

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

CENSUS (AMENDMENT) (SCOTLAND) BILL

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Linguistic Identity in the 2021 Census

The current problem

Although the primary purpose of this amendment is to address questions of gender identity, it could provide an opportunity to address another crucial aspect of identity, which is highly problematic in the current proposal for Census 2021, namely that of **linguistic identity**.

The formulation of the last census, 2011, asked whether the respondents speak at home a language other than English. All those who speak at home more than one language were forced, therefore, to choose only one of them: either English or one of the other languages.

The currently considered formulation for the new census (*what is your main language?*), taken from the 2011 English (rather than Scottish) census is even more problematic. It forces the respondents to name only one language, without even giving them a chance to distinguish between the language used at work and at home. It is about as meaningful as asking people who have several children to name "their main child".

Proposed solution

The problem could be solved through a minimal modification in the way the question is asked: replacing the singular of "*a language*" with the plural "*languages*". The already existing space in the Census form would allow naming at least two languages, apart from English. Accordingly, such a change would not make the form any longer (indeed, it would shorten it by one character) and would not require any additional spaces.

Why it matters?

1. Both questions (the 2011 Census about "*the language spoken at home*" and the currently considered one about "*the main language*") lead to a **gross systematic underestimation** of the number of languages spoken in Scotland, as well as the number of their speakers. This produces an inaccurate and misleading impression of Scotland being a uniformly monolingual country. Given the importance of census data for the development of language policy, inaccurate data might lead to incorrect assumptions and misinformed decisions.
2. The second version of the question ("what is your main language") produces, in addition, **unreliable data**, since different respondents can understand the question differently (e.g. is the main language the one spoken at work or in the family? Is it the language spoken most often or the one with highest proficiency?).

3. The formulation of the language question allowing to name only one of them **sends the wrong message** to the whole population of Scotland that knowledge and use of languages other than English, Gaelic and Scots is considered as a **burden** to get rid of rather than a **potential resource** to be valued, encouraged and supported. This is an issue of particular relevance in a time, when growing concern is being expressed about the continuous decline of language learning in Scotland, with all the negative economic, social and cultural consequences for the country (see the recent report of Reform Scotland from 23/10/2018).

4. The lack of appreciation of languages, expressed by forcing the respondents to name only one language is particularly damaging to members of ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrants and refugees. It conveys the message that **their languages have no value**, with an implicit assumption that giving them up is a prerequisite for a successful integration into Scottish society. It contradicts directly the position of the Scottish Government, which states: *“We recognise the importance of Scotland's rich diversity of languages, and the cultural, economic, historic and social benefits they bring.”*

5. **In practical terms, the systematic under-reporting of language skills**, caused by the way in which the language question is being asked will deny the users of the Census data access to potentially useful and valuable information. To name just a few: companies will not be able to compare their needs for language skills with the availability of these skills in specific regions. Health services will not be able to estimate the potential need for translations into specific languages (particularly important in cases in which people with dementia revert to their first language(s), losing the knowledge of later acquired ones) or the availability of people knowing them who could act as potential translators.

Importantly, the language data derived from the Census **cannot be obtained in other ways**. School statistics do not cover adult, let alone elderly population while single studies of small samples don't allow the service users to gather information about particular regions, sub-populations etc.

Supporting evidence:

1. Mehmedbegovic D, Bak TH (2017) Towards an interdisciplinary lifetime approach to multilingualism: from implicit assumptions to current evidence. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 9.2: 149-167. <https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/abs/10.3828/ejlp.2017.10> This paper provides several strands of evidence relevant in this context:
 - (a) A recent survey of teachers in Scottish primary schools (as part of the “Transnationalising Modern Languages” Project) demonstrates that many pupils speak **several** languages in addition to English, with some combinations such as Kurdish/Turkish, Kurdish/Arabic, Punjabi/Urdu or Russian/Lithuanian being particularly common (p158).
 - (b) UK-wide statistics shows a 4% drop in the percentage of bilingual pupils between the primary and secondary schools. Research at the Institute of

Education of the University College London suggests that older pupils **hide their language knowledge**, describing themselves as English monolinguals (p. 157): a tendency likely to be reinforced by a census question forcing the respondents to choose between English and other languages.

2. McFarlane A, Deerin C, Payne A (2018) Breaking The Language Barrier: Reform Scotland Report: <https://reformscotland.com/2018/10/breaking-the-languages-barrier/> The report argues that one of the ways of addressing the current crisis in language learning could be the introduction of community languages into the school curriculum. It also demonstrates why the way the language question is asked in the Census is highly relevant for the status of community languages.
3. A survey by the Scottish-based Polish-language website emitto.net shows that out of the 1200 respondents, 25% speak regularly **more than one language at home**: <http://healthylinguisticdiet.com/what-language-should-migrants-speak-to-their-children-asurvey-among-polish-migrants-in-the-uk/>
4. Our own research at the University of Edinburgh (D'Souza, Unpublished MSc thesis, 2018) of 1153 bilingual speakers in the UK shows that 96% use **more than one language regularly** (rendering the question about the "main" language meaningless), while 50.4% use **more than one language at home** (showing that even the question about language use at home can be problematic if it assumes that only one language is spoken).
5. Another strand of our research at the University of Edinburgh (Bak TH, Mas Casadesus A, Schnelten EM) examined systematically the way in which the language question was asked in 147 out of the total of 196 world's countries. Out of the 99 countries which have asked questions about language at all, **72 (73%) allowed the respondents to name multiple languages**. We have then contacted via email statistics offices in countries allowing multiple languages to find out whether such an option caused confusion or any other problems. No problems were reported; on the contrary, countries like Switzerland or New Zealand, allowing naming of multiple languages, reported positive experiences with this question. "*We collect all languages spoken at this level as opposed to one primary/main language as this would not enable us to understand the multilingual nature of the New Zealand population*" (from an answer by Statistics New Zealand).

We would be delighted to provide more information and details and would appreciate an opportunity to discuss all related questions in person.