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'Home language', 'Main Language' or no language: questions and answers about British Sign Language in the 2011 British censuses.

Mark Sebba and Graham H. Turner

The 2011 census in the UK was the first to ask questions about the use of languages other than the indigenous Celtic languages, Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic. The resulting broadened inquiry included asking about the use of British Sign Language (BSL), the acknowledged language of the Deaf signing community in Britain. Official and public attitudes surrounding signing – its relationship with spoken/written language; its linguistic 'validity'; its territoriality or universality; its association with ideologies of disability – are rarely placed on display as they are via the census process. The formulation of questions, their linguistic expression, and the responses elicited may all be seen as indexical of societal positioning.

In the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland each conduct their own census, so the question about sign language was differently phrased in each jurisdiction, and placed alongside a different set of questions about other languages. Thus in each questionnaire the sign language question was contextualised differently, and was open to comparison by respondents with the questions about other, more prominent languages including English. Unsurprisingly, this led to different responses to questions which were ostensibly asking about the same thing.

In this paper we describe how the census questionnaire in each jurisdiction asked about respondents' principal language, and how British Sign Language was positioned in each. A significant difference in the wording of the question – about 'home language' in Scotland and 'main language' elsewhere – led to a far larger proportion of respondents mentioning BSL in Scotland. We conclude that while the 'home language' question produces a more realistic picture of the extent of BSL use, neither question is sufficient to reveal the complexity of the repertoire of many bi- and multilinguals. More generally, the wording of questions about principal language may crucially affect the responses of users of minority languages.

[299 words]

1. Introduction

Beginning in the 19th century and almost since the start of modern census-taking, questions about language have been asked in official censuses. However, by no means all censuses have included language questions, and whether such questions are asked or not has been a function not only of their relevance to the society and the economy, but also of the ideologies about language, ethnicity and nationality prevailing at the time.

In the United Kingdom, language questions have been asked in censuses since the 19th century, but only in some geographical regions. In England, the largest and most populous of the four countries[1] currently making up the United Kingdom, no language questions were asked until the most recent decennial census, in 2011. In the other three – Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – census questions on language began in the 19th century, but only examined knowledge of the local indigenous languages, i.e. Scottish Gaelic, Welsh and Irish respectively.

A public consultation for the 2011 census persuaded the UK census authority, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), of the need to ask additional questions on language, though it had previously envisaged no change to the status quo (Sebba 2017, 272). Questions on the respondent's 'principal language', and on ability to speak English, were added to the questionnaire in all four countries. The consultation indicated that information about British Sign Language (BSL) was a specific user need in this area (ONS 2009, 4): as a consequence, a question mentioning BSL was also asked. In fact, in the 2011 census, only two languages were mentioned in the questionnaire by name in every part of the UK: English and BSL. However, due to the devolved form of government which exists in the UK and the fact that for census purposes there are four separate jurisdictions, this question was eventually asked in four somewhat different ways, contextualised differently in each local questionnaire by being placed alongside a different set of questions about other languages. This fact – as well as giving us four different estimates of the proportion of the population who use BSL – allows us an unprecedented insight into how the manner and context in which a census question is *asked* can affect how it is *answered*.

In this paper, we begin in Section 2 by examining the motivations for asking language questions in censuses, and find that alongside practical matters of enumeration for public service provision, there are potentially many ideological motivations, in which the census may serve both as a tool for description and an instrument of persuasion or (attempted) change. Section 3 introduces British Sign Language, a language which despite several decades of research and documentation is still often misunderstood. Section 4 discusses the four different versions of the census questionnaire in the four jurisdictions, and the different ways in which the language questions were phrased and contextualised in each. In Section 5, we discuss how this variation led to different results, in terms of numbers of users of sign language identified in each country. Asking about 'home language' (as in Scotland) rather than 'main language' (as elsewhere) led to a far larger proportion of the population acknowledging that they use British Sign Language. Significant differences can also be seen in the responses from speakers of other (i.e. spoken) languages. In Section 6, we reach the conclusion that while asking about 'home language' produces fuller information in terms of identifying linguistic diversity, no single question is on its own adequate for giving a realistic picture of the complex language use of many bi- and multilinguals.

2. Motivations for language questions in the census

Why ask questions about language in a national census? Many countries do, but many others do not; clearly there is an argument to be made as to why it should or should not be done. Questions relating to ethnicity, nationality and language have historically been among the most ideologically laden in national censuses. The inclusion of questions about language in the censuses of a number of European states in the 19th Century usually reflected a concern with ethnic composition, especially in diverse multilingual states, and during the same period, censuses were part of the process of enumerating, categorising and governing empires (Kertzer and Arel 2002, Duchêne and Humbert 2018, Adler 2018).

More recently, the inclusion of language questions in censuses has often been motivated by the symbolic, communicative and educational needs of nation-states seeking to manage their diverse populations (Duchêne, Humbert & Coray 2018; Dobrin, Austin & Nathan 2009; Sebba 2019.)

Despite sometimes being portrayed as a neutral exercise in collecting externally verifiable 'facts' , censuses are arguably ideology-laden processes in which the 'facts' are themselves outcomes of ideologised processes of categorisation, labelling, enumeration and reporting. The latter view is held by many researchers, including Duchêne and Humbert (2018: 3), who take as given that the practice of census-taking is ideological:

> Examining the reasons that have motivated state apparatuses to produce statistics on languages helps us understand what language ideologies have contributed to matters of government in various contexts at different times […] Whether a group appears in official statistics as a linguistic, ethnic and/or racial group determines its visibility in society (whether desirable or not), conferring recognition through numbers, discriminating a group of people, or silencing a minority (see Kertzer and Arel 2002; Simon 2005; Busch 2015).

