



Awkward questions: language issues in the 2011 census in England

Mark Sebba

To cite this article: Mark Sebba (2017): Awkward questions: language issues in the 2011 census in England, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2017.1342651](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2017.1342651)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2017.1342651>



Published online: 30 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 7



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Awkward questions: language issues in the 2011 census in England

Mark Sebba

Department of Linguistics, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

The 2011 Census in England broke new ground, as a question about language had never previously been asked. After stakeholder consultations and a series of trials, the census authority decided on two questions based on earlier censuses in the USA: one about the respondent's 'main language' and another about proficiency in English. This paper provides a critique of the census questions, showing how the pressure to produce questions which were straightforward to answer and consistent with the predominant monolingual ideology led to the choice of two questions which were problematic in different ways. This raises doubts about the validity of the questions themselves and the usefulness of the data collected.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 July 2016
Accepted 10 June 2017

KEYWORDS

Census; multilingualism; language policy; self-assessment of language proficiency

Introduction

Alongside mundane inquiries about the number of vehicles owned and the number of rooms in the home, national censuses offer the prospect of asking pertinent questions about respondents' uses of language, gathering reliable information about the languages used throughout the population and allowing it to be correlated with other information, such as location, employment and education.

While some census questions are clearly matters of objective fact, other questions may require the respondent to make a combination of judgements, some relatively objective, and some quite subjective, linked to personal identity and socioeconomic status and influenced by self-perception and by the perceptions of other groups. Inevitably, questions about language are asked within a social and historical context which both constrains the possible answers and motivates respondents to select certain answers rather than others from those available, in accordance with prevailing ideologies about (among others) nation, ethnicity and language (see, e.g. Urla 1993; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Leeman 2004; Laversuch 2007). The act of census-taking, as shown by those researchers and many others, is always politically and ideologically charged. Urla (1993, 820) points to 'a recent emergence of faith in statistical measurement as the basis for an objective and necessary science of society', while arguing that administrative processes of quantification like censuses are not socially neutral activities that deliver true 'facts', or even ideologically motivated distortions of facts. Rather, such processes 'in and of themselves constitute our most basic understandings of the social sphere and social actors'. Such a view contrasts strongly with that of the authorities and the public, by whom censuses are expected to – but in reality cannot – deliver objective 'facts' in the form of statistics.

Many countries include language questions in their national censuses, or have done in recent times: for example, detailed questions related to language use and language proficiency have been asked in the Canadian census (Christopher 2011, 544) and in Australia (Ozolins 1993). In the Commonwealth, 37 census authorities (around half the total) included questions on language in recent

censuses (Christopher 2011, 536). Other countries, such as the USA, now collect language data through household surveys. In Europe, Central Asia and North America, 76% of countries collected language data in the 2000–2001 census round (Aspinall 2005, 364). In the UK, however, before 2011 no questions about language had ever been asked in England, where over 80% of the population live. In this respect, the 2011 census in England was ground breaking, as it included two questions specifically about language: one about the respondent's 'main language' and a second, for those who declared that their main language was not English, about how well they could speak it.

The census language questions in England were formulated in the context of a prevailing linguistic ideology which assumes monolingualism as a norm (Blackledge 2000), and favours language shift towards English as a way of encouraging the integration – or assimilation – of non-indigenous minorities. Blackledge (2000, 36), argues that 'in imagining the nation, public discourse unites around the English language, and puts to one side the other languages of Britain'. This ideological predisposition will become apparent when the choice of questions and the history of their formulation are examined. The questions used in England were based on census questions previously used in the USA, which themselves have attracted criticism from linguists for the ideologies they embodied. This seems a good moment, therefore, to examine these questions critically in the light of current applied linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Both census questions, though tested in advance and designed to be easy to answer and to provide good data, can be seen as highly problematic from the viewpoint of linguists, especially sociolinguists. To date, however, they have received little attention from academics, and when the census statistics have been communicated, whether to users or the public at large, they have generally been treated uncritically. This makes it all the more important that they be subject to scrutiny now, as preparations are under way for the next census.

The paper is structured as follows: the second section deals with the historical background and early testing of language questions; the third section discusses the 'main language' question which was chosen for the census questionnaire; the fourth section examines the question about ability to speak English; and the fifth section is for discussion.

Language questions in the 2011 census in England

In the UK, a national census has been carried out every 10 years since 1801, except in 1941 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], n.d.; Christopher 2011, 539). In England and Wales, the Census is carried out under the authority of Parliament, but is conducted by the ONS, the recognised national statistical institute of the UK. A slightly different questionnaire, also developed by the ONS, is used in Wales, where the Welsh Assembly Government now has responsibility. In other constituent countries of the UK, Scotland and Northern Ireland, devolved legislatures have authority for the census, and different questionnaires, developed by their own statistical institutes, are used. This paper discusses the language questions in the 2011 census in England only. Welsh language questions, which were asked only in Wales, are outside its scope.

