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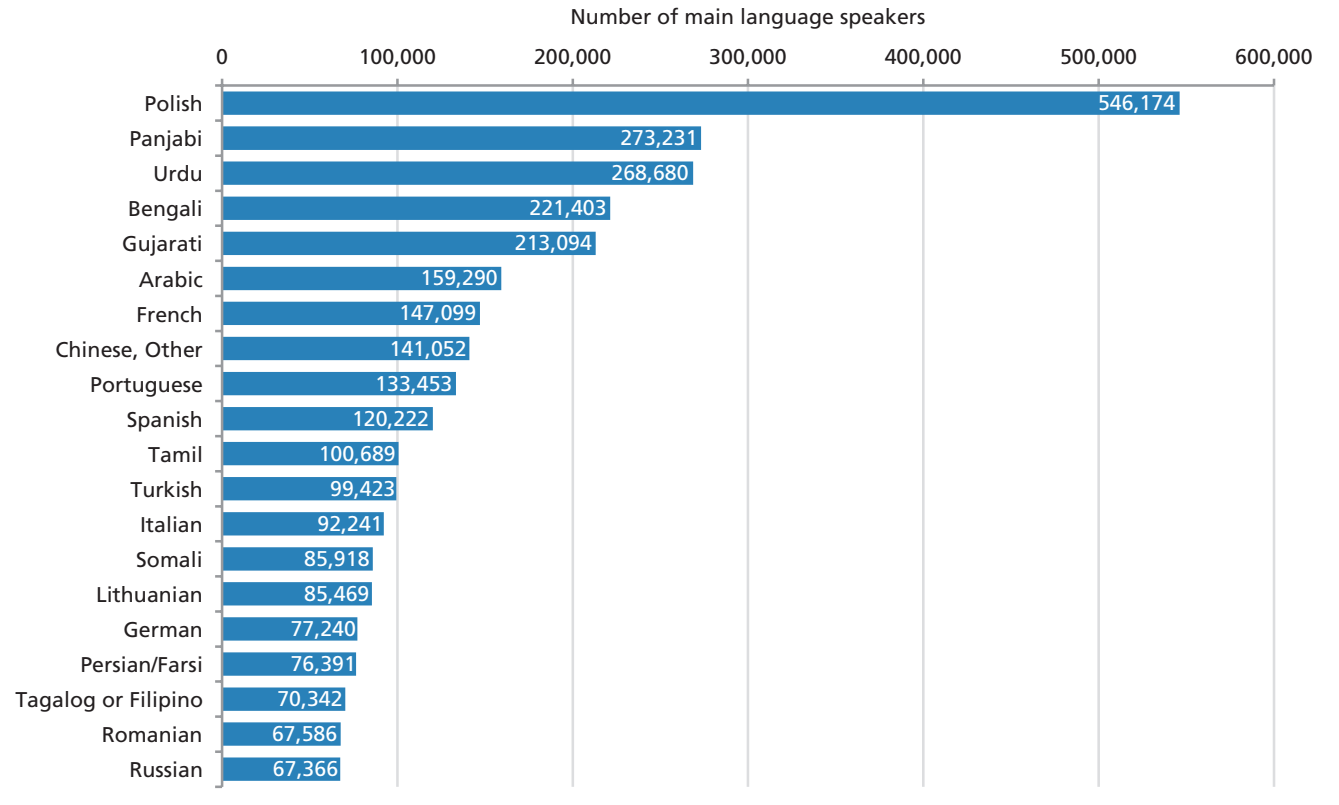
DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY:
EVIDENCE FROM THE 2011 CENSUS
ESRC Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE)

# What languages are spoken in England and Wales?

## Summary


- Languages other than English are part of the cultural heritage of a significant and growing proportion of the British population.
- In 2011, 8% of the population reported a main language other than English (or Welsh in Wales) and it is likely that this is a small fraction of all people in England and Wales who consider another language a part of their lives.
- The languages found in England and Wales are diverse:
  - from languages local to this region such as Welsh and Irish, to other European languages such as French, Portuguese, and Polish;
  - Middle Eastern and West Asian languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Kurdish;
  - South Asian languages such as Urdu, Panjabi, and Bengali;
  - East and South-East Asian languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai;
  - East African languages such as Somali, Amharic, and Tigrinya;
  - Nigerian and other West African languages such as Yoruba and Igbo.