The decision to count according to categories such as ethnicity, nationality and language requires a decision about *which* ethnicities, nationalities or languages are to be named, and hence validated, by the census; this leads 'inevitably', according to Kertzer and Arel (2002, 23) to groups who are thus excluded feeling they are being 'denied an existence on the census, and thus in society'. This can happen even when respondents are invited to write in an answer of their choice (as in the UK census questions on language): the census process of enumeration, followed by the grouping of data and the publication of summary statistics is liable to lead to the disappearance of some groupings in favour of others. At the stage of data collection, this is illustrated by the German micro census[2] of 2017/2018 (Adler 2018). Respondents were asked to state the 'language predominantly spoken in the household' but were limited to selecting one of thirteen categories by ticking a box. First was 'German'; then eight specific languages, each characterised as 'not German but…' (Arabic, Turkish etc.) and lastly, four options: 'another European language', 'another African language', 'another Asian language' and 'another language' (Adler 2018, 6). The possible responses thus present a hierarchy from the normalised German, through a

number of languages which are ‘not German’ but are at least specific, to geographical groupings of languages which are not named at all, and finally to ‘other’.

Busch (2016) shows a similar process at the stage of data analysis and communication, in her study of the way language statistics are calculated and published by the Austrian statistical institute. Language data from the 2001 census was published in the form of a table divided into two main sections: [speakers of] ‘German only’ and the rest, consisting of about 45 languages, divided into seven broad categories, according to criteria ‘that seem somewhat arbitrary or random’ (2016, 6). Several of these categories contained a residual category, for example ‘Other African languages’ (in fact there was only one named African language, Arabic). Busch comments that ‘This reduction in complexity undertaken for statistical purposes corresponds to what Irvine and Gal (2000) describe as a language ideological mechanism of erasure’ (Busch 2016, 12).

A ‘reduction in complexity’ of this type was also a feature of the 2011 UK census. In England and Wales, a process of recategorisation was applied to the data, as in the Austrian case, though it was certainly more nuanced. In this case, African languages were divided into fifteen categories, although here too, there were three residual categories: ‘Other Nigerian language’, ‘‘Other West African language’ and ‘African language (all other)’. The dysfunctionality of the ‘other’ category is shown by the way the ONS reported the most spoken languages in England and Wales, in a publication titled ‘Language in England and Wales: 2011’ (ONS, 2013). In the chart ‘Top ten main 'Other' languages in England and Wales, 2011’ (p. 3), the 8th most spoken main language after English is given as ‘all other Chinese’. A footnote explains that this is ‘is an aggregate of Chinese languages and excludes those that wrote in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese’ – in other words, it does not refer to a single language at all. Combining the three Chinese categories (Cantonese, Mandarin and ‘Other’) would have brought a total of 207000 speakers, just below Gujarati and thus sixth in the table. This would have made some sense, since although the spoken varieties of Chinese are mutually unintelligible, the argument is often made that the ‘dialects’ share a writing system, or rather, use the writing system associated with one dialect, Mandarin (Chen 1999, 104-5, footnote 3). Here, a rigid set of statistical categories seems to collide with the more fluid sociolinguistic notions of language and dialect, which are themselves ideological and social consructs. Furthermore, in this classification, any language which is not English is literally described as ‘other’.

A decision *not* to enumerate languages is potentially as ideologically laden as a decision to do so. Political pressures have led to the decision to avoid collecting language or ethnicity data in a number of countries, including Belgium, Burundi, Mauritania and Pakistan (Kertzer and Arel 2002, 23-24, 106). In each case the political consequences of ascertaining the relative size of different groups was potentially threatening to those in power; if the status quo was to be maintained, it was more expedient to be ignorant than to be informed.

While the view of censuses as pervaded by ideology is incompatible with a belief that they are ideologically neutral, it is possible to hold one view and assert the other, i.e. to *understand* the census as a highly ideological process while at the same time *claiming* that it is a neutral fact-finding exercise. Such claims are made more acceptable to the public by the widely-held belief that surveys, correctly designed, can discover 'facts' and present them in the form of 'statistics'.

Kertzer and Arel (2002, 18-19) raise the question of whether, given the extent to which census questions are bound up with politics, there can be 'any scientific validity' to census data on cultural categories. They emphasise that social scientists are divided on this issue. They point out that 'statistical realism,' the belief in an objective reality for cultural categories, appears to be widespread among demographers. This seems, for example, to be the position of John de Vries, author of the article on language censuses in a major international handbook of sociolinguistics, when he says:

> census data on bilingualism […] provided that they are collected without bias and in social conditions in which no response is associated with any form of stigma, do give us baseline information (de Vries 2006, 1111).

This assumes that it is possible to collect data 'without bias' and ensure that all responses are 'free of stigma'. Yet there are few if any places in the world where all the languages used are on an equal footing and 'free of stigma'.

The relationship between census questions and political intentions is contextual. The same question may be asked with completely different motives and different interpretations of the results (Leeman 2018, 3). For example, questions on the use of the indigenous Celtic languages of the British Isles were added to the regional censuses in Scotland in 1881 and in Wales in 1891 at the urging of local language activists who were concerned about the loss of Scottish Gaelic and Welsh respectively (Mackinnon 1990,

Christopher 2011). At the same time, it is clear that some people in authority would have seen the decline of the Celtic languages as a sign of progress (Christopher 2011, 539). In the same way, the existence of large numbers of speakers of exogenous minority languages in present-day England could be interpreted as evidence of healthy multiculturalism resulting in language maintenance, or as a failure of minorities to assimilate, requiring government intervention, e.g. English classes (see Sebba 2017b, 191).

What, then, motivates the asking of language questions in the UK census? According to the website of the UK Office for National Statistics in June 2020 (ONS, n.d.), 'The census provides information that government needs to develop policies, plan and run public services, and allocate funding.' Most national statistical offices would probably make a similar statement. If one goal of government is to provide public services to people in the languages in which they can best communicate, then it would clearly be helpful to know which languages are used where and by whom. This point is made by de Vries, who states that such data allow us to develop an 'ecology' of linguistic diversity and 'allow policy makers to specify the regions where public services in more than one language would be most needed' (de Vries 2006, 1111). This is relevant to the explanation given by the ONS for including language questions in the census in England in 2011, based on their public consultations a few years earlier:

> By far the most common interest in language is to facilitate the provision of public services, both by identifying the need for translation and interpretation services in the short term and for providing English language lessons in the medium term (ONS 2009, 9).

