

Language Use, Asian American

Asian Americans are one of the most linguistically diverse populations in the United States. According to the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, respectively, AAPIs represent more than 30 different countries that speak more than a 100 different languages, and more than 75 percent of Asian Americans in 2010 spoke a language other than English in their homes. Newcomers tend to keep their mother tongues, or first language, active for at least one generation, while subsequent generations retain or shift away from their heritage language, or language spoken at home but not at a society-wide level due to a variety of factors. This entry identifies trends and shifts in the usage of major Asian languages in the United States since the mid-19th century and considers ways in which heritage languages as well as English use remain a vital part of Asian American societies. It contrasts the role of English in immigrant incorporation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with that of contemporary immigrant generations who arrived after 1965. In both immigration waves, languages and the relationships speakers maintain with them play a major role in the formation of communities and of public perceptions of Asian Americans and in processes of acculturation and generational change.

Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

A stunningly wide array of languages can be found in East, South, and Southeast Asia, and immigrants from these nations bring this linguistic diversity to bear on their lives as new Americans. Perhaps the best known are Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Thai, but numerous others, including Cantonese, Taiwanese, South Indian languages (such as Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam), Southeast Asian languages (such as Laotian, Malay, and Thai), as well as countless others, make the linguistic landscape of Asian America rich and varied indeed. The languages themselves can vary from one another in their phonology, or sound system, in that they may be inflectional or tonal; in their

orthography, or the way they are written in a variety of scripts and writing conventions; and in their social status at particular periods in United States history. No one Asian language can be considered dominant or inclusive of all these groups, and American English is generally considered a default common language.

In the mid-19th to the early 20th century, small populations of Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and Filipino communities grew in the mainland United States. Most came as unskilled or semiskilled laborers to work on railroads, in agriculture, and in menial jobs. Legislation that ultimately curbed Asian immigration until the postwar 20th century and barred citizenship for Asian immigrants created a variety of challenges for speakers to socialize new generations in heritage languages. Sikh men who married Mexican Americans, for instance, were unable to socialize more than a generation or two of Punjabi speakers.

Other ethnic groups who lived in ethnically concentrated areas like Chinatowns and Japantowns had far more dynamic relationships with their heritage languages, as they flourished in local businesses, community centers, and in the public landscape of their neighborhoods. A different linguistic situation prevailed in Hawai'i after its annexation in 1898, where Hawai'ian, Japanese, Okinawan, and Hawai'ian Creole maintained a more prominent public role in social institutions and spaces, creating a complex linguistic landscape unlike any other in the mainland. While not readily accepted by the United States government, the social value and public use of Japanese, Hawai'ian, and other Pacific Island tongues was more socially welcome in the islands than other heritage languages were on the mainland during this period.

Prior to the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, public sentiment toward the use of Asian heritage languages was largely negative. Yellow English, a linguistic dimension of the yellow peril, depicted the English of Asian Americans, usually Chinese and Japanese Americans, as halting, broken, and difficult to discern by white Americans. This so-called fortune cookie speech, replete with trademark grammatical errors and malapropisms, abounded in representations of Asian Americans in advertisements, films, and journalistic accounts and served as yet another way in which Asian Americans were reviled as unwanted and excluded

from the body politic as foreigners. Arguably, many varieties of English that bore traces of any non-American or Western European accent was subject to ridicule during this time, but Chinese Americans bore the brunt of this language and accent-based discrimination.

Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries

When the United States began to actively solicit the immigration of medical and science professionals in 1965, the majority of Asians who immigrated did so as fluent speakers of at least one language other than English. Some were fluent and literate in a variety of English, while others faced the task of acquiring American English upon arrival. Due to the colonial presence of the British in South Asia and America in the Philippines, educated immigrants from these nations have a higher likelihood of English proficiency than those from China, Korea, and Vietnam. Nonetheless, other family members who immigrated as sponsored family members or as laborers were often not fluent in English. Especially those who immigrated to urban and suburban enclaves with coethnics, the immediate necessity for English was less urgent, and heritage languages flourished. The social presence of some heritage languages have posed challenges as well, especially with regard to youth and education. English as a second language (ESL) and similar programs in schools are designed to increase English fluency in spoken and written American English.