**Figure 1:** Twenty largest non-English main languages by number of speakers in England and Wales, 2011




*Click here for data in Excel*

# What languages are spoken in England and Wales?

- Non-English languages are spread unevenly across various areas of England and Wales. Some languages are only present in a small number of areas in the country (e.g. Somali), while others are part of the linguistic landscape of every region (e.g. Polish).
- Polish, for example, is widely distributed and spoken in 95% of electoral wards in England and Wales. By contrast, Yiddish is clustered in a smaller number of areas, largely within Hackney and Salford.
- The geographical distribution of languages reflects the history of immigration, as seen in the tendency for languages whose presence is relatively recent, such as Somali, to be much more tightly clustered than other languages with longer histories in Britain such as Cantonese Chinese.

## Why is language diversity important?

Data on languages and the locations and age groups of speakers are of interest to local authorities and service providers when planning provisions for local library stocks in community languages, and support and regulation of community-run schools. They are also useful to help plan interpreter provisions for a range of public and private services, when linked to data on English proficiency (see *Who can and cannot speak English?* Briefing). Evidence on language diversity also provides an indication of community language skills, which can be of wider interest to economic planning, as a key to support overseas expansion of local businesses and attracting multinational investment to an area.

## Which languages are around us?

The 2011 Census was the first to ask for any detailed information on main language other than Welsh in Wales (see box).

Of the many languages other than English, the largest by far is Polish, listed as the main language by 13% of the 4.2 million people who reported a non-English language. The second and third largest non-English main languages are Panjabi and Urdu at 6.6% and 6.5% respectively. 15,487 people (or 0.03%) reported British Sign Language as their main language in 2011.

## Where are non-English languages spoken?

Many of the largest clusters of non-English languages are found within London. Outside the capital, the highest percentages of reported non-English main language speakers are seen in areas such as Leicester (28%), Manchester (17%), Peterborough (16%), Birmingham (15%), and Bradford (15%).

Electoral wards reporting over 50% non-English main language speakers in 2011 were Latimer in Leicester, Southall Broadway in Ealing, Spinney Hills in Leicester, Southall Green in Ealing, Green Street East in Newham, Alperton in Brent, Belgrave in Leicester, Wembley Central in Brent, Central in Peterborough, and Green Street West, East Ham North, and Wall End in Newham. These areas are located in some of the most ethnically diverse parts of England and Wales and most of them contain large clusters of persons of South Asian origin: in Latimer, 74% of residents declared their ethnicity to be Indian in the 2011 Census. Only 2 of the 8,570 electoral wards in England and Wales had 0 people report a non-English (and non-Welsh in Wales) main language: St. Agnes in Cornwall and Halkyn in Flintshire.

## Language in the 2011 Census

The 2011 Census asked people whether their main language was English (or Welsh in Wales) or not. If not, they were then asked to write in the name of their main language, including Sign Language. The aggregate data from this question for England and Wales combines all responses of 'English' in England and 'English or Welsh' in Wales. There is a separate question on the Welsh Census form, which asks 'Can you understand, speak, read or write Welsh?'. In this briefing, we consider only data from the question on 'main language'.

Information on main language is self-reported and subjective, and the different ways in which people understand the census question 'What is your main language?' could lead to unexpected answers. For example, many among the 86% of Nigerian-born who listed English as their main language will also speak one or more Nigerian languages. As another example, somebody who speaks both Panjabi and Urdu with family and friends and English at school, in the workplace, or in other public contexts, may not be certain which language to denote as 'main'. The small proportion of people reporting Manx and Cornish as main languages also suggests that self-reporting reflects different individual perspectives. Both languages, once extinct, are currently undergoing revival efforts but do not as yet have populations of 'native speakers'. For these reasons, the Census may not always reflect the actual number of speakers of individual languages spoken in England and Wales. Within Manchester, as an example, counts of schoolchildren from the School Census suggest that the numbers of people speaking Yoruba and Lingala may be far larger than the 2011 Census leads us to expect[1].

# What languages are spoken in England and Wales?

The largest clusters of British Sign Language were 86 people in Town Moor, Doncaster, and 81 in Twerton, Bath. Doncaster contains particularly old and well-known deaf/hearing-impaired educational facilities, and Twerton contains at least one residential home for deaf persons.

Speakers of non-English languages are not evenly distributed across wards in England and Wales. Of the 8,570 electoral wards, 95% contained at least one person declaring Polish as their main language, compared to 57%, 54% and 53% of wards containing at least one Lithuanian, Panjabi and Urdu speaker. Somali speakers are only present in a small number of wards (16%) in the country despite having a relatively high overall number of speakers.