The above statement by the ONS does make an implicit assumption, however, that the requirement for translation services is a transitional one which will be overcome in time by providing the means to learn English. It does not see bilingualism as relevant to public service provision in England as long as English is one of the languages known by the individual wanting to access a service. The situation is different in Wales, where it is understood that many people who are competent users of English nevertheless have a strong preference for Welsh, and Welsh government policy is to make it possible for them to access services in Welsh if they so wish (Welsh Government 2020). Much the same would apply to Scottish Gaelic in Scotland. Thus although the priority for the census

authorities appears to be to find out the most efficient means of enabling the public to communicate with government, there is also a recognition that for users of certain indigenous languages, speakers may exercise a preference to use a different language even when they may not strictly need to.

The position of BSL is similar in some respects to that of Welsh and Gaelic, as service providers have statutory duties under disability legislation, and deafness is classed as a disability. The ONS census consultation produced a number of requests from organisations to collect data about use of BSL (ONS 2009: 4), to 'help service [providers] to map out where services can be targeted' (ONS 2007, 58). Disability legislation in the UK also requires the authorities to have an understanding of the communications requirements of disabled people (ONS 2007, 58). Following the consultation, the ONS concluded that the 'ability to capture sign languages' was an essential requirement of any new language question, second only to the ability to capture spoken languages (ONS 2009: 11). It is also true, as we discuss in the next section, that BSL is an indigenous language used by an indigenous community, although this point does not seem to have influenced the decision by the ONS.

3. Sign Language and British Sign Language

Sign language communities (SLCs) exist all around the world, and their languages, like others, emerged naturally as a consequence of sustained interaction across generations within stable populations. There are many different sign languages, and communities which share a spoken language do not necessarily have similar sign languages. Since the 1960s, sign languages have slowly come to be understood and treated as fully-fledged, "real" languages. Although an extensive body of research attests to this (see the collected materials in Baker et al 2016; Gertz & Boudreault 2016; Pfau et al 2012), they have traditionally been neglected by minority language policies and institutions (Turner 2003a, 2009; McBurney 2012; Napier & Leeson 2016). They have, for instance, been excluded from the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (CoE, 1992) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (CoE, 1995) by the Council of Europe (see Batterbury 2012; De Meulder 2015).

Given this widespread lack of recognition and partial understanding of sign languages as actual languages, it is unsurprising that enumerating sign language users is problematic.

The World Federation of the Deaf estimates that there are about 70 million deaf people worldwide for whom a sign language is “their first language or mother tongue”.[3] Within the European Union, recent estimates put the number of “sign language users” at one million (although no indication is given about whether hearing people are included in this estimate – see Turner 2020 for discussion).[4] Turner (2020, 59) argues for an estimate of “a global community of just over 17 million signers (using a range of different national signed languages), of whom almost 5.1 million would be deaf people”.

The status of Sign Languages (SLs) as "minorised minority languages" (Krausneker 2003) – numerical minority languages, misunderstood as to their very nature, unequal in terms of power, and poorly addressed by institutions, policies and research – is rooted in the widespread misapprehension that these languages should properly be handled as simple epiphenomena of disability (Turner 2003a; De Meulder 2017). This categorisation results from social, political and historical processes and practices (Lane 1992; Jankowski 1997; Wrigley 1996; Ladd 2003) which conceptualised signers as individuals requiring medical intervention and SLs as non-linguistic communication support mechanisms. With some 95% of deaf children being born to hearing (non-signing) families (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), the 20th century saw most deaf children in the industrialised Global North acquiring SLs via the linguistic 'underground' (Ladd 2003), i.e. from the 5% of their peers fortunate enough to learn by familiar processes of adult-to-child transmission within signing Deaf families.

At the formal, policy level, the ideology of oralism, which forcibly insisted upon speech training and denigrated signing, was globally dominant in the education of deaf children to an extent that has been described as constituting linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Jokinen 2000; Ladd 2003). The prominence of oralist social regimes also underpins the important and often fraught relationship between signing and writing. Firstly, SLs have no commonly-used orthographic forms, although they have often been transcribed for research purposes (Stokoe 1960; Brennan et al 1984; Hanke 2004) and a rich variety of writing systems have been proposed (for discussion, see Thoutenhoofd 1992; Stumpf 2005; Grushkin 2017). Secondly, educational practices have not always enabled deaf children to develop high levels of literacy (see Marschark et al 2002). In the 21st century, those wishing to promote oralism (see Krausneker 2015) have been assisted by the rapid rise of new medical responses to deafness (especially cochlear implantation – see Blume

2010; Mauldin 2016) and by the ongoing social stigmatization of deaf bodies (Bryan & Emery 2014), both of which help to sustain a widespread assumption that speech is both preferable and biologically attainable despite neo-natal deafness.

Counter-intuitively, perhaps, against this background, a variety of encouraging indicators nevertheless suggest the possibility of a more secure future for signing communities. Over 30 countries have enacted some form of legal recognition of their SLs (De Meulder 2015; Murray 2015). In the USA, Goldberg et al (2015) report that approximately 100,000 people per annum are studying American Sign Language at US post-secondary institutions, making it the third most commonly taught language at that level in the country. The perceived attractions of learning to sign have prompted the popularity of 'baby signing', whereby hearing parents and their hearing babies learn signs in order for the infants to communicate their needs earlier and more efficiently, bringing perceived social and cognitive benefits (Pizer et al 2007: though cf Kirk et al 2013). It has been estimated that for every deaf person who uses BSL there are up to nine hearing people who have some knowledge of the language (Woll & Adam 2012). Against the backdrop of neglect and disrespect over centuries (eg Baynton 1996; Fischer & Lane 1993) and continents (eg Monaghan et al 2003), the wider populace may be less inclined to disparage or disdain signing in the modern world.

