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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

April 28, 2008

David McMahan  
Public Affairs Specialist  
U.S. Census Bureau  
4600 Silver Hill Rd.  
Washington, DC 20233  
[david.j.mcmahan@census.gov](mailto:david.j.mcmahan@census.gov)

Dear Mr. McMahan,

The American Anthropological Association (AAA), the primary professional society of anthropologists in the United States, has passed a resolution concerning the language questions in the U.S. Census, and the classification of many speakers of languages other than English as "Linguistically Isolated." Founded in 1902, the AAA represents well over 11,000 members with a strong record of advocacy in protecting anthropological interests. In accordance with our resolution, which we attach, we are writing to ask that (1) the U.S. Census Bureau refrain from classifying any speakers as "Linguistically Isolated" due to its inaccurate and discriminatory nature, and (2) add a question concerning proficiency in languages other than English in order to arrive at a more accurate picture of language in the U.S.A.

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.

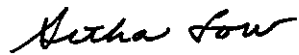
(2) The Census does not ask about proficiency in any language except English, despite multilingualism being a valued norm in most communities worldwide. A widespread and growing English-only ideology, fostered by misinformation about the desire and ability of immigrants to speak English, has led numerous 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 the U.S. Census Bureau to include a question about proficiency in languages other than English, and to stop 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.

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 as to the best way the AAA can weigh in with the US Census Bureau. He can be reached at (703) 528-1902 extension 3008 or [ddozier@aaanet.org](mailto:ddozier@aaanet.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Setha Low".

Setha Low  
President

*Whereas:*

Anthropology as a profession is committed to the promotion and protection of the right of peoples everywhere to the full realization of their humanity, which is to say their capacity for culture,

*and whereas*

As a professional organization of anthropologists, as stated in the AAA Declaration on Anthropology and Human Rights, the AAA has long been, and continues to be, concerned whenever human difference is made the basis for a denial of basic human rights, where "human" is understood in its full range of cultural, social, linguistic, psychological, and biological senses,

*and whereas*

In 1990 the US 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: US Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3, Matrices P19, P20, PCT13, and PCT14),

*and whereas*

There is no threat to the primacy of English, since 82% of the US population speaks only English at home and more than 2/3 of those who do speak a language other than English at home, primarily Spanish speakers, also speak English "well" or "very well" (2000 Census),

*and whereas*

the Census does not ask about proficiency in any language except English although multilingualism is a valued norm in most communities worldwide, and every national study of education in the US decries the inability of most the US population to speak a second language, including indigenous and immigrant heritage languages,

*and whereas*

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, thus denying bilingual services, and/or to make it illegal to teach children in their heritage language even when they are also taught in English,

*and whereas*

Increasing evidence of linguistic intolerance and linguistic profiling in housing, employment, education, health and child custody cases have been documented throughout the US,

*and whereas*

The term “linguistically isolated” conveys the false and damaging view that people who do not speak English very well have no contact with English speakers and/or are outside the pale of US society. More generally, it falsely assumes that it is possible to live a life in any language in linguistic isolation (ie, isolated from face to face contact or print or electronic media),

*and whereas*

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,”

*and whereas,*

The Census Bureau' categorizes as “isolated” only the small percent of households in the US where adults have some difficulty with English, not the great majority in which no one speaks anything but English,

**Therefore, be it resolved that**

The American Anthropology Association urge the Census Bureau to include a question about proficiency in languages other than English, and to stop 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.