Historically, a language question has been asked in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, about the use of the indigenous Celtic languages Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish. This provided information about language maintenance and shift towards English, but did not ask about any other languages. Up to and including 2001, no language questions had been asked in a census in England, making it unique within the UK, and somewhat out of line internationally.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe note in their recommendations for decennial censuses that there are various kinds of language data which countries may want to collect (cf. Arel 2002, 97):

430. Multilingual countries and countries with significant immigrant populations may wish to collect data on languages that are currently written or spoken. Depending on information needs, the following data may be collected:

- a) 'Mother tongue', defined as the first language spoken in early childhood at home;
 - b) Main language, defined as the language which the person commands best;
 - c) Language(s) most currently spoken at home and/or work;
 - d) Knowledge of language(s), defined as the ability to speak and/or write one or more designated languages.
- (United Nations 2006, 96)

The Commission also recommend 'that at least two questions be asked about language. One should refer to topics (a), (b) or (c) and the other should refer to topic (d)'. Up to 2001, the census in England did not follow this guideline, and there appears to have been no substantial pressure, either from politicians or public bodies, for it to do so. After 2001, however, there were calls (e.g. Aspinall 2005) for the next census to include language questions.

The process of planning the questionnaire for the next census began with an open consultation by the ONS in May 2005 (ONS 2005). The consultation document discussed potential questions and invited stakeholders to make a case for collecting new information. Change to census questionnaires is incremental and there is competition for space in the questionnaire: therefore any new topic must have thorough justification.

The initial consultation document for the 2011 census did not propose to include the topic of language. A potential question on 'English language proficiency' was given a low priority rating because 'ONS believed that there was insufficient evidence of user demand to justify inclusion' in the census (ONS 2006, 14). However, of almost 500 responses to the consultation, around 80 involved a need for language information, and the ONS concluded from this that there was, in fact, a demand for a language question (2006, 14). Stakeholders who mentioned language in their responses included central, local and regional government, bodies responsible for ensuring equality and diversity, charities concerned with disability and the Welsh Language Board (ONS 2006, 14). It is not clear whether linguistic minorities themselves were among those requesting language data. Reasons for needing language information included diverse language planning purposes, for example: enabling government bodies to meet their duties under legislation governing race relations and disability discrimination; allowing local and central government to allocate resources for teaching English as a second language, for libraries and for providing translation services within public services; identifying isolated groups of people and addressing social inclusion; and supporting regional or minority languages like Cornish and BSL (ONS 2006, 15).

The ONS decided to trial questions both about languages spoken and about proficiency or skills. Between four and six years before the census date, the ONS experimented with questions designed to find out more about respondents' abilities in multiple languages. They tried using different versions of a matrix to collect responses to the question *What languages can you understand, speak, read or write?* The 2007 postal pilot census included a matrix in which respondents could indicate 'the ability to understand, speak, read and write English, Welsh and one other language (to be specified by the respondent)' as well as sign language (ONS 2009, 20). Testing indicated that the matrix form of the language question was not satisfactory. Respondents found all versions of it difficult to complete, leading to incomplete and inconsistent responses. Furthermore, less than half of the respondents to the 2007 consultation thought that this version would meet their needs for language information, *inter alia* because it failed to elicit the preferred language of communication, the details of all languages known, and information on levels of language ability and literacy. One major problem was a lack of clarity about the level of proficiency required for respondents to report that they knew a language. If some respondents reported they could speak languages which in fact they knew only slightly, the data would be less useful (ONS 2009, 27) and there was a high risk of inconsistency in the answers.

Noting that 'international research and best practice also advises that a matrix format is not appropriate for a question in a self-complete census questionnaire' (ONS 2009, 27), the ONS then abandoned the matrix question design and trialled a number of versions of a question based on the New Zealand census, *In which language(s) can you have a conversation about a lot of everyday*

things? But again it was clear that consistency of responses would be a major issue (ONS 2009, 31) as respondents could interpret the question in different ways.

After trials of several versions of matrix-style questions and at least two versions of questions about conversational ability, as ‘none of the previously tested style of questions met all the essential elements of a suitable language question, let alone the desirable elements’, the ONS ‘decided to test an alternative style of question for meeting user requirements within space constraints’ (ONS 2009, 31).

These were the questions that appeared in the final census questionnaire, based on a two-part question asked on the US-census long-form questionnaire in 2000: the first part to elicit the ‘primary language’ of the respondent, and the second to determine their knowledge of English.¹ Each was problematic in its own way. They are considered separately in the next two sections.

The ‘main language’ question

According to the ONS, ‘the key purpose of a primary language question is to establish the language that public authorities can communicate with respondents in’ (2009, 31). Thus, it is not mainly intended to find out about the respondent’s linguistic repertoire, their language use in specific domains like home or work, or even their preferred language.

In the 2007 consultation, the need to know ‘mother tongue or first language’ and ‘main language (spoken at home)’ ranked high in the list of stakeholders’ priorities (94%/95%), with the ability to speak and understand English slightly lower, at 92%/93%. A need for ‘preferred language for communicating with public authorities’ ranked a little lower, expressed by about 90% of the stakeholders (2009, 10). While the decision to adopt the US-style question about ‘primary language’ is thus arguably based on the priorities of users determined by the 2007 consultation, it nevertheless seems to mark a change in the strategy of the ONS: rather than planning to collect information about a *range* of languages – ‘capturing multiple languages to gain the best understanding of ethno-linguistic diversity and resource’ as listed in the initial set of desiderata (2009, 11) – questions would now focus closely on one ‘key purpose’: to determine how public authorities could best communicate with their user communities.