The indigenous signed language throughout the UK is BSL (while Irish Sign Language is used on the island of Ireland, and by a small proportion elsewhere in the UK). Although records suggest that the language has, in some form, been in existence since at least the 16th century AD (Sutton Spence & Woll 1999), it was not overtly named as such in print until the publication of a seminal text by Mary Brennan, working in Edinburgh (Brennan 1975). Within a few short years, Brennan & Hayhurst were confidently describing the "renaissance" of BSL (1980). Whilst ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 2001 had been the precursor for the UK to give protected status to the languages of its constituent nations (including Welsh, Scots, Ulster Scots, Scottish and Irish Gaelic, and Cornish), BSL recognition of any overt kind had to wait until 2003. In that year, the UK Department of Work & Pensions issued an anodyne statement acknowledging BSL as a language and put forward a one-off fund of £1.5m to stimulate an associated set of short-term projects (Turner 2003b). A similarly ineffectual statement was made by the Minister for Public Health in the Scottish Government in 2011. Despite

the weakness of this statement, the Scottish Parliament had, from its reinstatement in 1999, displayed an encouraging awareness of BSL, sensitive to comparisons with the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which created a 'planning-based' model of language legislation (McLeod 2006). It can be seen that the UK and Scotland, legislatively separate entities, both remain poor on policy, though the advances in Gaelic policy offer a ready lead to emulate. At the culmination of a lengthy community and parliamentary process (see Lawson et al 2019), on 17 September 2015, Members of the Scottish Parliament voted unanimously in favour of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. Scotland thus became the first country within the UK to afford legal status to BSL and to date remains the only one.

Returning now to the question of enumeration, there was no UK-wide systematic attempt to count BSL users until the 2011 census. For England and Wales, figures from that census provided by ONS following our inquiry show that 21,971 people aged three or over chose to write in the available blank space using terms that align them with some form of visual-gestural communication. Not all of these forms can properly be considered naturally-arising human languages (eg some literally bear the names of their inventors as artificial systems), but all appear in a modality that uses the hands as a central articulator. No significant differences between England and Wales are discernible. Of this overall population, 15,487 present overtly as BSL signers while 75 are Deaf-Blind people using specific tactile forms (Willoughby et al 2018).

Of the remaining 6,409 respondents, a large group (2,775) have written in ‘Sign Language’ without further detail. Many of these may be BSL users who simply didn’t add the modifier ‘British’, while others may be users of ‘home systems’ which would not be more widely recognised. Just two individuals wrote in ‘International Sign Language’, commonly used to refer to signing that incorporates features of more than one natural signed language. Outside of the BSL population, however, the largest single group is the 3,449 ‘Makaton’ users. Makaton [TGH5] is not a full language but a proprietary communication programme for people with learning or communication difficulties in which a limited number of signs are used, with speech, in English word order. Although it exploits the forms of some BSL signs and was controversially developed by hearing people from language forms naturally arising in the Deaf community, Makaton is not intended for and rarely used by deaf people. ‘Sign-Supported English’ (SSE) was given

by 107 as their main language. This is a label used particularly in British schools from the 1980s onwards [TGH6] to refer to educationalists' efforts to combine spoken and signed elements simultaneously within utterances, believing that to do so would afford deaf pupils 'the best of both worlds' in the form of bimodal access to the curriculum.

We have not obtained a similarly detailed breakdown of figures from Scotland. However, using the 2011 Scottish census data, which for reasons explained below allows a more realistic estimate than the other UK censuses, it is possible to derive a credible estimate of 12,533 BSL users aged three and over in Scotland, of whom 3729 are also reported to be deaf. Extrapolated to the entire UK population recorded at that time, this would suggest that there are 46,028 deaf BSL users of all ages in the UK (Turner 2020, 58).

4. Language questions and BSL in the UK census

4.1 Origins of the language questions

At the time of the preparations for the 2011census, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe guidelines on census questions about language (United Nations 2006, 96-97) recommended 'that at least two questions be asked about language'. Of these, one should relate to 'mother tongue', 'main language' ('the language which the person commands best') or 'language(s) most currently spoken at home and/or work' while the other should refer to 'knowledge of language(s), defined as the ability to speak and/or write one or more designated languages'. The process of development of the questionnaire for England has been well documented by the ONS itself, in a number of publications including some dedicated to the language questions (ONS 2007, ONS 2009); but its account does not mention the UN recommendations, so it is not clear whether they played any direct part in the design of the questions. Rather, the ONS seems to have been led by the results of its consultations on user needs. One of these, as mentioned above, was the 'ability to capture sign languages'.

Following the decision to include a question on language, the ONS began a series of trials. The earliest trials were of matrix-style questions asking about respondents' abilities to read, write, speak and understand up to six languages. These included BSL as one of the named languages. After testing found these to be unsatisfactory, there were trials of questions based on a question used in New Zealand, 'In which language(s) could you have a conversation

about a lot of everyday things?'[5], but the ONS was not satisfied that any of the trial questions would meet the criteria of clarity and consistency of response which they required. They finally decided to use a two-part question based on the 2000 US census long form questionnaire. This consisted of a question on 'primary language' followed by one on English proficiency. (ONS 2009, 31).

According to the ONS, the 'key purpose of a primary language question is to establish the language that public authorities can communicate with respondents in' (ONS 2009, 31). The US census question is phrased to ask whether the respondent speaks 'a language other than English at home'. If respondents select 'no,' they are directed to skip directly to the following question, but selecting 'yes' means they must answer two more questions: 'What is this language? – for example, Korean, Italian, Spanish, Vietnamese' and a question on ability in English. After testing several versions of these questions, the ONS reached the conclusion that 'the concept of languages spoken at home is a complex one and may require further qualifications such as to whom and when' (ONS 2009, 34), and this and other complexities of the question led them to decide to ask the respondent to name their 'main language' instead. According to the ONS, 'Main language was considered a useful concept in meeting the essential user need of allowing data users to understand which languages services should be provided in' (ONS 2009:35). It is not clear whether the ONS had in mind the United Nations' definition of 'main language' ('the language which the person commands best') (United Nations 2006, 96). ONS testing showed that in practice most respondents regarded 'main language' as their first language ('mother tongue') (ONS 2009, 36).