The most clustered main languages at district level with more than 600 speakers were:

- Yiddish: 75% of self-reported speakers live within the London borough of Hackney, 12% in Salford, 10% in Haringey.
- Pahari/Mirpuri/Potwari: 50% of all speakers live in Birmingham, 6.4% in Rochdale, 4.8% in Bradford.
- Hebrew: 25% live in Barnet, 10% each in Hackney and Camden, 4.3% each in Westminster and Haringey.
- The combined category for all Oceanic & Australian languages: 17% in Wiltshire, 6% in Richmondshire, presumably representing immigration tied to army garrisons at Salisbury and Catterick.
- Other highly clustered languages include Krio, Turkish, Gujarati, and Bengali. The least clustered languages (i.e. languages whose speakers are most widely distributed across districts in England and Wales) are Thai, Dutch, and Polish, along with British Sign Language.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of population reporting a non-English main language by local authority district, 2011

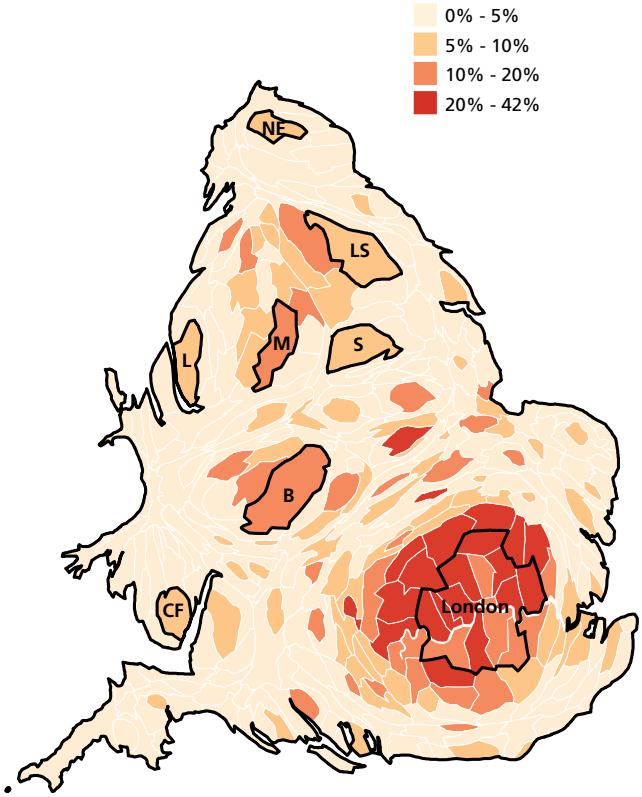
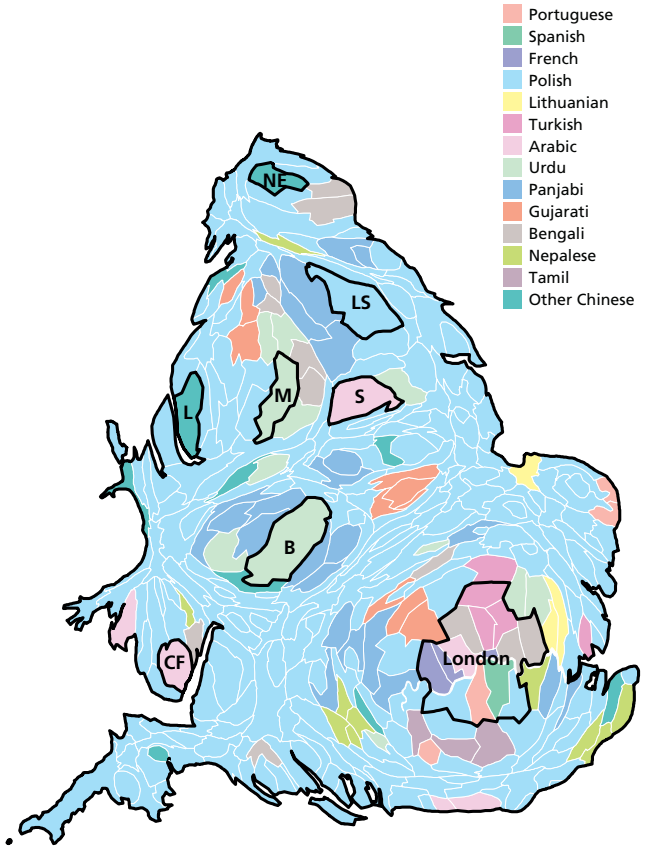