Though based on the US-census question, the ‘main language’ question was differently worded in England. The US census asked *Does this person speak a language other than English at home?*, directing the attention to the respondent’s ‘home language’. The final form of the question on the census form in England was as in Figure 1:

Both the US and the UK questions assume that it is possible to identify a single language as an answer; however, the US question is specifically about languages used in the family environment, allowing for the possibility of others outside the home, while the UK assumes that respondents have one ‘main language’ in their repertoire overall. Leeman (2004, 527) points out how in the US census, people who know other languages, but who speak only English at home, become invisible in the statistics, leaving potential bilingualism unrecorded. This applies even more so to the census in England, where bilingualism is statistically visible only for those who have a ‘main language’ other than English.

A bias towards monolingualism, in keeping with the prevailing linguistic ideology in England (Blackledge 2000) and the USA (Leeman 2004, 526) is apparent in this question. While asking about the ‘main’ language implies that the respondent may use other languages as well, it assumes

(18) What is your main language?

☐ English → Go to 20

☐ Other, write in (including British Sign Language)

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Figure 1. The ‘primary language’ question in the 2011 census questionnaire.

that everyone will be able to identify a single ‘main’ language. This fits well with a dominant ideology which ‘perceives languages to be in eternal competition’, as Leeman (2004, 526) observes in relation to the USA, while ‘bilingualism is constructed as a personal liability’. Within this mindset, it is natural to assume that for individual speakers, one language is necessarily ‘main’ while others are subordinate. If society were indeed like this, then answering the question would be easy for everyone. However, sociolinguistic research shows that while naming your primary language is straightforward for some people, it is difficult, messy and/or strategic for others (Pattanayak 1981, 54; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1989, 189; Freeland 2003).

Failing to acknowledge this, the census question assumes the respondent can identify a ‘main language’ inside and outside the home, and across both spoken and written language uses. Even where these are different – for example, where a person’s main spoken language is Panjabi but their main written language is Urdu – the respondent will have to choose just one. They may feel that their mother tongue is Panjabi and therefore record that as their ‘main language’, but this would not necessarily be the appropriate language for the authorities to use to communicate with them in writing, as for some Panjabi speakers, their language of literacy is Urdu. While this example applies (or did apply) to just one community – Panjabi Muslims (see Gardner-Chloros 1997, 213) – there could be many people for whom English is the ‘main language’ of literacy, but another language is the main spoken language especially in the home. Likewise, there could be many whose main spoken language is a nonstandardised language or is regarded as a ‘dialect’, while the language of literacy is the standard counterpart: for example, speakers of Sylheti for whom standard Bangla is the language of literacy (Reynolds and Verma 2007, 304).

These facts call the effectiveness of the question into doubt. DeVries (1985, 359) notes that for respondents who use more than one language, choices about which language to designate as ‘main language’ are ‘as subjective as the ones regarding the ability to speak designated languages’.

In fact, the way the question is contextualised provides an incentive to the respondent to answer that their main language is ‘English’. Any other answer not only requires more work to fill in the form, but also requires the respondent to subject their proficiency in English to assessment in a follow-up question. Furthermore, for a multilingual respondent, choosing a ‘main language’ could be difficult, especially as different languages may be ‘main’ in different contexts. For many people English will be a ‘main’ language in some sense, even if it is not the language they are most fluent in, so the scales are weighted in favour of ‘English’ being given as the response.

This is illustrated by an example reported by ONS in connection with the testing process:

One respondent whose mother tongue was Afrikaans understood the question to be asking about frequency of use rather than mother tongue and answered ‘English’ as their main language. Although such answers would reduce the quality of information on language diversity, the information provided would still meet essential user needs appropriately as anyone who mainly used English as their primary mode of communication would have appropriate language skills to be able to access services adequately in English. (2009, 36)

This extract gives some insights into how the question motivated some respondents to give their main language as English, and how the ONS interpreted this as unproblematic because ‘information provided would still meet essential user needs appropriately’. Again this underlines how the ONS decided to prioritise the user goal of identifying the language in which a respondent could access services, over and above that of finding out about ‘language diversity’. Having had difficulty developing suitable census questions to achieve the latter goal, the ONS seems to have made its own decision to reduce its importance.

The ‘Main Language’ question is thus problematic in a number of ways. The requirement to select a single ‘main language’ is out of step with a sociolinguistically informed view of multilingualism and erases bilinguals from the statistics if they report English as their ‘main language’. The questionnaire itself provides an incentive for respondents to choose English as their main language, potentially resulting in misleading statistics and ‘invisible’ bilinguals. Meanwhile information about linguistic

(19) How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 2. The ‘English proficiency’ question in the 2011 census questionnaire.

diversity – the range of languages actually used – is not asked for. Multilinguals and monolinguals alike are recorded as having just one ‘main language’.

The ‘English proficiency’ question

Those who declared a ‘main language’ other than English were directed to a second question about language (ONS 2009, 36). This question was modelled on a question asked since 1980 in the US census, *How well does this person speak English?*, slightly reworded (Figure 2):

This question focusses narrowly on one aspect of the respondent’s linguistic competence: the ability to speak English. Despite the prevalence of written communication throughout British society and the declared need of 91% of respondents to the consultation to know about ‘ability to read English’ (ONS 2009, 10), the question referred only to the spoken mode. No provision was made for the possibility that a respondent might read English well, but speak it poorly, or vice versa. Nor did it ask explicitly about habitual use of English, as might be inferred from the US-census question, which uses *does* rather than *can*.