Thus it seems that the ONS moved away from the original US census idea of asking about 'home language' and instead chose to ask about 'main language', which was the form of the question chosen for use in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. On this and a number of other points (including the use of matrices, which the ONS decided against), the Scottish census authority (NRS) diverged from the UK authority (ONS). Following its own user consultations, the NRS included a question similar to the US one about 'home language' in its census test, which found that the question was 'working well' (Eunson and Murray 2009, 11). This question subsequently was included in the final census questionnaire, with BSL users in Scotland having the option of ticking a box to indicate that they used BSL at home, whereas all other UK residents were given the option of writing 'BSL' as the answer to 'what

is your main language'. Predictably, this led to a difference in the numbers of BSL users recorded in Scotland and elsewhere.

4.2 The census questionnaires

Across the UK, there are four jurisdictions for census purposes: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland. For some purposes, all four function as a unit; for some purposes, there are four separate units; for some purposes, England and Wales function as a single unit, so that in effect there are three entities. For the language questions, all four jurisdictions had distinct questionnaires.

In the census in England, there were two questions on language, while in each of the other three census jurisdictions, there were three. One of these was a question about abilities in English which had the same form on all four census questionnaires, although it differed in its ordering with respect to the other questions, and in who was expected to answer. For this question, respondents were asked 'how well can you speak English' and were to answer by ticking one of four boxes: 'very well', 'well', 'not well', 'not at all'. This question on English ability is highly problematic in its own right, for reasons which include both its ideological implications and its disputable potential for correctly measuring what it is intended to measure. These issues have been addressed by other research (Sebba 2017b) and so will not be discussed here. For the purposes of this paper, the significance of this question is the way in which it interacts with the other language question(s) on the same questionnaire. In Scotland, all respondents were asked the English ability question, but everywhere else, it was only to be answered by those who did not consider English to be their 'main language'. In the next section, we will look at the language questions in each of the four census jurisdictions in turn.

4.2.1 England

The census authority for England is the ONS, and the Census Order (the legislation which instructs the census to be carried out) is approved by the UK Parliament in London, as England alone of the constituent countries does not have a separate autonomous government. In practice, the ONS also takes the lead in developing the questionnaire used throughout Britain.

The 2011 English census questionnaire first asks the respondent 'what is your main language?'. Two options are given. If the answer is 'English', there are no more language-related questions: the respondent is told to skip the next question and go on to a question about religion. The alternative to answering 'English' is 'Other, write in (including British Sign Language)' (See appendix for full version of the questions).

If the respondent chooses this alternative, they must write in the name of a language and then answer the next question, which is 'how well can you speak English'.

While for a majority of the population, most of them monolingual speakers of English, the 'main language' question poses no issues, for some multilinguals this question is particularly problematic. It relies on an assumption that all speakers can identify a 'main language' free of a specified context. However, for those who use different languages fluently, but in different domains – for example, 'mainly' Bengali at home, but exclusively English in a work context – it is not actually possible to answer this question sincerely without making further assumptions about the underpinnings to the question. This applies also to the potentially numerous respondents who may use one language for written communication (e.g. English, French or Arabic) and another mainly for speaking. Since giving an answer other than 'English' will require the filling in of an additional question, and furthermore could be interpreted as an admission of some kind of deficiency, there is an incentive to answer 'English' if that is a plausible answer (see Sebba 2017b, 5).

It is noteworthy that the only 'other' language offered as a *named* option on the census questionnaire is BSL. This is undoubtedly meant to reassure users of BSL that BSL is regarded as a valid answer, in case respondents assume that only spoken (or written) languages are considered acceptable by the relevant authorities. Nevertheless, for users of BSL, the requirement to nominate just one 'main language' is likely to create particular problems. Since it has no orthography, most users of BSL (whether deaf or not) read and write (to varying extents) in English. The same individuals will use BSL in other contexts. But given that English has greater prestige in the wider society, and writing is seen as more prestigious (and to some extent more valid) than speech, at least some deaf BSL users are likely to claim English as their main language. Some who use BSL are likely to have internalised the historic subordination of sign languages which has led to BSL being denied the status of a language, to the extent that they are liable to foreground their English ability in an 'official' context such as this. Some deaf BSL users may feel it is their 'native' language

but use it relatively little due to lack of opportunity for contact with other signers, and so may not declare it as their main language. It is unlikely that a fluent user who is not deaf would declare this as a main language unless they lived and worked with other BSL users and used it more than English. These factors mean that the use of BSL is likely to be under-reported in response to this question, both by deaf and hearing users.

4.2.2 Wales and Northern Ireland

Historically the ONS has had responsibility for carrying out the census in Wales, but partial responsibility has now been devolved to the semi-autonomous Welsh government. Northern Ireland is governed separately from the rest of the UK and its census authority is the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. In Wales the questionnaire is issued in Welsh and English versions, but in Northern Ireland the questionnaire is only in English. Both the Welsh and Northern Irish census questionnaires have three questions, including 'What is your main language' and the question about abilities in English. The additional question is a more detailed matrix question about the regional languages, 'Can you understand, speak, read or write Welsh?' and 'Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish or Ulster-Scots?', though these questions are differently ordered (first of the three in Wales, last in Northern Ireland.) In both cases, the alternative to selecting English ('English or Welsh' in Wales) as the 'main language' is to write in an 'Other,' with British Sign Language explicitly mentioned as a valid answer (along with Irish Sign Language in Northern Ireland) (See appendix for full version of the questions).

The Welsh and Northern Irish questionnaires raise similar questions to the one in England, about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the questions about 'main language' and proficiency in English. With respect to BSL, in these questionnaires despite being mentioned by name, it is 'other' not only compared to English, but also to Welsh or Irish and Ulster Scots, which are probed more intensively by means of additional questions.

