

## Reference Guide

# Languages Reference Guide, 2011 Census



Census year, 2011



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The following symbols are used in Statistics Canada publications:

.	not available for any reference period
..	not available for a specific reference period
...	not applicable
0	true zero or a value rounded to zero
0 <sup>s</sup>	value rounded to 0 (zero) where there is a meaningful distinction between true zero and the value that was rounded
<sup>p</sup>	preliminary
<sup>r</sup>	revised
x	suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the <i>Statistics Act</i>
<sup>E</sup>	use with caution
<sup>F</sup>	too unreliable to be published
*	significantly different from reference category ( $p < 0.05$ )

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## Definitions and concepts

The census collects a wealth of information on the languages of people living in Canada. Census data on language are used to measure the size, evolution and composition of language groups. These data are used, among others, in implementing and administering a number of federal and provincial statutes, including the:

- *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) – Canada
- *Official Languages Act* (1988) – Canada
- *Official Languages Act* – New Brunswick
- *Charter of the French Language* – Quebec.

Language data are also used by researchers, community groups, health-care providers, businesses and other organizations throughout the country to ensure equal opportunity for everyone. Data on language knowledge and use are important to consider when dealing with issues related to human resources policies, local education and training, health promotion, and community programs and services.

The following variables, as defined in the *2011 Census Dictionary*, Catalogue no. 98-301-X, have been created with language data collected during the census on May 10, 2011:

- [Knowledge of official languages](#)
- [Home language](#)
- [Mother tongue](#)
- [First official language spoken.](#)

In Canada, 'official languages' refer to English and French. 'Non-official languages' refer to all other languages.

## Classifications

Data from language questions in the census are used to derive summary and detailed variables which provide a linguistic portrait of the population living in Canada. Information is provided on English- and French-speaking communities as well as other language groups, including those who speak Aboriginal languages.

The classification of languages collected in 2011 is available in the [List of figures](#) (Figures 23, 23A to 23F) in the *2011 Census Dictionary*, Catalogue no. 98-301-X. A comparison of languages collected in the 2011, 2006 and 2001 censuses is also available in the *2011 Census Dictionary* [List of appendices](#). Appendix D presents the classification of mother tongue and home language.

### Census questions

Four questions were asked to the population as a whole. The knowledge of official languages question (Question 7) was followed by the home language questions, either most often (Question 8 (a)), or regularly (Question 8 (b)). The mother tongue question (Question 9) was the last language-related question in the [2011 Census questionnaire](#).

The census variable First official language spoken is not a census question. It is derived, successively, from the questions on knowledge of official languages (Question 7), language spoken most often at home (Question 8 (a)) and mother tongue (Question 9).

The wording of Question 7 on English and French knowledge was the following:

7. Can this person speak English or French well enough to conduct a conversation?

The census home language question (Question 8) was divided into two parts.

8. (a) What language does this person speak **most often** at home?
- (b) Does this person speak any other languages **on a regular basis** at home?

The wording of Question 9 on mother tongue was the following:

9. What is the language that this person **first learned** at home **in childhood** and **still understands**?

On the English version of the census forms, mark-in circles for English appear first, while on the French version of all census forms, the mark-in circles for French appear first.

To assist people whose first language was neither English nor French, the census questions were translated into 31 other languages, including 11 Aboriginal languages.

### Changes made to the questions and methodology of the 2011 Census

The 2011 Census of Population questionnaire contained four language questions asked of the entire Canadian population: (a) ability to conduct a conversation in English and/or French, (b) the language spoken most often at home, (c) other languages spoken on a regular basis at home, and (d) the language first learned at home in childhood and still understood (mother tongue).

In comparison, the short form of the 2006 Census of Population contained one question on mother tongue asked of 80% of the households, and was supplemented with the long-form questionnaire sent to the remaining 20%. The long form contained seven questions, including those asked in 2011 as well as a question on knowledge of non-official languages and two questions on language of work.

The wording of the language questions in 2011 was the same as the one used in 2006.

The mother tongue question from the 2011 Census questionnaire (and the 2006 long form) asked the respondent to specify the write-in answer, if applicable. The choice of responses in 2011 was 'English,' 'French' and 'Other – Specify.'

As with the 2006 Census long-form questionnaire, the following parts of the mother tongue question were bolded in 2011: first learned, in childhood and still understands.

In 2011, the questionnaire contained two lines for answering the mother tongue question instead of one like in 2006, and the lines were segmented.

As with the long version of the questionnaire since 1991, the question on first language learned at home in childhood and still understood appeared at the end of the language questions block.

### **Comparability of language data between censuses of population**

For the first time in 2011, three language questions (knowledge of official languages, home language and mother tongue) were included on the census questionnaire that was administered to 100% of the population.

Language data and analysis published for all censuses since 1996 have been based almost exclusively on responses from the long-form census questionnaire administered to 20% of the population.

All trend analyses presented for this release, and its accompanying products, compare 2011 Census data to previous long-form census data.

Evaluation of data on the knowledge of official languages and the first official language spoken indicates that these data are comparable to those of previous censuses.

However, Statistics Canada has observed changes in patterns of response to both the mother tongue and home language questions that appear to have arisen from changes in the placement and context of the language questions on the 2011 Census questionnaire relative to previous censuses. As a result, Canadians appear to have been less inclined than in previous censuses to report languages other than English or French as their only mother tongue, and also more inclined to report multiple languages as their mother tongue and as the language used most often at home.

