

## America the Bilingual podcast

### Episode 74: The Unexpected Truth About Languages in America

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#### TRANSCRIPT

(Gently edited for clarity)

*Note to readers: The voice you will hear throughout is Steve Leveen's, the founder of America the Bilingual.*

[00:00:00] **STEVE LEVEEN:** It's common knowledge that America is home to a vast population of English monolinguals. We Americans know it. People outside the U.S. know it. “What do you call someone who speaks one language?” goes the old joke: “an American.” And it's true. America is home to more than a quarter billion. English monolinguals.[00:00:30]

[00:00:32] But what practically nobody knows—not Americans, not Europeans, not even the many university professors I've spoken with—is that America is also home to a huge population of bilinguals. We have more than 76 million people in this country who not only can, but do, speak two or more languages.[00:01:00]

[00:01:02] Seventy-six million is a lot of people. If our 76 million American bilinguals were their own country, they would be the 20th largest country in the world.

[00:01:17] Yet what is distinctive about American bilinguals is not the quantity of them. Other countries also have large numbers of bilinguals. What's distinctive about American bilinguals is the [00:01:30] diversity of the languages they speak in addition to English. American bilinguals speak all the major languages of the world and hundreds of smaller languages, with quantities of speakers that no other nation can match.

[00:01:47] That's what I'm going to talk about in this episode, and at the end, you'll understand what few people do: America leads the world in bilingualism.

Welcome to America the Bilingual. I'm [00:02:00] Steve Leveen.

[00:02:17] Okay, I just made a big claim: America leads the world in bilingualism. It's hard for us, who have always thought about our country being a land of monolinguals, to [00:02:30] begin seeing ourselves in another way. It's hard even for linguists and language instructors at universities to wrap their minds around this, which is why they invite me to come speak to them.

[00:02:41] When I speak at universities, I present a data story that our small team at America the Bilingual has put together. It paints a picture of America not as a monolingual mouse, but as a linguistic lion. In this episode, I'm going to explain not only the quantitative evidence [00:03:00] for this, but also how this change in America has happened.

[00:03:04] And I'll finish with an invitation to you. Stay with me.

[00:03:14] Let's talk about the top 40 languages of the world, meaning the 40 most spoken languages of the world. Topping the list is English, then Mandarin, then Hindi, and then Spanish. Note I'm talking about [00:03:30] total speakers, not just native speakers. In which case, Mandarin would be number one. Anyway, the U.S. has a broader representation of these top 40 languages than any other country.

[00:03:43] To bring this point home, I'm going to give you some numbers and introduce a concept we call the stadium competition—Major League Baseball stadiums, to be specific. And here's a factoid. The average seating capacity of American Major League [00:04:00] Baseball stadiums is just under 44,000. But for ease of arithmetic, let's use 50,000, which a few of the largest stadiums can hold.

[00:04:14] Okay, so now visualize 40 Major League Baseball stadiums all around the country, and let's invite 40 different kinds of American bilinguals to each of them. For example, Wrigley Field in Chicago is holding an event [00:04:30] inviting English German bilinguals. Fenway Park in Boston is inviting English Portuguese bilinguals.

[00:04:37] Yankee Stadium in New York is inviting English Italian bilinguals. Camden Yards in Baltimore is inviting English Bengali bilinguals. Bush Stadium in St. Louis, English Vietnamese bilinguals. Oracle Park in San Francisco, English Japanese bilinguals.[00:05:00]

[00:05:01] So here's my question to you. How many of these 40 stadiums, each speaking a different top 40 language, do you think American bilinguals could fill to overflowing? Ten? 25? More? The answer is 34: 34 out of 40. That's

85%. Now let's look at the 200-plus other countries in the world. How  
 [00:05:30] do all the rest of the countries do on our stadium competition?

[00:05:34] They don't do well. Number two in the world listing is not China, not India, but Germany. And want to know how many major league stadiums Germans could fill with German citizens who speak German plus one of the other top 40 languages? Fifteen. That's less than half the 34 stadiums that the Americans could fill.[00:06:00]

[00:06:01] If there were a language Olympics, America would take the gold.

[00:06:10] Germany would come in a distant second place to take the silver. And the bronze—that medal would go to India, behind Germany, with 13 of the top 40 languages. China finished far back, with only eight of the top 40 languages. And so China didn't make the medal stand in our [00:06:30] language Olympics.

