorer, less educated and less likely to be homeowners than previous immigrants. The National Immigration Forum, a group that generally favors relaxing immigration restrictions, disputed the Center for Immigration Studies report. It noted that the longer immigrants stayed, the better they did; that the gaps between immigrants and native-born in income and home ownership disappeared over time but that it might take up to 20 or 30 years. Over the last 40 years or so, three-quarters of foreign-born had, in fact, become citizens; and to differentiate between legal and undocumented immigrants, the figures looked better for the legal immigrants.

INTERMARRIAGE AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

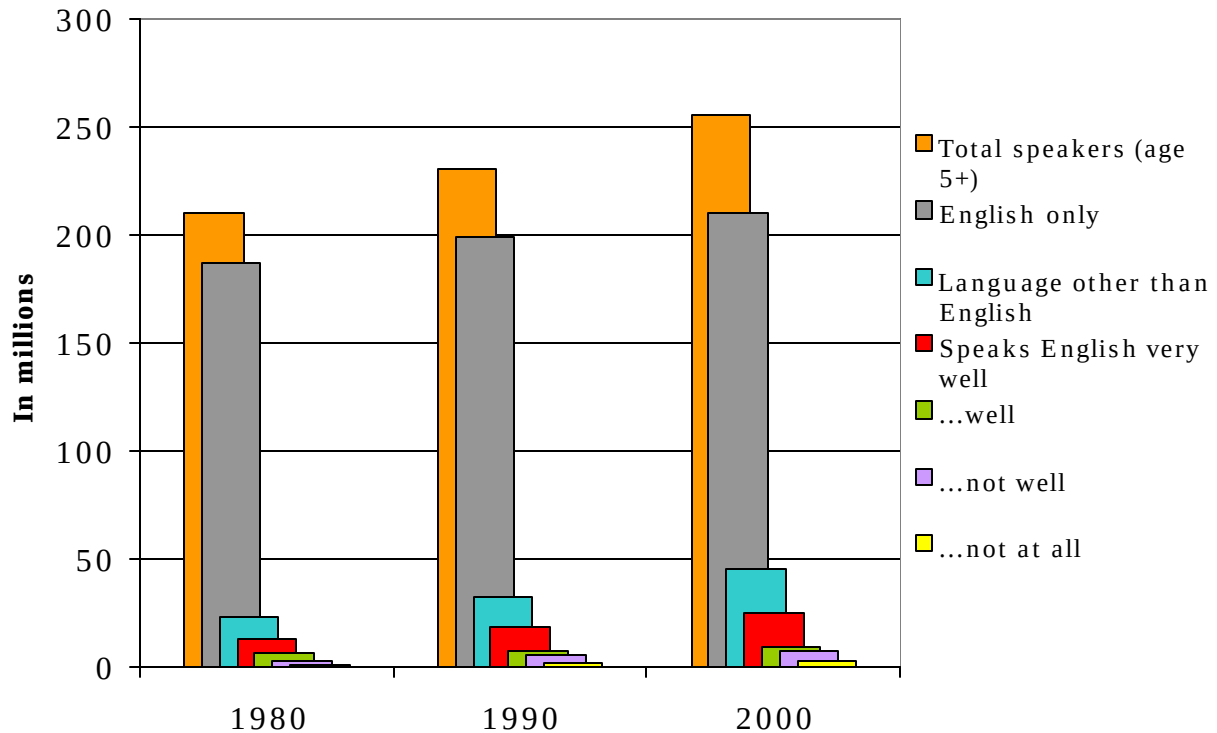
The figures for intermarriages and language acquisition are equally heartening from an “assimilationist” point of view. By the third generation, a third or more of Latino and Asian women are marrying outside their racial groups.

In 1900, a quarter of immigrants could not speak English. In 2000, the figure of U.S. residents who could not speak English at all was 1.3 percent. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of immigrants spoke English “with high proficiency” within ten years of arrival; and almost all their children spoke English either well or exclusively. Almost half the children of Asian immigrants can speak only English.

Over the past 20 years, the population of fluent bilinguals has been increasing at about the same rate as the population that speaks languages other than English (see the chart and the table that follows).

The growth of the language minority population corresponded with the immigration levels. In the 1980s, the foreign population grew by 40 percent and the language minorities by 38 percent. In the 1990s, the foreign-born population grew by 54 percent and language minorities speaking other language than English at home grew by 41 percent.

In the year 2000, about 60 percent of language minorities in the USA spoke Spanish at home. Since 1980 the Spanish-speaking group has increased more rapidly than the overall language minority population.