**Figure 3:** Highest-reported non-English main language by local authority district, 2011

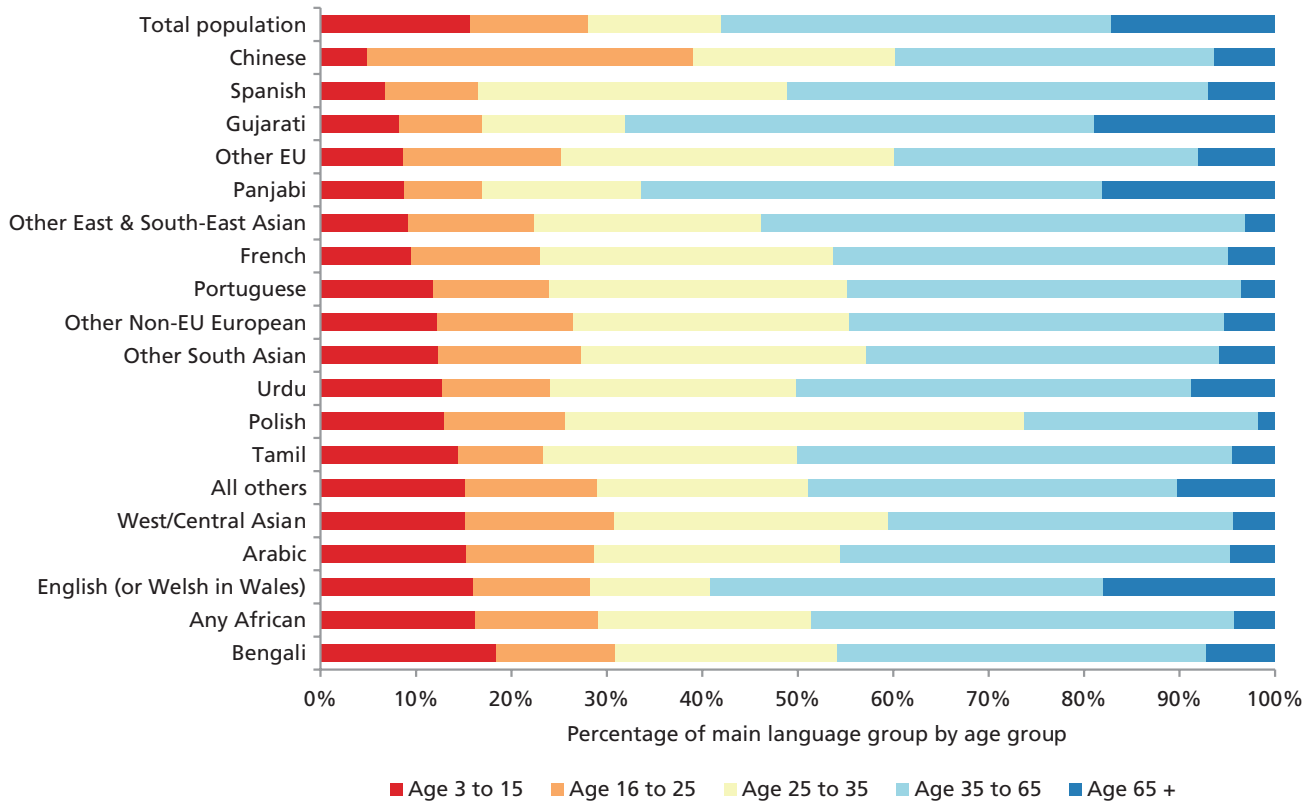



Note: These maps are population cartograms where each local authority district is shown approximately proportional in size to its resident population[2]. Cartograms have not excluded any districts on the basis of ethnic group populations. The highlighted areas are intended to act as reference points: Inner London and other principal cities: Manchester (M), Liverpool (L), Sheffield (S), Newcastle upon Tyne (NE), Birmingham (B), Leeds (LS), and Cardiff (CF). For a more detailed key of each local authority district click here.

*Click here for data in Excel*

# What languages are spoken in England and Wales?

**Figure 4:** Age distribution of main language broad groups in England and Wales, 2011




Click here for data in Excel

## How old are the non-English language speakers?

The age distributions of people who speak non-English languages reflect the trends in historical and recent migration patterns. The 16 to 24 age group is disproportionately large for Chinese speakers, due to the overseas student population. Ages 25 to 34 are overrepresented among Polish speakers, and the elderly are underrepresented, reflecting the recent years of employment-based immigration from Poland. Newer communities have far fewer members in the 65 and over age group. Both Panjabi and Gujarati speakers seem to be from aging communities, with a skew towards 35 and over; this is consistent with shifts to English as the main language among younger members of some South Asian communities.

[1] See Multilingual Manchester website: http://mlm.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/

[2] Dorling, D., & Thomas, B. (2011) *Bankrupt Britain: An Atlas of Social Change*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Source: 2011 Census (Crown Copyright).


This briefing is one in a series, *The Dynamics of Diversity: evidence from the 2011 Census*.



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