[00:06:38] When it comes to China and India, each of those giant countries has a population about four times the population of the U.S. And most of their citizens are bilingual. But their bilingualism is regional. That is, they speak the languages that are internal to their own countries and the languages of their immediate [00:07:00] neighbors.

[00:07:01] By and large, the Chinese speak other Chinese languages. Indians speak other Indian languages. The U. S. also has bilinguals who speak English plus our internal, or Indigenous, languages, like Cherokee, Navajo, and Hawaiian. We also have millions of American bilinguals who speak the languages of our immediate neighbors—French in common with our Canadian neighbors, and Spanish in common with our Mexican neighbors.

[00:07:29] But what the [00:07:30] U.S. has that other countries don't is immigration at scale. There are other countries that have a higher percentage of immigrants in their population. Canada, for instance, has 20 % immigrants, where the U.S. has less than 15%. But no country comes close to America in the quantity of our immigrants.

[00:07:52] And our immigrants have come not just from our neighboring countries, not just from Europe, but from all over the world, [00:08:00] bringing their other languages with them.

[00:08:08] One reason all this bilingualism in America is surprising is that it kind of snuck up on us, historically speaking.

[00:08:21] When a German U boat sunk the ocean liner *Lusitania* in 1915, it triggered not only America's entrance into [00:08:30] World War I, but also the end of a decades-long wave of American immigrants coming from Europe. The war ended in 1918, but U.S. immigration did not resume its pre-war levels of people flowing into Ellis Island, with the result that by the 1960s, America's immigrant population had fallen so low—soon to drop below 5%—the Congress got alarmed.

[00:08:59] [00:09:00] In a bipartisan effort, Congress passed the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. For the first time in American history, we disregarded race and country of origin and launched what became our present wave of American immigration, bringing people from all over the world. But it's not just the number of immigrants that has transformed bilingualism in America.

[00:09:28] Before the [00:09:30] 1960s, immigrants generally abandoned their heritage languages quickly, as it wasn't practical or particularly useful to maintain them. After 1970, and increasing to this day, continuing to speak your heritage language is not only practical due to advancing technology, but beneficial.

[00:09:50] Beneficial for jobs and careers. Beneficial for being rooted in one's community. Beneficial, even, for mental health.[00:10:00]

[00:10:09] The science surrounding bilingualism has changed, too. At the same time that American immigration law changed so dramatically—that is, in the 1960s—science did a 180 on the benefits of bilingualism. Before 1960, raising kids with two languages was thought to be bad for them, [00:10:30] that it would delay their literacy in English.

[00:10:33] During the 1960s, some Canadian researchers began finding exactly the opposite, and pointed out the flaws in earlier studies. Science, as someone once said, is the process of being less wrong about the world. And in the 1960s, science started to be less wrong about bilingualism. Today, we know that raising kids with two languages actually improves their performance in [00:11:00] both languages and in other subjects, too.

[00:11:02] It apparently even helps at the other end of life, staving off the onset of dementia. These scientific findings continue to be widely reported in the press. So the parents today generally know that by raising their children to be bilinguals, they are giving their children a great gift. So it's not just the number

of immigrants, but their changing views reflecting today's economic and scientific realities.[00:11:30]

[00:11:36] Another reason the extent of American bilingualism is surprising to us is that American bilinguals are mostly hiding in plain sight, or rather, hiding in plain speech. Most of them speak English like a native and speak their other language at home. Listening to them speak English at work or on the street, we would often never know they speak another language.

[00:11:59] [00:12:00] So, we've got a contradiction to explain. America leads the world in monolinguals and bilinguals. How do we make sense of this? Well, we make sense of that by understanding that we are a nation of contrasts. And we Americans already do understand that our country contains great contrasts. We see the contrast when it comes to wealth, certainly.

[00:12:23] But that's not the half of it. Take health and fitness.[00:12:30]

[00:12:30] Health-wise, Americans overall are not impressive. According to the World Population Review, the U.S. is the 15th chubbiest nation, with 43% of our population tipping the scales into the clinically obese range. By comparison, only 17% of the French are obese, despite all their fabulous cheeses and baguettes, while the annoying Swiss come in at a lean 11% [00:13:00] obese. That means that only 1 out of 10 Swiss are obese, whereas 4 out of 10 Americans are.

[00:13:08] Because of all our overweight fellow Americans, Martians out in space looking down on planet Earth might conclude that Americans wouldn't be strong in sports compared with other countries. But those Martians would be badly mistaken. Take the Olympics. Americans have earned more Olympic medals than any other [00:13:30] nation, by a wide margin.

