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A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

September 24, 2008

The Honorable John D. Dingell
U.S. House of Representatives
2328 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Dingell:

The American Anthropological Association (AAA)—a professional organization of over 11,000 anthropologists that is committed to the promotion and protection of the right of people everywhere to the full realization of their humanity—is writing to ask that the House Committee on Energy and Commerce take appropriate legislative action to (1) pressure the U.S. Census Bureau to refrain from classifying any speakers as “linguistically isolated” due to its inaccurate and discriminatory nature, and (2) to add a question concerning proficiency in languages other than English to the national census in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of language in the U.S.A.

Our association has previously raised these concerns with the U.S. Census Bureau, to which the bureau’s division chief of housing and household economic statistics, David Johnson, replied, “We are unaware of any federal legislative need requiring the assessment of proficiency in languages other than English.” Johnson’s response prompted us to bring this issue to your attention because there *is* a critical need for such data. Non-English language information will allow our schools, hospitals, military, and social services to effectively serve and tailor programs to meet the needs of our nation and its disparate communities. AAA asks that you and your colleagues on the Committee on Energy and Commerce introduce legislation that will require the U.S. Census Bureau to obtain an accurate linguistic profile of our increasingly diverse nation while avoiding the use of misleading and discriminatory language.

In 1990 the U.S. Census Bureau began categorizing individuals and families as “linguistically isolated” if their household “is one in which no member 14 years old and over (1) speaks only English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well” [Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, Matrices P19, P20, PCT13, and PCT14]. The term “linguistically isolated” conveys the false and damaging view that people who do not speak English have no contact with English speakers. Moreover, the Census Bureau’s application of the term “linguistically isolated” to all members of a family in which no one over the age of 14 speaks English “very well” incorrectly categorizes the children in those families under the age of 14 who speak

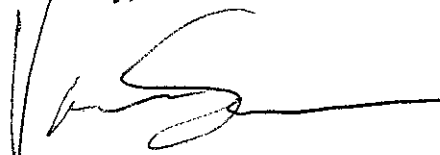
English “very well.” The Census categorizes as “isolated” a small percentage of American households where adults have some difficulty with English, not the great majority in which no one speaks anything but English.

The Census does not ask about proficiency in any language except English, despite multilingualism being a valued norm in most communities worldwide. A widespread and growing English-only ideology, fostered by misinformation about the desire and ability of immigrants to speak English, has led numerous states to declare English their official language, effectively denying bilingual services and hindering bilingual education. There is also increasing evidence of linguistic intolerance and linguistic profiling in housing, employment, education, health, and child custody cases throughout the nation.

We urge you and the Committee on Energy and Commerce to take appropriate action that will ensure the Census includes a question about proficiency in languages other than English, and stops classifying those who speak English less than “very well”—and all members of their households—as “linguistically isolated” because the term is inaccurate and discriminatory, and the classification promotes an ideology of linguistic superiority that foments linguistic intolerance and conflict.

Our Association would like to speak with your aide(s) who handles Census Bureau affairs by the week of October 6th so that we can further detail our concerns. We will contact you prior to that time to ensure that you have received our letter and are able to discuss this important issue. We thank you for your prompt attention to this matter and ask that you follow up with Mr. Damon Dozier, AAA Director of Public Affairs. He can be reached at (703)528-1902 extension 3008 or ddozier@aaanet.org.

Sincerely,



Victoria Sanford
Chair, Committee for Human Rights
American Anthropological Association

cc: Hon. Rep. Joe Barton
U.S. House of Representatives
2109 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515