Other problematic aspects of this question are discussed under separate headings below.

The underlying ideologies of language

The choice of English as the only language where respondents’ knowledge is examined more deeply shows a concern with English rather than any other language in the respondent’s repertoire. As pointed out by Leeman (2004, 527), it is constructed as the ‘normal’ language. In this way, the question reflects a linguistic ideology which discounts multilingualism and prioritises English. This is clear when we compare other possible ways of asking the question, for example some of the matrix questions trialled by the ONS, which asked the same questions about all the languages listed by the respondent (ONS 2009, 15–22).

Zentella, Urciuoli, and Graham (2007), in a cogent critique of this question as it appears in the US Census, argue that it is based on a view of language which is at odds with the one held by most linguists, particularly sociolinguists. The question, they say, reflects a monolingual and prescriptive ideology of language (a ‘correctness ideology’) which is also held by the majority of the population. In this view, ‘control’ of language – English in this case – ‘can be measured in terms of correctness’, and ‘insufficient correctness means loss of meaning’ (2007, 10). They warn of the social divisiveness of this, as ‘correctness’ is well known, from decades of sociolinguistic research, to correlate with the usage of the elite and dominant class. Furthermore, they say, the assumptions underlying the question ignore the interactive nature of language by presupposing that ‘acts of communication take place in a vacuum’, and are the acts ‘of an individual rather than a social production’ (2007, 10).

Thus, the question is grounded in an ideology of language which prioritises English, treats monolingualism as the norm and views language ‘proficiency’ as measurable separately from its social context. In the next sections, we discuss the more practical issues of the validity of the question and the effectiveness of self-assessment of language abilities.

Validity of the question and interpretation of the responses

The usefulness of this question depends on accurate self-assessment. But self-assessment of ability in a named language is not straightforward. While psychological research has shown a substantial

correlation between self-concepts of ability and actual levels of ability in a given domain, it is doubtful whether the same applies to self-assessments of language proficiency (Edele et al. 2015, 100). No guidance was given to respondents about how to assess their own ability in English.

Before deciding to use this question format, the ONS conducted cognitive testing to assess the validity and reliability of the question. Cognitive testing involves semi-structured interviews with a sample of respondents to find out how they ‘understand, mentally process and respond to the question under scrutiny to explore whether the question, response options and accompanying instructions are interpreted in the way intended’ (Ipsos MORI, n.d.). Tests found that respondents had satisfactorily clear interpretations of the proficiency level options; thus, for ‘very well’ ‘it was thought that if a person did not have English as a first language then to tick this box they should have a high level of English and possibly be fluent’, while for ‘well’, ‘respondents felt this level of ability was appropriate for people who were not fluent, but were able to use their language to get by on a day-to-day basis’. ‘Not well’ was felt to apply to someone ‘who could follow some of what was being said, but with difficulty’ (ONS 2009, 38).

To check the accuracy of the self-assessments by L2 users of English, the ONS asked the interviewers who were carrying out the census tests (who had not been trained in any form of language assessment) to give their own assessment of the respondents’ English language ability. The outcome was almost perfect agreement on the categories ‘very well’ and ‘not well’. For the category ‘well’, the interviewers assessed the respondents’ English as better than the respondents themselves did: of those respondents who said that they spoke English ‘well’, the interviewers put 56% in the ‘very well’ category, suggesting ‘a tendency for people to underestimate their English proficiency’ (ONS 2009, 39).² Acknowledging this mismatch, the ONS report points out ‘However, none of the discrepancies in judgement between respondent and interviewer crossed the boundary between “not well” and “well” which is the most crucial distinction for data users’.

The claim that the ‘most crucial distinction’ is that between ‘not well’ and ‘well’ seems to be based on Kominski’s (1989, 5) statement, cited by the ONS (2009, 39) that

the ‘not at all’ and ‘not well’ items come closer to identifying a unique sub-population (one that we might call ‘in need of English assistance’), than do the ‘very well’ and ‘well’ categories, (which we might say are ‘English assimilated’ to varying extents).

For the ONS, a key user goal was to identify the language in which a respondent could access services. For respondents who knew English ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’, this would have to be their ‘main language’.

But research from the USA casts doubt on the ‘crucial’ boundary lying between ‘well’ and ‘not well’. For many data users the important distinction may indeed lie between those categories in their commonsense interpretation, and according to cognitive testing done by the ONS, this view is shared by the general public. They interpret speaking English ‘well’ as able ‘to get by on a day-to-day basis’ (i.e. not needing help with English), while ‘not well’ implies able to follow partly, ‘but with difficulty’ (i.e. needing help with English) (ONS 2009, 38). However, some researchers have argued that the boundary between these categories – those ‘not needing help’ and those ‘needing help’ – is actually the boundary that separates those who answer ‘very well’ from all the rest.