The earliest ESL program was mandated in San Francisco, California, through the ruling resulting from the 1974 Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* in which Chinese Americans students successfully argued that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 should also safeguard against language-based discrimination. That the Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the students underscored the inextricable linkages between heritage languages, ethnicity, and communities in Asian America. Nowadays it is commonplace to have speakers of nearly every Asian language in ESL classes for brief periods as they acclimate to the norms and usages of American English. While effective, such language learning environments have also been shown to be isolating and difficult

for young people to manage socially because of the stigma of being non-English proficient or speaking English with an accent.

The rise in speakers of Asian languages has been significant, with Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog ranking among the top 10 languages other than English spoken in the United States. According to a 2011 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, Chinese has the largest number of speakers (2.9 million), followed by Tagalog (1.6 million), Vietnamese (1.4 million), Korean (1.1 million), Japanese (436,110), and several Southeast Asian languages each with under 300,000 speakers. Additionally, "Other Pacific Island languages" (428,476) and "Other Asian Languages" (855,303), which presumably included South Asian languages, were also included. Of the nearly 300 million residents counted, 60.6 million (20.8 percent) spoke a language other than English at home. This percentage was far higher in the 14.1 million Asian (alone) population, in which 76.7 percent spoke a language other than English at home. Yet, according to the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development's 2013 spotlight on poverty in these populations, 39.5 percent of these bilinguals speak English "less than very well," which in some cases contributes to their difficulties with upward mobility.

In those geographic regions that have received a steady stream of immigrants in the form of sponsored family, spouses, or specialized labor, heritage languages may thrive over several generations. Religious places of worship, active community centers, ethnic media, and the performing arts can further the success of such heritage language retention. Others who have immigrated to regions with small or no coethnic speakers have had a more challenging time of socializing their children and grandchildren into speaking their heritage languages. Due to the stigma of speaking accented English, as well as misplaced concerns about children not properly learning English if they are socialized as bilinguals, heritage language retention is a variable process that is difficult to predict. What is better understood, however, is the use of heritage languages and varieties of English in a variety of expressive, representational, and identity-making practices.

Especially among youth, but certainly not limited to them, genres of spoken word, hip-hop, performance, and poetry are modes through which heritage languages acquire new circulations and uses. Code switching, the practice of using two or more language varieties in the same segment of spoken or written discourse, provides expressive options that English alone may not. Heritage language words, phrases, or large spans of dialogue allow speakers to signal insider knowledge and humor with other speakers. The use of accented English by Asian Americans has also been effective in stand-up comedy to emphasize ethnic dimensions of humor. Asian American youth have also incorporated African American English alongside these other elements in hip-hop, spoken word, and other verbal performances. Such linguistic creativity and diversity is only beginning to gain credibility in mainstream media, which still routinely features Asian American characters speaking English with a non-American accent. Nonetheless, the performances of Asian American actors who speak American English and are otherwise well settled in American social life are on the rise. Viewed optimistically, such a shift may signal a greater accommodation of linguistic variation in the everyday lives of Asian Americans and a greater comfort with active bilingualism outside of the home.

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See Also: Bilingual Education; Code Switching; Identity Formation; Language and Identity.

Further Readings

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Laotian Americans

Large-scale Laotian immigration to the United States dates back to the end of the Vietnam War. Currently, the United States is home to the second-largest group of the Laotian diaspora (Thailand and France are first and third, respectively). From 1964 to 1973, the United States waged a secret war on Laos, dropping more than two million tons of ordnance during 580,000 bombing missions. This is equal to a planeload of bombs every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years, which made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. These bombings were part of the U.S. military strategy against communist regimes in Southeast Asia (that is, Pathet Lao, Khmer Rouge, and Viet Cong), which helped support the democratic Royal Lao government and prevented communist troops from using the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The nine years of bombing destroyed many villages and displaced hundreds of thousands of Laotian civilians. Moreover, up to a third of the bombs dropped did not explode, leaving Laos contaminated with vast quantities of unexploded ordnance that continue to harm villagers today.

The communist Pathet Lao's takeover of Laos resulted in a mass exodus of Laotian refugees, who fled to countries such as the United States, France, and Australia. They were escaping from political persecution, reeducation camps known informally as "seminars," famine, torture, and displacement. Many families were split up while attempting to escape, and some family members died along the way, including children who died of malnutrition. The "boat people" (that is, refugees who were escaping by boat) often fell victim to Thai pirates, who attacked and abused the men and raped the women. The majority of the Laotians who fled spent some time in refugee camps