4.2.3 Scotland

Scotland is largely autonomous and has its own census agency, National Records of Scotland (formerly the General Register Office (Scotland)), subject to the Scottish Parliament. Despite this, the Scottish census is aligned with that in the rest of the UK and usually takes place at the same time[6].

In contrast to the questionnaire in England, in the Scottish questionnaire the first language question asks about three languages of Scotland: English, Scottish Gaelic, and Scots. A question on Gaelic has been present in the census for over a century, but the one on Scots was asked for the first time in 2011. Its history is the subject of other papers (e.g. Macafee 2017, Sebba 2019). The question has the form: 'Which of these can you do?' followed by a matrix with tick boxes for the respondent to indicate which of the abilities – Understand, Speak, Read, Write or 'None of these'– they have for each language (See appendix). As in England, the question asks specifically about English, but here English is placed alongside Gaelic and Scots, as just one – albeit the first – of three named local languages about which respondents are asked.

The next Scottish question is the one about proficiency in English, identical to the one in the English questionnaire. However, there is again a framing difference: this question, unlike the one in England, is not subject to a 'filter' which excludes respondents whose 'main language' is English. Thus everyone in Scotland was asked this question, even those who might identify as native speakers of English. For the census in England and Wales, the ONS had taken the decision not to ask this question of the whole population, as census tests showed that some people who spoke English natively might rate their proficiency as less than 'very good' due to nonstandard speech being stigmatised in England. 'Main language' speakers of English were therefore not asked this question in England 'because people who speak English as their first language might interpret the proficiency question as a measure of social class' (ONS 2009: 40). In Scotland, this question may have produced some confusion because many people still have negative attitudes to Scots or regard it as 'bad English'. Although Scots was distinguished from English in the first census question, some speakers for whom Scots is a first language may have felt that it was appropriate to evaluate their English as less than 'very good'. In fact, just below 10% of those who said they could speak Scots said they could speak English 'well', 'not well' or 'not at all', i.e. less than 'very well'. (Census table AT_452_2011 - Scots language skills by proficiency in spoken English). This provides another illustration of how not only the content of the census questions, but also their context within the questionnaire itself, may impact on the responses. The presence of the two named local languages alongside English in the first question had the potential to suggest a comparison between English and the others. Having keyed into an evaluative mode by answering about specific abilities in each language, the respondent might be inclined to

continue by evaluating his or her competence in speaking English, with an expectation that only 'the best' speakers could truthfully answer 'very well'.

The final question on language in the Scottish census is 'Do you use a language other than English at home?'. The respondent is offered the options 'No, English only', 'Yes, British Sign Language', 'Yes, other – please write in' and is instructed to 'tick all that apply'. Although clearly this question is in some sense a counterpart to the 'main language' question in the English census, it functions very differently. First of all, it allows for the possibility that the respondent uses English at home, *as well as* another language. In England, acknowledging English as a 'main language' would close off the opportunity for mentioning any other language the respondent regularly used; in Scotland, there is the possibility of mentioning at least one other language, and possibly two if BSL is one of them.

Nevertheless, the phrasing of the question leads to some problems. There is an assumption that if the respondent regularly uses a language other than English, that will happen in the home environment, even if not elsewhere. However, that may not be the case. Advocates for Gaelic, a language with declining numbers and relatively few speakers, have pointed out that despite it being 'a language of the home', it may not be spoken at home because there is no one to speak it with. Clearly this is true for individuals who live alone, but also in the case where most of the family do not speak Gaelic, even though the respondent does (Mcleod 2013). The same could apply to BSL: a fluent and regular user may nevertheless use it only rarely at home, because other family members are not signers. This would lead to under-reporting. Equally, in the situation where an adult is completing the questionnaire on behalf of younger members of the household, they may truthfully answer that English is the 'home' language, even when there is a young person in the home whose preference is for BSL. In the phrasing of this question, an implicit domain-based model (Fishman 1972), where 'home' is regarded as the domain where a minority language is most likely to be used, is confounded by the reality of marginalised languages with small numbers of users living in relative isolation from other users.

In the Scottish questionnaire, though it is mentioned explicitly, BSL is positioned as different from the other local languages, Scots and Gaelic, which are interrogated in more detail by means of a matrix. It would have been possible to do the same with BSL but it was not included in the matrix. It may be that this was not done because the matrix asks about ability to 'understand, speak, read and write' but – taken literally – only the first of these is relevant

to BSL, and alternatives tested by the ONS when trialling a similar grid for the questionnaire in England and Wales were found to be confusing (ONS 2009:19).

5. Discussion

Each of the four national questionnaires asked somewhat different questions arranged in different orders, producing different contexts in which a fluent user of BSL might be prompted to disclose that fact or not. For our purposes here, the most important difference among the questionnaires is between Scotland on the one hand, where the questionnaire asked about 'home language', and the other three countries on the other, where each asked about 'main language'. This difference seems to have resulted in a very significant disparity in the enumeration of users of BSL: the proportion of the population who are BSL users in Scotland (measured by those who claimed to use BSL 'at home') is more than eight times the proportion of BSL users in England (taken to be those for whom BSL is a 'main language') (See Table 1).

It is certainly possible that there could be regional variation in the proportions of BSL users in the population, depending (for example) on the presence of schools and cultural centres for deaf people, and the historically preferred local methods of education. In fact, however, a comparison of the number of users of sign languages per 100,000 population, based on answers to the 2011 census question about 'main language', reveals quite similar proportions of sign language users in England and Wales, with a somewhat lower proportion in Northern Ireland, at about 2/3 of the figure for England. The figure for Scotland, however, shows over eight times as many BSL users in Scotland as in England (See Table 1).

