Latino Language-Use Patterns in New York City, 2005

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The Center established and helps administer an interdisciplinary specialization in Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program.

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This report examines the 2005 American Community Survey census data on linguistic patterns found among the four principal racial/ethnic groups in New York City: Non-Hispanic Whites, Non-Hispanic Blacks, Asians, and Latinos. Additionally, language usage patterns among the major Latino national groups in New York City, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Cubans, will be considered. The two linguistic variables for which data were collected by the Census Bureau, ‘Speaks English’ and ‘Language Spoken at Home’ - both self reported variables – will be the focal points of the analysis which follows.

Data on “Language Spoken at Home” indicate significant differences among the four primary racial/ethnic groups although similar patterns were found when the nativity (domestic or foreign-born) of persons within each group was examined. (See Figure 1). Among all four racial/ethnic groups the foreign-born population reported speaking English at home at lower rates than the domestic-born population, a finding which could have been anticipated. Yet, Latinos reported speaking English at home at lower rates than any other group (22.0% for domestic-born and 5.1% for foreign-born) followed by Asians (36% for domestic-born and 15.1% for foreign-born). Since most Non-Hispanic Blacks were domestic born, they reported speaking English at home at higher rates than any of the other racial/ethnic groups (95% for domestic-born and 70.7% for foreign-born). The relatively high rate among foreign-born Non-Hispanic Blacks was in all likelihood linked to a large number English-speaking Caribbean immigrants. Non-Hispanic whites indicated that they spoke English at home at greater rates than Asians and Latinos, but less than Non-Hispanic Blacks (86% for domestic-born and 19.9% for foreign-born). This is because European-born immigrants were classified as Non-Hispanic whites. (See Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1](image-url)
The data presented in Figure 1 suggest that Latinos prefer to speak a language other than English at home more than any of the other racial/ethnic groups, regardless of nativity. Not surprisingly Spanish was spoken by 99.4% of households which did not use English as the primary language at home.

Among the different Latino national groups there were significant differences in the rates of “Language Spoken at Home.” Cubans and Puerto Ricans stand out from the other four nationalities in that 24% and 23% respectively of their population reported speaking English at home in 2005, while less than 8% of the population of the other four groups (Mexicans, Colombians, Dominicans and Ecuadorians) reported speaking English at home. The exact percentages for these groups are indicated in Figure 2.

![Figure 2](image)

Differentiations in language spoken at home between the domestic and foreign-born population within each national group are depicted in Figure 3.

NOTE: In this report the terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ are used interchangeably.
In Figure 3 we may observe the considerable disparities indicated in Figure 2 between the Cuban and Puerto Rican population and the other four national groups. While there are clear differences among the domestic-born population across all the national groups, there was less variation among the foreign-born population across all six nationalities. Although almost half (48.2%) of the Cuban domestic-born population 5 years of age and older reported speaking English at home, less than 10% of the Cuban foreign-born population reported speaking English at home. This same pattern may be observed in each of the other nationalities with the exception of Dominicans. It is striking that the differentiation in the percentage of Dominicans speaking English at home was fairly small when nativity is considered.
In order to understand language patterns among immigrants and their subsequent generations we also need to consider English language skills. The variable ‘Speaks English’ measures the self-reported level of English for the population over 5 years of age and older. Slightly over 90% of all Latino New Yorkers were in this broad age cohort in 2005.

There were five possible responses for this variable: ‘Speaks English, but not well’, ‘speaks English well’, ‘speaks English very well’, ‘speaks only English’ and ‘does not speak English.’ Among New York City Latinos in 2005 14.8% reported speaking only English while only 7.5% indicated that they did not speak any English at all. The largest group (43.7%) reported speaking English ‘very well’ while 17.1% reported speaking English ‘well’ and 16.9% reported speaking English ‘but not well’. (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to Speak English</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, speaks only English</td>
<td>300,805</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, speaks very well</td>
<td>890,765</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, speaks well</td>
<td>348,537</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but not well</td>
<td>344,471</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not speak English</td>
<td>153,761</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,038,339</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were significant differences between Latino national groups, as to be expected in a population shaped in large part by ongoing immigration and the different timing of historical migration pattern. To bring these disparities into sharper focus Latinos have been aggregated into two broad linguistic categories: 1) those who reported speaking English at least well; and 2) those who reported not speaking English at all or 'not well.' At the extremes were the City’s oldest and newest Latino national groups. Puerto Ricans, most of whom were born in the U.S., reported that nearly 89% spoke English only, very well, or well. Among Mexicans, the City’s fastest growing and most recent Latino immigrant group, most of whom were born outside of the U.S., nearly 57% reported high-level English-language skills. The other Latino national groups are indicated in Figure 4.
As indicated previously nativity was the one variable which most influenced the English-language skills of all Latino nationalities, as would be expected. Among the six largest Latino national groups in New York City in 2005, Puerto Ricans had the largest U.S.-born population (not including those born in Puerto Rico) at 67%. Cubans were the second leading group at 40.8% followed by Dominicans (39%), Mexicans (36.6%), Ecuadorians (27.4%), and Colombians at 26.6%. (See Figure 5).
Since the percentage of the domestic-born population varied significantly in 2005 by Latino nationality, it is critical to consider language skills by nativity. It is not surprising that there was very little variation among the domestic-born population since it grew up in the U.S. and eventually utilized English in school and other venues.

