

Chapter 9.

Language Assistance Program

9.1 OVERVIEW

The language assistance program for the American Community Survey (ACS) includes a set of methods and procedures designed to assist sample households with limited English proficiency in completing the ACS interview. Language assistance can be provided in many forms, including the development of translated instruments and other survey materials, the recruiting and training of bilingual interviewers, and the provision of telephone or Internet assistance in multiple languages. Providing language assistance is one of many ways that the ACS can improve survey quality by reducing levels of survey nonresponse, the potential for nonresponse bias, and the introduction of response errors; it ensures that individuals with limited English skills will more fully understand the survey questions.

The ACS language assistance program includes the use of several key tools to support each mode of data collection—mail, telephone, and personal visit. The development of these tools was based on research that assessed the current performance of the ACS for non-English speakers. McGovern (2004) found that, despite the limited availability of mail questionnaires in languages other than English, non-English speakers were successfully interviewed by telephone and personal visit follow-up. She also found that the level of item nonresponse for households speaking languages other than English was consistent with the low levels of item nonresponse in English-speaking households. These results led to a focus on improving the quality of data collected in the telephone and personal visit data collection modes. The program includes assistance in a wide variety of languages during the telephone and personal visit nonresponse follow-up stages.¹ Efforts to expand language assistance in the mail mode were postponed; the current focus in the mail mode is limited to supporting Spanish-language speakers.

This chapter provides greater detail on the current language assistance program. It begins with an overview of the language support, translation, and pretesting guidelines. It then discusses methods for all three modes. The chapter closes with a discussion of research and evaluation activities.

9.2 BACKGROUND

The 2010 Decennial Census Program has placed a priority on developing and testing tools to improve the quality of data collected from people with limited English proficiency; in fact, staff involved in the ACS and the 2010 Census have been working jointly to study language barriers and effective methods for data collection. People with limited English skills represent a growing share of the total population. The 2004 ACS found that 8.4 percent of the total population who speak a language other than English at home speak English less than “very well.” This is an increase from 7.6 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2004b).

9.3 GUIDELINES

The U.S. Census Bureau does not require the translation of all survey instruments or materials. Each census and survey determines the appropriate set of translated materials and language assistance options needed to ensure high quality survey results. The Census Bureau does require that guidelines be followed whenever a decision is made to translate a data collection instrument or a respondent letter.

In 2004, the Census Bureau released guidelines for language support translation and pretesting. These state that data collection instruments translated from a source language into a target language should be reliable, complete, accurate, and culturally appropriate. Reliable translations convey the intended meaning of the original text. Complete translations should neither add new

¹ In 2005, interviewer language capabilities included English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian, French, Polish, Korean, Vietnamese, German, Japanese, Arabic, Haitian Creole, Italian, Navajo, Tagalog, Greek, and Urdu.

information nor omit information already provided in the source document. An accurate translation is free of both grammatical and spelling errors. Cultural appropriateness considers the culture of the target population when developing the text for translation. In addition to meeting these criteria, translated Census Bureau data collection instruments and related materials should have semantic, conceptual, and normative equivalence. The Census Bureau guidelines recommend the use of a translation team approach to ensure equivalence. The language support guidelines include recommended practices for preparing, translating, and revising materials, and for ensuring sound documentation (U.S. Census Bureau 2004a). The ACS utilizes Census Bureau guidelines in the preparation of data collection instruments, advance letters, and other respondent communications.

9.4 MAIL DATA COLLECTION

The Census Bureau currently mails out ACS questionnaires to each address in a single language. In the United States, English language forms are mailed, while in Puerto Rico, Spanish is used. The cover of the questionnaire of both the English and Spanish mailouts contains a message written in the other language requesting that people who prefer to complete the survey in that language call a toll-free assistance number to obtain assistance or to request the appropriate form. In 2005, the Census Bureau received requests for Spanish questionnaires from less than 0.01 percent of the mailout sample (Griffin 2006b).

Telephone questionnaire assistance is provided in both English and Spanish. A call to the toll-free Spanish help number reaches a Spanish speaker directly. The interviewer will either provide general assistance or conduct the interview. Interviewers are encouraged to convince callers to complete the interview over the phone.

9.5 TELEPHONE AND PERSONAL VISIT FOLLOW-UP

The call centers and regional offices that conduct the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) nonresponse follow-up operations make every effort to hire bilingual staff. In addition, CAPI interviewers are instructed to search for interpreters within the sample household, or from the neighborhood, to assist in data collection. The regional offices maintain a list of interpreters who are skilled in many languages and are available to assist the CAPI interviewer in the respondent's preferred language. Interviewers use a flashcard to identify the specific language spoken when they cannot communicate with a particular household. CAPI interviewers can also provide respondents that speak Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, or Vietnamese translated versions of some informational materials. These materials include an introductory letter and two brochures that explain the survey, as well as a letter that thanks the respondent for his or her participation. Future plans include expanding the number of languages that these CAPI informational materials are available in, and increasing the number of materials that are translated.

The ACS CATI and CAPI survey instruments currently are available in both English and Spanish. Interviewers can conduct interviews in additional languages if they have that capability. Because a translated instrument is not available in languages other than English and Spanish, interviewers translate the English version during the interview and record the results on the English instrument. The Census Bureau is exploring the possibility of creating translated instruments or guides for interviewer use in languages other than English and Spanish. Also, there are special procedures and an interviewer training module that deal with the collection of data from respondents who do not speak English. All ACS interviewers are given this training as part of their classroom interviewer training. The training is designed to improve the consistency of these procedures and to remind interviewers of the importance of collecting complete data for all households.