Census region	Total number of BSL users as 'main language' (England, Wales and NI) or 'home language' (Scotland)	Users of BSL as 'main language' (England, Wales and NI) or 'home language' (Scotland) per 100,000	Users of any SL as 'main language' (England, Wales and NI) or 'home language' (Scotland) per 100,000
England	14,736	28.9	40.88
Wales	751	25.4	37.8
N. Ireland	339	19.5	27.5
Scotland	12,533	245	256

Table 1: Users of sign languages as 'main' or 'home' language, based on 2011 census statistics in four jurisdictions

It seems certain that this difference mainly results from the different ways the question was phrased: asking about ''language used at home' in Scotland and 'main language' elsewhere.

It is of course predictable that asking different questions would result in different answers. A language-by-language comparison between the responses to the question 'What is your main language?' in England and the question 'Do you use a language other than English at home?' in Scotland confirms that these indeed represent distinct constructs and receive different interpretations from respondents. This difference, however, is not equally apparent for all languages, and looking at some specific cases gives an indication of why. For example, the census in England and Wales recorded 48,308 persons (of all ages) born in Hungary, and 44,365 people over the age of 3 who had Hungarian as a 'main language'. Thus, 92% of people born in Hungary stated that Hungarian was their 'main language'. In Scotland, there were 2,943 persons born in Hungary, and 2,723 respondents who said they used Hungarian at home[7]. This gives almost exactly the same percentage, 93%. A quite similar pattern is shown by Romanians: in England, 84% of people born in Romania list Romanian as their 'main' language, while in Scotland 80% of those born in Romania give Romanian as their 'home language'. This might suggest, assuming that Hungarians and Romanians behave similarly in England and Scotland, that the 'home language' and 'main language' questions are in fact probing the same concept. But the figures for other countries and languages suggest otherwise.

Only 45% of people born in the Netherlands[8] give Dutch as their 'main language' in England and Wales, but in Scotland, 91% give it as their 'home language'. In England and Wales, 69% of persons born in Italian give Italian as their 'main language', but in Scotland, there are far more people using Italian as a 'home language' (8,252) than were born in Italy (6048) – so the equivalent percentage would be 136%.

There is a likely sociolinguistic explanation for these differences. For speakers of languages like Hungarian and Romanian - national languages of countries which joined the European Union in the period 2004-2007 and thus in most cases were quite recent arrivals in the UK in 2011 – the great majority of speakers of those languages regard that language as their main

language, and use it at home as well as in other contexts. For these speakers the 'main' and 'home' language are, or at least in 2011 were, indeed much the same thing. For speakers of Dutch, this seems not to be true. When asked about 'home language', as in Scotland, they will respond that it is Dutch, but it seems that most do not consider it their 'main language' – most probably, because they speak English very well[9] and use it in most contexts outside the home. In the case of Italian, it is clear that many people born in Scotland are using Italian in the home[10], in this case as a heritage 'home language' even if it is not a 'main language'.

The differences between Scotland and England/Wales in responses to the 'principal language' question show that, one the one hand, for some relatively newly-established minority language communities, 'main language' and 'language used at home' are often the same. For other language communities, however, they are not, and a more complex pattern of language use has developed, where another language (generally English) is the 'main' language for many individuals (See, for example, Li Wei, 1994; Curdt-Christiansen and Morgia, 2018). All this is in keeping with well-known sociolinguistic trends in bilingual minority communities (Fishman, 1989). The census is a blunt instrument for measuring such complex relationships, even if allowances are made for problems with the phrasing of the questions. A comparison of the English/Welsh and Scottish data gives an indication of that bluntness.

Having established that 'main language' and 'language other than English used at home' are indeed different constructs and that questions about them will receive different answers, it is predictable that we find a difference between the figures for England/Wales and Scotland with respect to users of BSL. However, the size of the difference is remarkable: the recorded proportions of BSL speakers in the population differ by a factor of eight. Even then, the number of BSL users may have been *under*-reported in Scotland because some fluent users have no opportunities to use BSL in the home. Despite this, it seems that the Scottish question is much more effective at capturing BSL users than the one used elsewhere.

A question on 'home language' thus seems a more effective way to find out who regularly uses minority languages than a question about 'main language'. This seems to have been the goal of the question as asked in Scotland. But this was not the main goal of the ONS in England and Wales: rather, the 'key purpose of a primary language question is to establish the language that public authorities can communicate with respondents in' (ONS 2009, 31).

Arguably, the question on ‘main language’ failed to do this for BSL, as it captured only a fraction of those for whom BSL is the native and preferred language. The ‘home language’ question, by contrast, may have recorded many people whose usual language was English, but who used BSL with a member of their household. Neither question on its own could detect all and only the deaf signers, who arguably are the core group who require public authorities to communicate with them in BSL.

Using multivariate analysis of the Scottish census statistics for users of BSL and those identifying as deaf, Turner (forthcoming) concludes that 3729 people in Scotland in 2011 could be identified as *both* deaf *and* using BSL; hence by this ‘small enumerative miracle’ it is possible to reach a conclusion about the number of deaf BSL users in Scotland, and thus estimate the number ‘likely to engage with service provision offered in BSL, or translation and interpreting services to mediate between signed and spoken/written language output’. The two statistics combined thus provide the answer to one of the possible questions which the census sought to answer, i.e. how many people require communications in BSL from the public authorities.

Another difference among the four different census questionnaires lies in the arrangement of the questions. In England and Northern Ireland, respondents were asked to report BSL as one possible ‘main language’, in the first of the language questions on the questionnaire. In Wales, the question was phrased similarly, but came second, after a detailed question on Welsh, but before questions about English ability. In Scotland, users of BSL could report this by ticking a box, but as part of the third of three questions on language. The effect of these different contexts is difficult to measure. It is possible that the positioning of the questions had no effect on the way they were answered, but may still have had effects in terms of the way respondents (including the majority who are not sign language users at all) may perceive BSL. What would respondents in England, Wales and NI make of the instruction ‘write in (including British Sign Language)’, which suggests that BSL is a potential ‘main language’, but nevertheless for some reason people who use it might be reluctant to regard it as one? It is certainly possible that the way a language is contextualised within the census could affect the way people perceive it, by raising its profile or by drawing attention to how it is positioned in relation to other languages (See Sebba 2019 for an example of how this may have happened in the case of Scots in the Scottish census). In the absence of research, it is not possible to give an answer to this question, and we leave it open.