Among the foreign-born population (or insular-born among Puerto Ricans) it could have been anticipated that those born in Puerto Rico had a higher percentage of people with good English-language skills (73%) than the other nationalities since Puerto Rico is legally part of the U.S. and there is widespread English-language instruction on the island. Still a fairly large percentage of foreign-born Colombians (65%) and Cubans (62%) reported good English-language skills. These nationalities were followed by Dominicans (54%), Ecuadorians (53%), and Mexicans (43%). (See Figure 6). From this point on only language skills among the foreign-born population will be considered since there was relative uniformity among those born in the U.S.
Important social and demographic variables influenced the English language abilities of foreign-born Latinos in New York City. These include income, citizenship status, employment status, age, and educational attainment levels. There was a very clear association between income levels and English language abilities and these are depicted clearly in Figure 7. A clear linguistic hierarchy was observed which paralleled the distribution of income, with those earning the highest incomes reporting better English language skills.

Those who were foreign-born but not U.S. citizens had poorer English language skills than those who were naturalized or born abroad to U.S. citizens. (See Figure 8). Foreign-born Latinos who were not seeking work ("out of the work force") had the poorest English language skills when compared with those employed (who had the highest) and those who were unemployed. (See Figure 9).

Among New York City foreign-born Latinos in 2005, there also was a close association between age and English language skills. Younger foreign-born Latinos spoke better English than their older counterparts right along the age hierarchy. (See Figure 10).

Of the five variables which influenced English-language abilities among foreign-born Latinos, the most important was education. As could be anticipated, those with greater educational levels had better English language abilities and in all likelihood there was a correlation between education and income, citizenship, employment and age. (See Figure 11).
Figure 7
Percentage of Foreign-born Hispanic Population 18 Years of Age and Over Who Report Speaking English ‘Well’, ‘Very Well’ or ‘Only’ by Total Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0 - $19,999</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 - $29,999</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 - $59,999</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000 or more</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8
Percentage of Foreign-born Hispanic Population 18 Years of Age and Over Who Report Speaking English ‘Well’, ‘Very Well’ or ‘Only’ by Citizenship Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born abroad of American parents</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalized citizen</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a citizen</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 9
Percentage of Foreign-born Hispanic Population 18 Years of Age and Over Who Report Speaking English 'Well', 'Very Well' or 'Only' By Employment Status

Employed: 59.4%
Unemployed: 53.8%
Not in labor force: 43.1%

Figure 10
Percentage of Foreign-born Hispanic Population 5 Years of Age and Older Who Report Speaking English "Only", "Well" and "Very Well" by Age Category

Age Category: 5 - 19, 20 - 39, 40 - 49, 50 - 79, 80 and over
Among foreign-born New York City Latinos there was also a very clear differentiation by sex within each national group. Among all nationalities foreign-born men had better English language skills than women. (See Figure 12). This finding is somewhat surprising if we consider that most linguistic studies indicate that immigrant women traditionally tend to use what are called ‘prestige variants’ (the standard language in the host country) more so than men. In the context of New York City this implies transition to more widespread English language usage and increasing skill levels. However, the data for 2005 suggest that this has not been the case among New York City’s Latino nationalities. A possible explanation may be that men, who tend to have more sparse social networks compared with women, may have more need and opportunities than women to acquire English, because of work experiences.

Although foreign-born Mexicans had the smallest percentage of the population reporting they speak English ‘only’, ‘very well’ and ‘well’ (45.3% of males and 37.3% of females) the difference between foreign-born males and foreign-born females among Mexicans was the smallest. Among foreign-born Colombians, foreign-born Cubans, foreign-born Dominicans and island-born Puerto Ricans the differences were slightly greater between the sexes.
One possible explanation for the differences in English skills between foreign-born men and women among all six Latino national groups would be educational attainment levels. Figure 13 below indicates the percentage of foreign-born Latinos who reported having attended at least ‘some college’ by sex and Latino nationality. As may be observed the results are not consistent between national groups. Among foreign-born Cubans and Colombians more men than women had attended at least some college and perhaps this could be an explanatory factor for the better English-language skills among these national groups. However, among every other nationality fewer foreign-born men has attended at least some college than women. Thus, there may have been other variables which would explain why reported English language skills among men of these nationalities were better than among women.
• Cubans and Puerto Ricans reported speaking English at home more than any other Latino national group.

• Of all the Latino national groups, Dominicans (both foreign-born and domestic-born) reported speaking English at home the least.

• 75% of the total Latino population in NYC 5 years of age or older reports speaking English ‘only’, ‘well’ or ‘very well’.

• Puerto Ricans and Cubans, the groups who reported speaking English at home more than any other Latino national group, also report speaking English ‘only’, ‘well’ or ‘very well’ more than any other Latino national group.
There were clear differences in self-reported levels of English between foreign-born Latinos and domestic-born Latinos among all national groups except Puerto Ricans.

Latinos in higher income groups also reported higher levels of English-language skills.

Latinos who were U.S. citizens in 2005 reported higher levels of English than those who are not U.S. citizens.

There were not clear differences in level of English between Latinos who were employed and those unemployed. However, Latinos who were not in the work force reported lower levels of English than both of the other groups.

Younger Latinos reported higher levels of English than older Latinos.

Latinos who had attended at least some college reported higher levels of English than those who had completed high school or lower grades exclusively.

Among all Latino national groups, men reported higher levels of English than women.

Among Ecuadorians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans more women reported having attended at least some college. For Cubans and Colombians more men reported having attended at least some college.