This conclusion could be drawn from the English Language Proficiency Study, carried out in 1982 by the Census Bureau for the Department of Education. The study administered tests to respondents chosen from a sample based on their responses to the language usage question in the 1980 census. Detailed tests of English writing, reading, listening and speaking abilities were given to respondents in their homes and compared with their answers to the census questions (Kominski 1989; McArthur 1993, 4). The analysis of the ELPS showed that there was ‘a strong correlation’ between the census responses and the test score. However,

In terms of a simple ‘pass-fail’ criterion (based on an assigned cutoff point in the scoring), it was shown that persons responding ‘very well’ to the speaking ability item had passing levels similar to the English-speaking

population that had taken the test (as a control group), while persons reporting ability levels as ‘well’ or worse had significantly higher levels of failure. (Kominski 1989, 2)

So although as Kominski puts it, ‘in this context, the “how well” item exhibited a fair degree of validity’ the cut-off point between those who can speak English well enough (‘need no help’) and those who cannot (‘need help’) seems, for this population at least, to lie not between the self-assessment categories of ‘speak well’ and ‘don’t speak well’, but rather between ‘speak very well’ and ‘speak well’. This has been the interpretation, for example, of Edith McArthur, one of the researchers on the English Language Proficiency Study, whose report ‘makes the assumption that all persons who spoke a language other than English at home and who were reported to speak English [...] less than “very well” had difficulty in English’ (1993, 5). A more recent study shows that the census question ‘captures significant differences in average prose literacy among LOTE speakers’ (Vickstrom et al. 2015, 24), again with the key distinction being McArthur between those reporting that they speak English ‘very well’ and those reporting lesser ability. Furthermore, since 1990, the census response ‘very well’ has been used in the US as the cut-off point in the definition of ‘linguistic isolation’. Individuals and families are classified as ‘linguistically isolated’ unless at least 1 person over 14 in their household speaks exclusively English, or speaks English ‘very well’ (for a critique of this concept, see Leeman 2004, 528; Zentella, Urciuoli, and Graham 2007, 10–11).

Despite the reassurance provided by the ONS, it is doubtful whether the judgements of interviewers completely untrained in language assessment are satisfactory validation of a census measurement of language, even if the studies by Kominski and Vickstrom suggest that it has some validity. In addition, the discrepancy in the judgements concerning the ‘well’ category might give rise to concerns. Furthermore, even if the assessment has validity, its interpretation, in terms of the actual communicative abilities of respondents and the borderline between those who ‘need help’ and ‘don’t need help’, is open to question.

Further problems with self-assessment

Similar conclusions can be drawn from studies which have compared self-assessment of ability in L2 with more objective measures.

In the British context, Carr-Hill et al. studied around 1100 adults from four specific ethnic/linguistic backgrounds (Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi and Chinese) and a selection of refugees with Tamil, Somali, Kurdish or Bosnian as mother tongue. Participants were asked to self-assess their abilities in English as well as complete a set of language assessment tasks, including a written test. In the assessment, a score of 49 points was taken as indicating the achievement of ‘survival level’ English,

the level at which it becomes possible to work in an English speaking environment, though not if extensive verbal and listening communication is required. Verbal and listening skills remain quite moderate, but a [foundation level of literacy] has been reached ... (Carr-Hill et al. 1996, 66)

The researchers found that on average, participants tended to be ‘rather optimistic’ in their self-ratings as ‘good’ and ‘very good’ (97). Thus, the participants who self-assessed as ‘good’ had an average score just below ‘survival’ level – in the authors’ terms, not quite good enough to work in an English-speaking environment. The average score of those who self-assessed as ‘very good’ was just within ‘level 5’, where people ‘could work in many English-speaking environments provided they were not required to use much written or spoken English independently, or understand complex instructions; and could function independently in social and community contexts’ (66). Carr-Hill et al. remark that while ‘one can legitimately call individual self assessments into question *on an individual basis*, they are very useful indicators in *relative terms*’ (97, emphasis in original), shown by ‘very high’ correlations between the self-assessment score, the proportion requiring help from the interviewer, the total raw point scores and the classification into levels (97).

Edele et al. (2015) review a number of earlier studies where language self-assessment was carried out using a general type of question, similar to that often used in censuses, for example, where participants were asked to rate their language ability on one or more dimensions (understanding, speaking, etc.) with respect to a four- or five-point scale. (The Carr-Hill et al. study was not among those they reviewed.) They remark that ‘the few studies that have examined the validity of the general question type have yielded inconsistent findings’ (101) with correlations between the self-assessments and externally validated tests varying from moderately good to no correlation, in different studies. They conclude that ‘It is thus unclear whether the general type of self-assessment on which most empirical evidence on immigrants’ language skills relies is reliably related to tested language proficiency’. They cite a study by Finnie and Meng (2005) which found substantial differences between the results for self-assessments and test scores. Finnie and Meng, furthermore, found that ‘tested L2 ability predicted participants’ employment status and income reliably, whereas self-assessed language skills did not’ (Edele et al. 2015, 102).

In their own larger study based on data collected from adolescents in Germany – L2 speakers of German with L1 backgrounds in Russian, Turkish, Polish and a large number of other languages – Edele et al. concluded that ability self-assessments (those using a general type of question as described above) correlated only moderately with tested linguistic ability (2015, 112).

Furthermore, a multivariate analysis suggested that self-assessments of both the general and a more specific type

are systematically biased in some groups ... For instance, even though female students scored higher on the language tests, they estimated their L1 skills on a similar level as their male peers. This result indicates that, in relative terms, boys tend to overestimate their abilities. (Edele et al. 2015, 113)

Highly relevant here is the finding that different groups of immigrants (i.e. groups with different L1) also showed this kind of bias.