Conclusion

It is possible but unrevealing to conclude simply from all this that 'the answer you get depends on the question you ask'. If an example were needed, the case of the 'main language' and 'home language' questions shows that despite their shared history as alternative questions about a 'principal language', they produce responses which clearly are not interchangeable.

For the enumeration of BSL (and by extension, of other signed languages), we can conclude that a single question about 'main language' is not an appropriate way to identify users of BSL. The ONS decision - underpinned by a monolingual and to some degree anti-multicultural ideology - to ask a question about a single 'main language', had the consequence that the census goal of 'capturing sign languages' could not be met in a useful way. The Scottish "home language" census question, despite some drawbacks, seems to have been much more successful in identifying users of sign languages, whether deaf or hearing.

In terms of their wider implications, both the 'main language' and 'home language' questions are problematic in the kinds of answers they produce, in particular from multilinguals and users of minority languages. This applies not only to the UK, of course, but to any country with minority language users – in effect, everywhere.

While a question asking about a single 'main language' may indeed elicit responses from minority language speakers who function in that language in most domains (or at least those they consider salient), it becomes problematic when different languages (with different amounts of social capital) are used at home and work, in speech and writing, or – as in the case of BSL – for signed interactions and written ones. The 'home language' question meanwhile may reveal minority languages when used in the home, but not those the respondent can only use elsewhere. Unless respondents are allowed multiple answers, including write-in responses, neither question will reveal the potentially rich and complex repertoires which multilinguals often have.

Collecting useful information about multilingualism and minority languages is dependent not only the on the wording of the question, but also on the type of answer permitted. Adler (2018, 9-10) points out that in the German micro census mentioned in Section 2 above, the fact that respondents are limited to ticking a box means that, unless their main household language is one of the nine named languages, the response will 'eliminate all detail that could

be recorded in an open answer category. None of the information behind the answer option can be recovered for analysis'. Two indigenous local languages which would thereby 'disappear' from enumeration are Low German, which is an officially recognized regional language, and German Sign Language, which as in the case of BSL, is recognised under disability legislation. All the British censuses avoided this pitfall by naming BSL specifically in the questionnaire, making it possible to select it as 'main' or 'home' language. At the same time, they allowed for recording at most extremely limited multilingualism in SL users.

This echoes the findings of sign language researchers, whose recent work has shown how no one census question can capture the rich and complex repertoires that signing multilinguals often have (Kusters and De Meulder 2019; De Meulder and Birnie 2020). In our current century, this range is expanding as a result of technological developments (from cochlear implants to auto-captioning), social diversification in family and kinship structures, migration patterns and other changes in language networks.

In conclusion, we can say that no single question is likely to provide entirely satisfactory answers about who in the population uses what language. The fact that a large proportion of the population is monolingual in the majority language does not diminish the need for a nuanced understanding of the mainly bi- or multilingual remainder, whether they are users of a spoken or a signed language.

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Appendix – census questions in the four UK countries

A. The language questions from the 2011 census questionnaire in England

(17) This question is intentionally left blank → Go to 18

(18) What is your main language?

☐ English → **Go to 20**

☐ Other, write in (including British Sign Language)

(19) How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐

B. The language questions from the 2011 census questionnaire in Wales

(17) Can you understand, speak, read or write Welsh?

→ Tick all that apply

☐ Understand spoken Welsh
☐ Speak
☐ Read
☐ Write
☐ None of the above

(18) What is your main language?

☐ English or Welsh → **Go to 20**

☐ Other, write in (including British Sign Language)

(19) How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐

C. The language questions from the 2011 census questionnaire in Scotland

(16) Which of these can you do?

- Tick all that apply

	English	Scottish Gaelic	Scots
Understand	☐	☐	☐
Speak	☐	☐	☐
Read	☐	☐	☐
Write	☐	☐	☐

or

☐ None of these

(17) How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐

(18) Do you use a language other than English at home?

- Tick all that apply

☐ No, English only

☐ British Sign Language

☐ Yes, other - please write in

D. The language questions from the 2011 census questionnaire in Northern Ireland

(19) What is your main language?

☐ English → **Go to 21**

☐ Other, write in (including British/Irish Sign Language)

(20) How well can you speak English?

Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
☐	☐	☐	☐

(21) Can you understand, speak, read or write Irish or Ulster-Scots?

→ Tick all that apply

	No ability	understand	speak	read	write
Irish	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ulster-Scots	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

[1] These are sometimes referred to as 'nations' (particularly in the context of sport). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) refers to England, Scotland and Wales as 'countries' and Northern Ireland as a 'province' (ISO 2011 p. 27).

[2] An annual survey carried out among approximately 1 % of the total population (Adler 2018, 1).

[3] https://wfdeaf.org/whoarewe

[4] http://helgastevens.eu/userfiles/files/20160921%20Programme%20FULL%20Print.pdf

[5] See McKee (2017, 332) on this question in the New Zealand census with respect to sign language users.

[6] It has been delayed until 2022 in Scotland due to the covid-19 pandemic.

[7] Note that the questions about language and country of birth were asked and reported independently of each other. No table has been published for 'main language by country of birth'.

[8] In England and Wales, there were 25,472 persons born in Belgium. The corresponding figure for Scotland has not been published. It is not possible to determine what proportion of the Belgian-born would be likely speakers of Dutch.

[9] According to Census Table DC2210EWr - Main language by proficiency in English (regional), 98% of 'main language' users of Dutch in England (excluding Wales) considered themselves to speak English 'well' or 'very well'. The corresponding figures for Hungarian and Romanian and Lithuanian were 78%, 78% and 61%.

[10] It was reported (Colpi 2013) that there were 12,400 Italians in Scotland registered on the official Register of Italians Resident Abroad, 'with perhaps 30,000 or more of Italian origin'. The Register would include Italians born in Scotland as well as Italy.