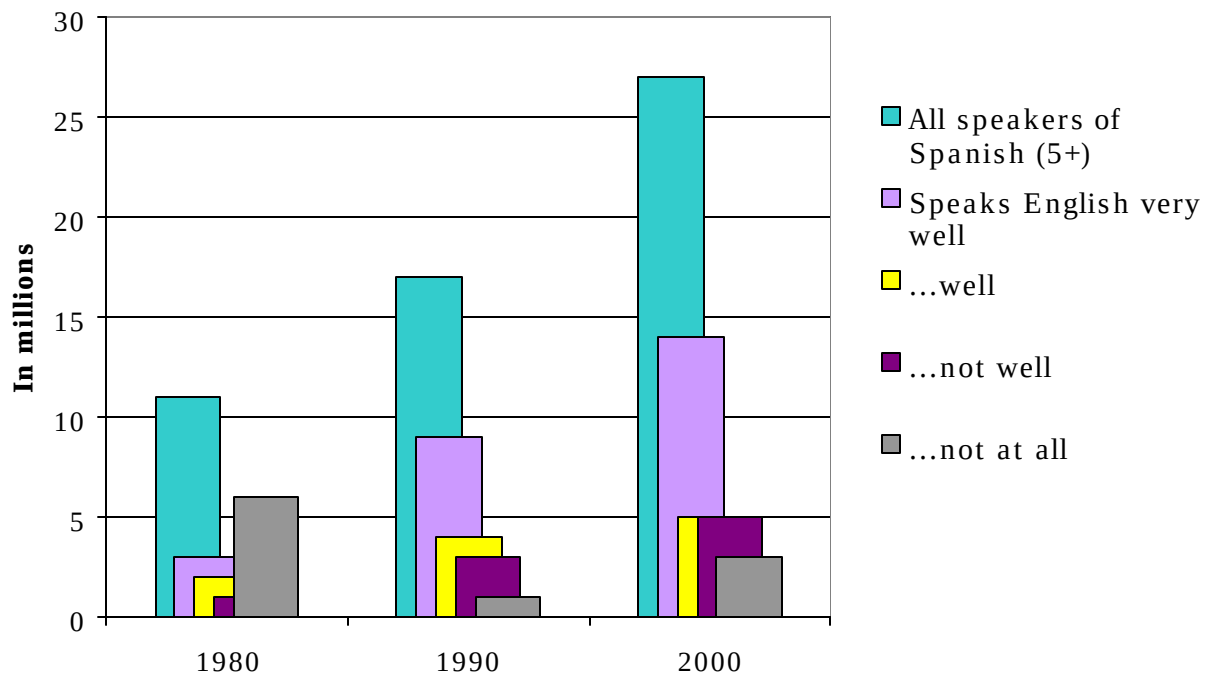
LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME

Census data on Languages Spoken at Home						
Self Reported English-speaking Ability, USA, 1980, 1990, 2000						
Home language	1980 (M)	%	1990 (M)	%	2000 (M)	%
Total speakers (age 5+)	210,247,455	100,0	230,445,777	100,0	254,762,734	100,0
English only	187,187,415	89,0	198,600,798	86,2	209,817,282	82,4
Language other than English:	23,060,040	11,0	31,844,979	13,8	44,945,452	17,6
Speaks English very well	12,879,004	6,1	17,862,477	7,8	25,419,219	9,9
...well	5,957,544	2,8	7,310,301	3,2	9,012,401	3,5
...not well	3,005,503	1,4	4,826,958	2,1	7,169,798	2,8
...not at all	1,217,989	0,6	1,845,243	0,8	3,344,034	1,3

Sources:

1980 Census of Population, vol. 1, chap. D, pt. 1 (PC80-1-D1-A);

U.S. Census Bureau, "Language Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for United States, Regions, and States: 1990" (1990 CPH-L-133).

SPANISH SPOKEN AT HOME

Spanish Spoken at Home						
Self-Reported English-Speaking Ability, USA, 1980, 1990, 2000						
	1980 (M)	%	1990 (M)	%	2000 (M)	%
All speakers of Spanish (5+)	11,116,194	100,0	17,345,064	100,0	26,771,035	100,0
Speaks English very well	2,873,539	49,8	9,033,407	52,1	14,291,984	53,3
...well	1,770,047	25,9	3,804,792	21,9	4,947,645	18,5
...not well	937,733	15,9	3,040,828	17,5	4,831,869	18,0
...not at all	5,581,319	8,4	1,460,145	8,4	2,699,537	10,1

Sources:

1980 Census of Population, vol. 1, chap. D, pt. 1 (PC80-1-D1-A);

U.S. Census Bureau, "Language Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for United States, Regions, and States: 1990" (1990 CPH-L-133);

Census 2000 Supplementary Survey