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From the Los Angeles Times

Not at home with English

A new census report says 43% in the state and 53% in L.A. speak a different language in their private lives.

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Bienvenidos. Huan ying. Dobro pozhalovat.

In California, "welcome" is more of an international affair than ever -- with nearly 43% of residents speaking a language other than English at home, according to data released Wednesday by the U.S. Census Bureau. The trend was even more pronounced in Los Angeles, where more than 53% of residents speak another language at home.

Spanish is by far the most common, but Californians also converse in Korean, Thai, Russian, Hmong, Armenian and dozens of other languages.

The census numbers are likely to fuel a decades-long debate in California over immigrants continuing to use their native tongue. There have been battles over bilingual education, foreign-language ballots and English-only restrictions on business signs.

While immigration is the driving force for the state's linguistic diversity, experts said people often speak another language out of choice rather than necessity.

Some do so to get ahead professionally, while others want to maintain connections with their homelands.

"In this century, there's going to be so much interaction with China, economically, socially and culturally," said Monterey Park real estate agent Lisa Yang, who insists on speaking Mandarin with her U.S.-born daughter, Melissa Hsu, even on the phone.

Yadira Quezada, 30, speaks mostly English at work, where she coordinates an after-school program for elementary students in Los Angeles.

But at home, she speaks only Spanish. She and her husband are fluent in English, but they don't want their four sons to lose their Spanish or to sound like "gringos" when they speak it.

"When they say something in English, we act like we don't understand," Quezada said. "We say, 'No entiendo.' "

But she acknowledges that the bilingual world her family has chosen -- mostly English during work and school, mostly Spanish at home -- can be confusing. "I am thinking in English and Spanish at the same time," she said.

Because California has strong ties to Asia and Latin America, some language experts believe the loyalty to native tongues has advantages.

"It really represent huge assets for California in the global economy," said Randy Capps, senior research associate at the Urban Institute, a think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The downside is that many people who speak other languages at home are not proficient in English -- making them more likely to earn low wages and live in poor neighborhoods, Capps said.

Among people living below the poverty line, 56% speak a language other than English in the home, compared with 41% for those above the poverty line, according to the census report.

"Isolation is problematic," said Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, chairman of UCLA's Department of Asian American Studies. "While it reflects the strong ties to the home country, it also suggests that folks in this situation are inherently more cut off from society and less able to participate and take advantage of opportunities here."

And the isolation is also felt by some English speakers living in areas where foreign languages are prevalent. Dental office administrator Mia Bonavita, 39, recently moved from San Diego to Monterey Park, where business at many stores is done in Chinese. Bonavita says the language barrier is difficult.

"I feel like an outsider," she said. "It's difficult to get to know your neighbors."

The linguistic diversity also affects the schools, where educators struggle to meet students' needs.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, there are more than 265,000 English learners who speak 91 languages. The district has a special translation unit, but must rely on parents and community members for some languages.

Southern California has numerous ethnic enclaves where speaking English is not a necessity, including parts of the San Gabriel Valley, Little Saigon, East L.A. and Koreatown. And some residents there say the lack of English hasn't diminished their lives.

Michael Yang said through an interpreter that he left Taiwan for the U.S. in 1984 and still barely speaks any English. The 58-year-old signed up for classes last year, but quit soon after because he was too embarrassed to learn alongside students a third his age.

Not surprising to some, his lack of English has not hindered his everyday life in the heavily Chinese San Gabriel Valley, he says.

Yang owns a popular video store filled with the latest hits from Asia that serves Chinese speakers almost exclusively. His everyday needs like dining and shopping are done in Chinese businesses and all the websites and newspapers he reads are in Chinese.

On the other end, Atour Jebrael speaks Assyrian, Armenian, English, bits of Japanese and he's learning Spanish.

The hotel chef from Glendale pledged to speak English well when he emigrated from Iran in 1994. He's accomplished that.

But he said nothing beats speaking his native languages at home with his wife.

"The humor is different in Assyrian and Armenian," said Jebrael, 42. "I use it in normal life: shopping, conversation with friends and joking around. English is for work, telephone calls and talking to neighbors."

He said it's easy to live in such a way in Glendale, where so many Armenian Americans trace their roots to Iran. "You could speak Armenian here all the time if you wanted to," Jebrael said. "Everyone shares the same culture."

The data are part of a census report on social, economic and housing characteristics in the U.S. Nationwide, almost 20% of people over age 5 spoke a language other than English at home in 2006.

Some smaller Southern California communities recorded even higher percentages than Los Angeles, including East L.A. (91%), El Monte (83%), Santa Ana (83%), Alhambra (71%), Oxnard (67%), Garden Grove (67%) and Glendale (64%). The statewide percentage of 43% is up slightly from data from a few years ago.

Lisa Yang, 60, was born in China and grew up in Taiwan and moved to the U.S. in 1969. Now fluent in English, she ran an unsuccessful campaign for Monterey Park City Council last year, one in which she said she was able to connect with more voters by being able to switch between Chinese and English.

Yang sent her daughter to a Chinese church in Alhambra to study Mandarin and followed that up with Chinese classes during summer breaks from Stanford.

Hsu, her 24-year-old daughter, said she didn't appreciate the value of the classes when she was young. But since marrying a Taiwanese American man whose family does not speak English, she has relied on her Chinese to communicate with her in-laws.

"My parents forced me to go to Chinese school," she said. "I knew it was because it would be handy in the future. Now I see it's really coming in handy."

She described herself as "mildly fluent" in Mandarin. Most important, "I can order in a restaurant," she said.

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