Whereas the students of Turkish origin who were born in Germany exhibited lower skills on the L2 tests than did most other groups, they rated their L2 skills on a similar or even higher level ... [They] thus tend to overestimate their language abilities. (Edele et al. 2015, 113)

Interestingly, Carr-Hill et al. appeared to produce a similar finding in their British study, although the authors themselves dismissed this conclusion. Carr-Hill et al. give tables showing the average score of the participants in each language group who assessed themselves as being in the categories ‘poor’, ‘moderate’, ‘good’ and ‘very good’. For example, the members of the refugee group (from various language backgrounds) collectively made a fairly accurate assessment of their own abilities. However, the range of scores of homogenous L1 groups under each self-assessment heading is quite large, especially for ‘good’ (between Level 3 for the Bengali group and Level 5, for the Chinese group) and ‘very good’. A comparison of the proportion scoring at ‘survival level’ or better with the self-assessed score likewise shows big differences: among the Bengali group only 10% who self-assessed as ‘good’, and only 61% who self-assessed as ‘very good’, reached the ‘survival’ score. By contrast, for the Chinese L1 group the corresponding figures were 79% and 89%.

On the basis of these figures, Carr-Hill et al. say,

It is possible that reported self-assessment – which is effectively an expression of confidence – might vary according to linguistic group, age group and gender ... with Bengalis overstating and Chinese understating their competence (relative to the whole sample) ... However, detailed breakdowns show that there is very little relationship with either linguistic group or age or gender (and that was also true of the correlation coefficients). (1996, 98)

Despite this disclaimer, there seem to be good reasons why groups with different L1 could vary in their judgement of what counts as speaking L2 ‘well’ or ‘very well’, as Edele et al. actually found in their study. They reflect on some of the reasons why this might occur, particularly in migrant communities where L2 is not learnt through structured instruction:

Whereas [instructed] foreign language learners typically can draw on explicit feedback regarding their linguistic performance (e.g. teacher responses, grades, exams), [untaught] immigrants often lack such feedback. In addition, foreign language learners have a relatively clear frame of reference for estimating their language skills, namely, curricular expectations and the performance of their classmates. The reference for immigrants, in contrast, is more ambiguous. For example, they may compare their L2 skills to those of other immigrants or to those of non-immigrants and their L1 skills to those of coethnics with good, basic or no skills in the language. This ambiguity may decrease the accuracy of immigrants' self-assessments. (Edele et al. 2015, 102)

While by no means all the respondents in the English census whose 'main language' was not English are 'immigrants', the considerations mentioned by Edele et al. could still apply to many. Even those who have been settled for long periods may still have an unclear frame of reference for judging their English abilities. Taking all this research into account, the apparently straightforward self-assessment required by the English census appears to be of questionable validity, even on its own terms. There is certainly a possibility that there was substantial variation in the way that respondents self-assessed, as well as in the accuracy of their own judgements when compared with more objective assessments.

Discussion

The 2011 census offered the first opportunity to collect detailed information about multilingualism in England. Yet, despite a careful programme of testing designed to ensure that user needs were met, both questions in the final questionnaire were, in different ways, problematic.

The decision to ask a language question at all took place in the context of – and in some ways in spite of – the prevailing linguistic ideology of monolingualism. Having initially planned not to ask questions on language, the ONS was then persuaded by user responses to do so, but drew back from asking those questions which might have been most informative about multilingualism and linguistic diversity. At the time when the census was being prepared, there was heightened concern among politicians and the public about 'immigration' and social cohesion, with knowledge of English being taken as an index of the extent of the latter. From 2007 onwards, central government pressured local authorities to reduce translation services for linguistic minorities, on the grounds that providing translations discouraged minorities from learning English and was bad for integration (Sebba 2017). In this context, the final questionnaire developed by the ONS and approved by Parliament seems to reflect a set of ideological/political priorities: to identify who speaks English well enough to communicate with the authorities, and who can only communicate with them via a different language.

While the focus on 'main language' and ability to speak English was a response to user needs as determined through the consultations, it was a partial response. Other user needs identified through consultation, in particular 'ability to understand, read and write English' and 'ability to speak, understand and read other languages' were given lower priority and in the end no information was collected about literacies or about more than two languages for any respondent. More generally, asking only about the 'main language' meant the loss of a number of opportunities – for example, to find out about multilingualism (individuals and households where several languages were in use) and about different contexts or domains, in particular home and work, where different languages might be used. Thus, while this question may have fulfilled the needs of the census to have a simple question, and provided end users of the data with a straightforward answer, it also left many important questions about multilingualism in England unanswered.

The English ability question, too, can be seen as a product of the dominant linguistic ideologies, focusing only on English, treating monolingualism as the norm, and overlooking the interactive nature of communication by viewing 'proficiency' as measurable separately from its context (Zentella, Urciuoli, and Graham 2007). Setting those important issues aside, the consistency and accuracy of self-assessments is a serious problem. It seems inevitable in the present era that any census question about language proficiency will involve self-assessment, as other methods would be too costly. However, the validity of the question itself, with its four possible answers, is called into question by the studies discussed above. Doubts exist as to whether non-native speakers of a language can

self-assess speaking ability with sufficient accuracy to produce worthwhile data. Even if they can, it is not clear whether the dividing line between being able to use the language effectively and not being able to do so should be drawn between the categories 'very well' and 'well' or between 'well' and 'not well'.