The CATI and CAPI instruments collect important data on language-related issues, including the frequency of the use of interpreters and of the Spanish instrument, which allows the Census Bureau to monitor how data are being collected. The instruments also record how often interviewers conduct translations of their own into different languages. For example, Griffin (2006b) found that in 2005, more than 86 percent of all CAPI interviews with Spanish-speaking households were conducted by a bilingual (Spanish/English) interviewer. She also found that about 8 percent of the interviews conducted with Chinese-speaking households required the assistance of an interpreter who was not a member of the household.

Additional data collected allow the call centers and the regional offices to identify CATI and CAPI cases that were not completed due to language barriers. A profile of this information by language highlights those languages needing greater support. Griffin (2006b) found that, out of 31,489 cases in the 2005 CATI workload that were identified as requiring a language other than English, 9.3 percent could not be interviewed due to a language barrier. The greatest language needs were for Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese. Call center managers used this information to identify specific language recruiting needs and hire additional staff with these skills. Similar information was used to improve CAPI.

Griffin and McGovern (2004) compared the language abilities of CAPI interviewers in each regional office with the needs of the population for that area. This assessment was based on 2003 ACS language data and regional office staffing information. The regional offices used these data to assist in recruiting support in anticipation of the full sample expansion in 2005. A planned update of this assessment for both CATI and CAPI will look at current staffing.

9.6 GROUP QUARTERS

Chapter 8 describes the data collection methodology for people living in group quarters (GQ) facilities. Two instruments are used in GQ data collection—a paper survey questionnaire for interviewing GQ residents, and an automated instrument for collecting administrative information from each facility. The Census Bureau designed and field-tested a bilingual (English/Spanish) GQ questionnaire in 2005. Interviewers used these questionnaires to conduct interviews with a small sample of GQ residents. An interviewer debriefing found that the interviewers had no problems with these questionnaires and, as a result, this form currently is used for GQ data collection. The Census Bureau will hire bilingual interviewers to conduct interviews with non-English speakers in Puerto Rican GQ facilities. The Group Quarters Facility Questionnaire is available in both English and Spanish.

9.7 RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Due to limited resources, priorities were set for research and development activities related to the language assistance program. Of critical importance was a benchmarking of the effectiveness of current methods. The potential for nonresponse bias due to language barriers was assessed by McGovern (2004) and Griffin and Broadwater (2005). In addition, ACS staff created a Web site on quality measures, including annual information about the effect of language barriers on survey nonresponse. These evaluations and the Web site both show that current methods result in very low levels of noninterviews caused by the interviewer's inability to speak the respondent's language. These nonresponse levels remain low because of special efforts in the field to use interpreters and other means to conduct these interviews. Item level nonresponse also was assessed by McGovern. She found that the mail returns received from non-English speakers are nearly as complete as those from English speakers and that the interviews conducted by telephone and personal visit with non-English speakers are as complete as those from English speakers. The Census Bureau continues to monitor unit nonresponse due to language barriers.

Language barriers can result in measurement errors when respondents do not understand the questions, or when interviewers incorrectly translate a survey question. Staff are exploring options for developing either translated instruments or language guides for use by telephone and personal visit interviewers who conduct interviews in Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Russian to reduce the potential for translation errors. Cognitive testing of the ACS Spanish instrument identified translation concerns (Carrasco 2003). The Census Bureau is planning a more complete assessment of the Spanish instrument to improve the quality of data collected from Spanish-speaking households.

Future research is planned to develop and test additional language assistance materials for the mail mode. Increasing levels of participation by mail can reduce survey costs and improve the quality of final ACS data.

9.8 REFERENCES

Carrasco, Lorena. (2003). "The American Community Survey en Espanol: Using Cognitive Interviews to Test the Functional Equivalency of Questionnaire Translations." Statistical Research Division Study Series Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.

Griffin, Deborah. (2006b). "Requests for Alternative Language Questionnaires." American Community Survey Discussion Paper. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.

Griffin, Deborah, and Joan Broadwater. (2005). "American Community Survey Noninterview Rates Due to Language Barriers." Paper presented at the Meetings of the Census Advisory Committee on the African-American Population, the American Indian and Alaska Native Populations, the Asian Population, the Hispanic Population, and the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Populations on April 25–27, 2005.

Griffin, Deborah, and Pamela McGovern. (2003). "Language Action Plan for the American Community Survey." Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.

McGovern, Pamela, Deborah Griffin, and Larry McGinn. (2003). "Language Action Plan for the American Community Survey." Meetings of the Census Advisory Committee on the African-American Population, the American Indian and Alaska Native Populations, the Asian Population, the Hispanic Population, and the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Populations, May 5–7, 2003.

McGovern, Pamela D. (2004). "A Quality Assessment of Data Collected in the American Community Survey for Households With Low English Proficiency." Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2004a). "Census Bureau Guideline: Language Translation of Data Collection Instruments and Supporting Materials." Internal U.S. Census Bureau document, Washington, DC, 2004.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2004b). "Housing and Population Edit Specifications." Internal U.S. Census Bureau documentation, Washington, DC.