[00:13:32] Now, let's move to education. In the international rankings of youth educational accomplishment, known as the PISA exams, the U.S. is also not impressive. According to the World Population Review, there are 14 countries above us. At the top of the list are Asian countries, Scandinavian countries, European countries, and also Australia, New Zealand, and the U.K.

[00:13:59] [00:14:00] All of them score above the U.S. From this sorry showing, our Martians up in space might conclude that America won't be competitive in intellectual endeavors. But again, those Martians would be mistaken. Americans have won more Nobel Prizes than any other country: more

than 400 Nobel Prizes, which is three times the number of the No. 2 nation, which is [00:14:30] the U.K.

[00:14:31] So, what's going on? A big part of the explanation of these contrasts is the sheer size of our population. As the world's third most populous country, with more than 336 million people, we have plenty of room for millions of overweight people and thousands of elite athletes. We have plenty of room for millions of teenage PISA test takers [00:15:00] who don't score all that well in math and reading, and thousands of world-class scientists and thinkers.

[00:15:09] Likewise, we have room for more than 250 million English monolinguals and 76 million skilled bilinguals. Most of these 76 million people speak English like a native, because so many of them are native speakers, plus another language with fluency. [00:15:30] So, language skills are another one of the many dimensions in our great country where there are great contrasts.

[00:15:37] So far, however, we only know our monolingual weakness. Why is it important? Why is it important that we know about our bilingual strength? Why is it important that we know about and celebrate the linguistic capital of America? It's important for two reasons. First, Olympic medalists and [00:16:00] Nobel laureates inspire people.

[00:16:03] Young Americans see them, and if they're lucky, even get to rub shoulders with them at sports camps and universities and model their behavior. It's important that American young people see and can look up to our fellow Americans who are skilled at languages. It's important that American young people know that they live in a country that leads the world in the diversity and depth of our bilingualism.[00:16:30]

[00:16:30] Young Americans can aspire to be part of that skilled group for all the benefits that bilingualism can bring to them personally, to their communities, and to our country. Second, our robust linguistic skills challenge another common conception about Americans. Namely, that we are insular, that we are isolationists, and that we lack an understanding of world cultures and world affairs.

[00:16:58] While we always have and still [00:17:00] do show isolationist tendencies, I'm going to make an argument you've not likely heard before. No country understands the world as well as the United States does.

[00:17:15] I'll say it again: No country understands the world as well as the United States does. This is true for the simple reason that no country has as

many speakers of the world's most spoken languages as the [00:17:30] U.S. The only place that has more Japanese speakers than the U.S. is Japan. You can say the same for Thai, Vietnamese, Filipino, and more than 20 other world languages.

[00:17:44] The fact that we have so many Persian speakers, so many Arabic speakers, so many Hebrew speakers, and so on, means that we get other parts of the world at a deep level. Being able to speak a language at a professional [00:18:00] level means that you understand the culture and the people in ways that's hard to do when everything must be translated.

[00:18:07] Now, I'm not claiming that our elected leaders necessarily take advantage of the linguistic skills of our citizenry, but that's starting to change. Few people I've met have ever heard about our National Language Service Corps, the NLSC.[00:18:30]

[00:18:30] Think National Guard, but this one is made up of highly qualified linguists who speak English and another language, both at a professional level. The National Language Service Corps began quietly in 2007 and since has grown to over 12, 000 members. Each member is not only fully bilingual and biliterate, but also has specialized knowledge in fields like medicine, law, public [00:19:00] health, and so on.

[00:19:01] Language Corps members are on call, like our National Guard, to help any federal agency understand, communicate, and collaborate with people around the world. All members of the National Language Service Corps are American citizens. I also need to point out that many of our American bilinguals and their children are not recent immigrants.

[00:19:26] We also have millions of native-born Americans who [00:19:30] grew up in English-speaking homes who have acquired a second language in school, in study abroad, and in the many other ways to build professional language skills aided by technology. Our country is changing fast to make it easier for parents to raise their children to be bilinguals,

[00:19:49] even if they themselves are not, including dual language schools, state-endorsed Seals of Biliteracy that can be earned with high school diplomas, [00:20:00] and advanced software that can provide language exposure beyond the dreams of language learners from just a generation ago. It is to tell these stories that our America the Bilingual project was founded.