This question is important when it comes to the communication of the census results. Since the census, many official publications based on the census data have conflated the categories 'cannot speak English well' and 'cannot speak English at all' into a single category representing speakers needing help with English, contrasting with those who placed themselves in the 'well' or 'very well' categories and who, it is implied, have adequate English for communicative purposes.³ This is in line with the pre-census observation by the ONS (based on their interpretation of the US experience) 'that a four-part scale is clear to users and allows a two-part distinction in terms of outputs' (2009, 38). The ONS has continued to use this demarcation line, and others using the statistics have followed suit, in spite of the questionable empirical basis discussed earlier.

In 2012, a media storm followed the announcement of the census figures which showed that 1.7% of the population in England and Wales self-assessed as 'cannot speak English well or at all'. There were widespread misunderstandings of the figures by media and politicians (see Sebba 2017). No voices – not even from academia – questioned the census methodology itself. The suggestion that the self-assessment approach might have led to an *underestimate* of those whose English is inadequate for everyday purposes, which seems plausible on the basis of the discussion above, might have led to an even bigger backlash. Therefore findings such as these are sensitive, and their communication has to be handled with the utmost responsibility and sensitivity.

As shown by Cardinal (2005) and Busch (2016), census statistics, having been collected in accordance with prevailing ideologies, become available to governments to support their desired narratives about identities and languages. For example, the census statistics in England were used as an argument to justify a policy of withdrawing translation services, to encourage minorities to learn English (see Sebba 2017). They were also used to support the announcement made by the then Prime Minister in January 2016 that '22% of Muslim women have poor or no English' and are to be offered English lessons paid for by the government.⁴ An examination of the statistics⁵ shows that the figure of 22% is on the face of it correct (the number of women who spoke English 'not well' or 'not at all' as a proportion of all women who reported themselves to be Muslim). However, lack of knowledge of English is heavily concentrated in the older age groups. Of Muslim females over age 3, 51% reported English as their main language. In the group aged 16–24, only 6% did not speak English well or at all; and aged 3–15, just 3%. In this case, census data collected about 'religion' and 'English proficiency' allowed the government to produce statistics showing that the group 'Muslim women' had poor English, in line with an ideological narrative that Muslims are 'poorly integrated' into British society.

Here, census language data have been correlated with information about ethnic group and religion to help drive a political agenda of assimilation and integration. But other census statistics, using the 'age' category, could be used to tell a different story, of a community integrating over the course of several generations, if the government had preferred this narrative. A different approach – one which welcomes multilingualism, and views multiple languages as valued individual and collective resources – is possible, but not well served by the information collected by the census. Of course, the UK is not unique in this respect. Monolingual, assimilating ideologies which validate only the national language can be found in many places (see, e.g. Kertzer and Arel 2002; Busch 2016.). Issues similar to those raised here will be pertinent to national censuses in those countries too.

It is of course easy with hindsight to criticise the decisions made by the designers of census questionnaires. It is not the intention of this paper to direct destructive criticism at the census authorities or the user groups who request particular information. In the years following the census, surprisingly little research has been done on the language questions or their use by the bodies which requested them. Furthermore, little attention has been focused on the census methodology and whether it produced the answers that would-be users needed. At the time of writing, it is not clear (and not easy to find out) what use public bodies have made of the language statistics collected, though they have

been widely disseminated. Ironically, one potential area of use – for determining the need for translations by local authorities – was cut off when the government decided to impose a policy of minimal translation.

Until 2011, the UK was ‘conspicuous’ (Aspinall 2005) in its lack of language questions in the decennial census covering four-fifths of its population. The inclusion of questions in the 2011 census means that language data for England is now available. However, as this paper has shown, it is not clear that the questions were asked in the best possible way, nor that the responses have been used as constructively as possible. More reflection on the linguistic and social complexities of asking and answering questions about language is, it seems, still necessary.