It is not uncommon in survey research to observe changes in response patterns due to changes to a questionnaire and most particularly due to changes in the context in which the question is embedded.

Data users are advised to exercise caution when evaluating trends related to mother tongue and home language that compare 2011 Census data to that of previous censuses.

In the case of the mother tongue data, comparisons other than those done in the current analysis are possible depending on the needs of the user, given that mother tongue was asked on both the short and long-form questionnaires in previous censuses. Users should take into account the advantages as well as the limitations of each dataset.

Readers will find a complete analysis of factors affecting comparability of language results between the censuses in the forthcoming publication, [Methodological Document on the 2011 Census Language Data](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011051.

## Data quality

The overall quality of 2011 Census data for the language variables is considered to be good. This assessment was based on a review of non-response rates, imputation rates, invalid-response rates and a review of 2006 counts with the latest data from the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB) to examine the increase of certain non-official languages based on the immigrants coming to Canada between the two censuses. The data quality assessment also factors in the ability to make comparisons with data from previous censuses. (See the previous section on comparability of language data between censuses of population.)

The 2011 non-response rate for the question on mother tongue was 2.0% at the national level, ranging from 1.7% in British Columbia to 3.8% in Nunavut (Table 1). The non-response rate for the question on home language was 1.8% in Canada, ranging from 1.5% in British Columbia to 2.9% in Nunavut. For the question on knowledge of official languages, the non-response rate was 1.6% at the national level, ranging from 1.4% in Ontario and British Columbia to 2.4% in Saskatchewan and Nunavut.

**Table 1 Non-response rates**

Province or territory	Mother tongue	Home language	Knowledge of official languages
Newfoundland and Labrador	2.4%	2.4%	1.7%
Prince Edward Island	2.2%	2.1%	1.8%
Nova Scotia	2.4%	2.2%	1.9%
New Brunswick	1.8%	1.8%	1.5%
Quebec	2.2%	2.0%	1.9%
Ontario	1.8%	1.6%	1.4%
Manitoba	2.7%	2.4%	2.2%
Saskatchewan	3.0%	2.7%	2.4%
Alberta	2.0%	1.7%	1.5%
British Columbia	1.7%	1.5%	1.4%
Yukon	2.0%	2.0%	1.8%
Northwest Territories	1.8%	1.6%	1.5%
Nunavut	3.8%	2.9%	2.4%
<b>Canada</b>	<b>2.0%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

The imputation rate for the question on mother tongue was 2.2% at the national level, 1.9% for the question on home language and 1.6% for knowledge of official languages (Table 2). For mother tongue, the imputation rate ranged from 1.9% in New Brunswick and British Columbia to 4.1% in Nunavut. For home language, the rate ranged from 1.6% in Ontario, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories to 3.2% in Nunavut. For the question on knowledge of official languages, the imputation rate ranged from 1.4% in Ontario and British Columbia to 2.4% in Saskatchewan and Nunavut.

**Table 2 Imputation rates**

Province or territory	Mother tongue	Home language	Knowledge of official languages
Newfoundland and Labrador	2.5%	2.4%	1.7%
Prince Edward Island	2.3%	2.2%	1.8%
Nova Scotia	2.5%	2.2%	1.9%
New Brunswick	1.9%	1.8%	1.5%
Quebec	2.4%	2.1%	1.9%
Ontario	2.0%	1.6%	1.4%
Manitoba	2.9%	2.5%	2.2%
Saskatchewan	3.1%	2.8%	2.4%
Alberta	2.2%	1.8%	1.5%
British Columbia	1.9%	1.6%	1.4%
Yukon	2.2%	2.0%	1.8%
Northwest Territories	2.0%	1.6%	1.5%
Nunavut	4.1%	3.2%	2.4%
<b>Canada</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>

The mother tongue and home language questions each had two lines of nine-segmented boxes for respondents to put a write-in response. A non-language response was considered invalid. At the national level, the invalid-response rate was 0.2% for the mother tongue question and 0.1% for the home language one (Table 3).

**Table 3 Invalid-response rates**

Province or territory	Mother tongue	Home language
Newfoundland and Labrador	0.1%	0.0%
Prince Edward Island	0.1%	0.0%
Nova Scotia	0.1%	0.0%
New Brunswick	0.1%	0.0%
Quebec	0.2%	0.1%
Ontario	0.2%	0.1%
Manitoba	0.2%	0.1%
Saskatchewan	0.1%	0.1%
Alberta	0.2%	0.1%
British Columbia	0.2%	0.1%
Yukon	0.1%	0.0%
Northwest Territories	0.2%	0.1%
Nunavut	0.3%	0.3%
<b>Canada</b>	<b>0.2%</b>	<b>0.1%</b>



### Comparison with other data sources

As was the case for previous censuses, the language data from the 2011 Census were compared to data from other sources. In addition to the Longitudinal Immigration Database (IMDB), three other sources were used: population estimates and projections produced by Demography Division, as well as data pertaining to permanent residents from Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

### Data and other products

For information on and access to 2011 Census data, please refer to the [2011 Census](#) web module.

For information on and access to 2006 Census data, please refer to the [2006 Census](#) web module.