[00:20:15] I wrote my book, [America's Bilingual Century](#), to share how Americans are seizing the gift of bilingualism for themselves, for their loved ones, and for their country. Our team produces podcast episodes [00:20:30] featuring inspiring American bilinguals from all walks of life and speaking all kinds of languages, in addition to English.

[00:20:42] And now, our project is launching something new. That invitation I promised you is an invitation to a quiz. Don't worry—it's a fun and fast quiz. You've been listening to me explain the big changes in American bilingualism historically and [00:21:00] quantitatively while you're driving or working out or walking the dog or whatever else you might be doing while listening to this podcast.

[00:21:08] I don't know about you, but it helps me to see numbers and data visuals in order to grasp quantitative things. That's why we've created our new [Quizzery](#) page on our website, which already has our first quiz. It's a series of 10 questions testing your knowledge of our American linguistic landscape. [00:21:30] The answers have illustrations and explanations that tell the story in a way that's easy to understand and remember.

[00:21:37] It's fast, it's fun, and it's [waiting for you on our website](#). How fast? Well, based on the 170 people who have taken it so far, it will take you between two and 10 minutes, depending on how much you ponder the answers and look at the cool visuals. I've already given you lots of the answers in this episode [00:22:00] so far.

[00:22:00] I invite you to try it, I think you'll like it, and I hope you'll like it enough to share it with your family and friends. You'll be helping to spread the word about America being a world leader in bilingualism, something that we should be proud of and make sure our fellow Americans know about too. [00:22:30]

[00:22:31] But wait—before I sign off, I want to raise an issue that some of you may be concerned about. Do all these other languages that Americans now speak—like Korean, and Arabic, and Hindi, and Filipino, and Mandarin, and Russian—do all these languages other than English lead to disunity? Because these Americans who speak them aren't maybe as true American as English [00:23:00] monolinguals?

[00:23:01] Does the ability to speak another language tend toward divided loyalties? Well, in my opinion, this would be a problem if these Americans were monolinguals and only spoke Korean. Arabic, Hindi, Filipino, Mandarin,



and Russian, and while living in the U.S., but that's not what we have in America today. The vast majority of American immigrants, and especially their children, speak English [00:23:30] well in addition to their heritage language.

[00:23:34] Now, some new arrivals do need help with their English, to be sure, and unless and until they gain a working knowledge of English, they will suffer economically and socially, just as immigrants of the past have suffered. We need to help them get their English as strong as their other language. Fortunately, there are marvelous English literacy organizations all around the country.

[00:23:59] But [00:24:00] speaking English well, plus speaking another language well, is not a case of divided loyalties, but of layered loyalties, which is another thing that we Americans understand really well. What do I mean by layered loyalties? Well, let me ask you this. Is it possible to be a proud Texan and also a proud American?

[00:24:23] Well, of course. That's kind of a stupid question. All of us know that you can be proud of being from Texas or [00:24:30] Iowa or South Carolina or Hawaii or whatever state you're from, and also be a proud American. That's what layered loyalties are. And we're all quite familiar and comfortable with that concept.

[00:24:43] And that's just what it's like to be an American bilingual.

[00:24:51] Proud of being able to speak your heritage language, and proud of being able to speak English. Proud of your skills in both languages. Just as [00:25:00] Americans are proud of our Olympic athletes, of our Nobel Prize winners, and of our fellow Americans with all sorts of other skills, we should be proud of our American bilinguals because being able to speak another language is a skill.

[00:25:15] So, as soon as you get a chance to get online, go to [AmericaTheBilingual.com](http://AmericaTheBilingual.com) and [take our quiz](#). I think you'll enjoy it. And you'll be helping to spread the good word about America leading the world in language skills, in our uniquely [00:25:30] American way.

My thanks to our America, the Bilingual team: Mim Harrison, our editorial and brand director, who saw the value of quizzes long before I did; [00:25:43] Fernando Hernandez Becerra, who produced this episode from his studio in Guadalajara, Mexico, *Esta no es radio*; Alli Torban, who designed the cool data visuals you'll see in that quiz; and Jen Cavagnaro at Daruma Tech, who

[00:26:00] manages our website. A transcript of this episode is available on the Episode Notes page of [americathebilingual.com](http://americathebilingual.com). [00:26:06] Thanks for listening. *Gracias por escuchar*. For America the Bilingual, this is Steve Leveen. [00:26:30]