Notes

1. These questions were also asked in Wales along with questions on knowledge of Welsh. However, this paper will not deal with the Welsh census.
2. It is unclear why the ONS did not give more consideration to the alternative possibility, that the interviewers were overestimating English proficiency.
3. For example, ‘People who could not speak English well or at all had a lower rate of employment (Part of 2011 Census Analysis, English Language Proficiency in the Labour Market Release), released by the ONS on 29 January 2014 and retrieved from <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census-analysis/english-language-proficiency-in-the-labour-market/sty-english-language-proficiency.html>. See also Census Table LC2603EW, ‘Proficiency in English by economic activity’ and similar tables.
4. BBC news, 18.01.2016.
5. Table CT0557, ‘Religion by proficiency in English by sex by age’ retrieved on July 26, 2016 from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/adhocs/005193ct05572011censusreligionbyproficiencyinenglishbysexbyage2011censusmergedlocalauthoritiesinengland>. In reporting the figures, the Prime Minister mistakenly added the number who did not speak English ‘at all’ to the number who did not speak English ‘well’ or ‘at all’, thus counting the ‘not at all’ group twice and inflating the number by 38,000.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Arel, Dominique. 2002. “Language Categories in Censuses: Backward- or Forward-Looking?” In *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Languages in National Censuses*, edited by D. Kertzer and Dominique Arel, 92–121. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aspinall, Peter J. 2005. “Why the Next Census Needs to Ask About Language: Delivery of Culturally Competent Health Care and Other Services Depends on Such Data.” *BMJ* 331: 363–364.
- Blackledge, Adrian. 2000. “Monolingual Ideologies in Multilingual States: Language, Hegemony and Social Justice in Western Liberal Democracies.” *Estudios de Sociolingüística* 1 (2): 25–45.
- Busch, Brigitta. 2016. “Categorizing Languages and Speakers: Why Linguists Should Mistrust Census Data and Statistics.” *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies*, Paper 189.
- Cardinal, Linda. 2005. “The Ideological Limits of Linguistic Diversity in Canada.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 26 (6): 481–495.
- Carr-Hill, Roy, Steve Passingham, Alison Wolf, and Naomi Kent. 1996. *Lost Opportunities: The Language Skills of Linguistic Minorities in England and Wales*. London: Basic Skills Agency.
- Christopher, A. J. 2011. “Questions of Language in the Commonwealth Censuses.” *Population, Space and Place* 17: 534–549.
- DeVries, John. 1985. “Some Methodological Aspects of Self-Report Questions on Language and Ethnicity.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 6 (5): 347–368.
- Edele, Aileen, Julian Seuring, Cornelia Kristen, and Petra Stanat. 2015. “Why Bother with Testing? The Validity of Immigrants’ Self-Assessed Language Proficiency.” *Social Science Research* 52: 99–123.
- Finnie, R., and R. Meng. 2005. “Literacy and Labour Market Income: Self-Assessment Versus Test Score Measures.” *Applied Economics* 37: 1935–1951.
- Freeland, Jane. 2003. “Intercultural-Bilingual Education for an Interethnic-Plurilingual Society? The Case of Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast.” *Comparative Education* 39 (2): 239–260.

- Gardner-Chloros, Penelope. 1997. "Vernacular Literacy in New Minority Settings in Europe." In *Vernacular Literacy: A Re-Evaluation, by Members of the International Group for the Study of Language Standardization and the Vernacularization of Literacy*, edited by Andrée Tabouret-Keller, R. B. Le Page, Penelope Gardner-Chloros and Gabrielle Varro, 188–221. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ipsos MORI. n.d. Cognitive testing. Accessed May 8, 2017. <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/contactus/offices/scotland/Research-Techniques/Cognitive.aspx>.
- Kertzer, David I., and Dominique Arel. 2002. "Census, Identity Formation and the Struggle for Political Power." In *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*, edited by David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel, 1–42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kominski, R. 1989. *How Good is 'How Well'? An Examination of the Census English-Speaking Ability Question*. Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census. <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/language/ASApaper1989.pdf>.
- Laversuch, I. M. 2007. "The Politics of Naming Race and Ethnicity: Language Planning and Policies Regulating the Selection of Racial Ethnonyms Used by the US Census 1990–2010." *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 8 (3): 365–382. doi:10.2167/cilp128.0.
- Leeman, Jennifer. 2004. "Racializing Language: A History of Linguistic Ideologies in the US Census." *Journal of Language and Politics* 3 (3): 507–534.
- Le Page, Robert B., and Andrée Tabouret-Keller. 1989. *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McArthur, Edith K. 1993. *Language Characteristics and Schooling in the United States, A Changing Picture: 1979 and 1989*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED365167.pdf>.
- ONS (Office for National Statistics). 2005. Consultation Document. The 2011 Census: Initial View on Content for England and Wales. Accessed June 6, 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/consultationsusersandlocalpartners/2011censusclosedconsultations/consultationon2011censuscontent>.
- ONS (Office for National Statistics). 2006. The 2011 Census: Assessment of Initial User Requirements on Content for England and Wales – Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion.
- ONS (Office for National Statistics). 2009. "Final Recommended Questions for the 2011 Census in England and Wales: Language, October 2009".
- ONS (Office for National Statistics). n.d. "How Our Census Works." Accessed May 8, 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/howourcensusworks>.
- Ozolins, Uldis. 1993. *The Politics of Language in Australia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pattanayak, Debi P. 1981. *Multilingualism and Mother Tongue Education*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds, Mike, and Mahendra Verma. 2007. "Indic Languages." In *Language in the British Isles*, edited by D. Britain, 293–307. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sebba, Mark. 2017. "'English a Foreign Tongue': The 2011 Census in England and the Misunderstanding of Multilingualism." *Journal of Language and Politics* 16 (2): 264–284.
- United Nations. 2006. "United Nations Economic Commission for Europe: Conference of European Statisticians Recommendations for the 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing." Prepared in cooperation with the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), New York and Geneva, United Nations.
- Urla, Jacqueline. 1993. "Cultural Politics in an Age of Statistics: Numbers, Nations, and the Making of Basque Identity." *American Ethnologist* 20 (4): 818–843.
- Vickstrom, Eric, Hyon Shin, Sonia Collazo, and Kurt Bauman. 2015. *How Well – Still Good?: Assessing the Validity of the American Community Survey English-Ability Question*. Washington, DC: US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2015/demo/SEHSD-WP2015-18.pdf>.
- Zentella, Ana Celia, Bonnie Urciuoli, and Laura R Graham. 2007. "Problematic Language Assessment in the US Census." *Anthropology News*, September 2007, 10–11.