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# Census in Brief

## Multilingualism of Canadian households

Census of Population, 2021



Release date: June 21, 2023

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## Introduction

This article presents a portrait of multilingualism at home in 2021. In particular, it examines situations where more than one language is spoken at home within private Canadian households according to select household characteristics.

The Canadian population is increasingly diverse. According to data from the 2021 Census, more than 8.3 million people, or nearly a quarter (23.0%) of the population, were landed immigrants or permanent residents in Canada or had been at some point in the past.<sup>1</sup> This is in addition to a second-generation population (children of immigrants), who represented nearly one-third (31.5%) of children under 15 in 2021. The 2021 Census data also revealed that 4.6 million Canadians<sup>2</sup> (12.7% of the Canadian population) primarily spoke a non-official language (i.e., a language other than English or French, Canada's two official languages) at home, a proportion that has been increasing for the past 30 years.<sup>3</sup> Recent projections also show that the population is expected to continue becoming more diverse in the coming years, especially in light of the recent immigration plan published by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada in November 2022.<sup>4</sup>

Canadian families and households are also expected to become more diverse over time, which is why it is necessary to examine ethnolinguistic diversity not only from the perspective of individuals (particularly through English–French bilingualism) or regional, provincial or territorial dynamics, but also from the perspective of families and households, which are a child's first circle of socialization and language learning.

Living in a household where certain languages are spoken necessarily exposes its members to those languages. The languages spoken in the household are the ones likely to be transmitted to children by parents and other household members. In turn, they contribute to the vitality of different communities, be it Indigenous communities, official language communities or immigrant communities, by ensuring that language skills are transmitted to the children. In addition, when the languages spoken at home are English or French, they promote the learning or development of official languages, including among immigrants, and can help strengthen English–French bilingualism in the population.

## One in five Canadian households were multilingual in 2021

According to 2021 Census data, more than 3.1 million households in Canada (21.0%) were multilingual, meaning that at least two languages were spoken in those households (see Box 1 for the method used to calculate household multilingualism). Specifically, two languages (be it official or other languages, or a combination of these) were spoken at home by 2.4 million private households in Canada, representing 16.2% of all private households in the country.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these households, there were those where three or more languages were spoken, representing an additional 720,000 households (4.8% of households). Among these households, there were 146,000 (1.1% of all households) in which four or more languages were spoken.

In total, more than 9.5 million people were living in multilingual households in Canada in 2021, or just over a quarter (26.2%) of the total population living in a private household.

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1. Statistics Canada. 2022. "Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians." 2021 Census, *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm>.

2. The term "Canadians" refers to residents of Canada, regardless of citizenship status.

3. Statistics Canada. 2022. "While English and French are still the main languages spoken in Canada, the country's linguistic diversity continues to grow." 2021 Census, *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220817/dq220817a-eng.htm>.

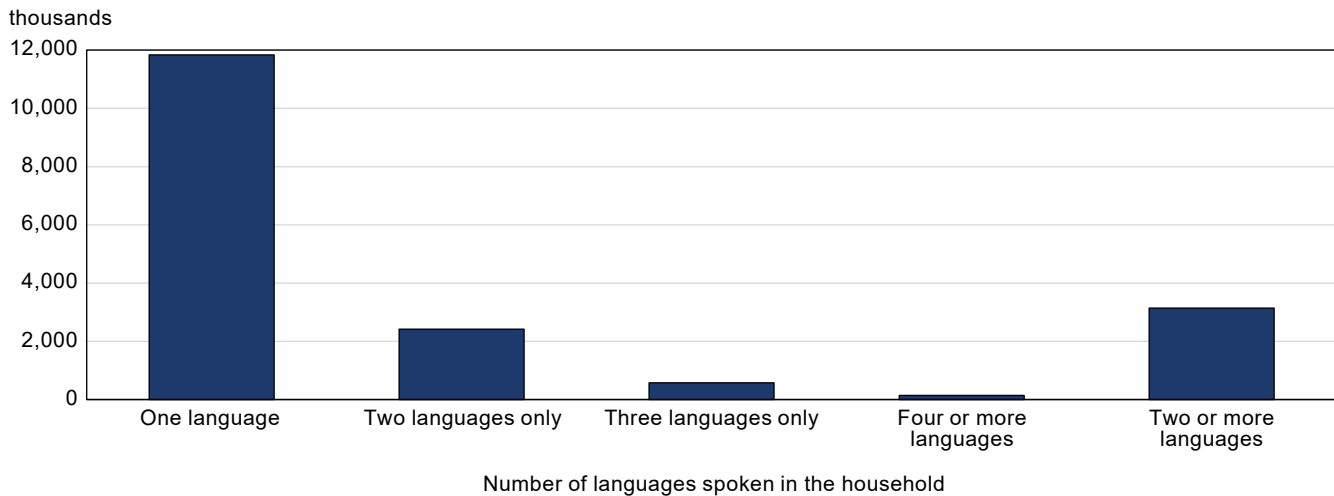
4. Statistics Canada. 2022. "Canada in 2041: A larger, more diverse population with greater differences between regions." *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220908/dq220908a-eng.htm>.

5. For more information on the language concepts in the 2021 Census, please consult the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/az/Definition-eng.cfm?ID=pop186): <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/dict/az/Definition-eng.cfm?ID=pop186>.

# Multilingualism of Canadian households

**Chart 1**

**Number of households, by number of languages spoken in the household, 2021**



Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

## Box 1. Counting the languages spoken in households

In this article, the data on languages spoken at home are examined from a household perspective, that is, the household (rather than the person) is the unit of analysis. Based on information from the 2021 Census on languages spoken at home, each language spoken in a given household was counted. A total of 474 languages were enumerated, including English and French (Canada's two official languages), 72 Indigenous languages and 400 non-official languages (including Quebec Sign Language and American Sign Language).<sup>6</sup> All the above-mentioned languages, whether spoken most often or regularly at home, were counted to produce the total number of different languages spoken in the household. Since households were counted as opposed to individuals, some people living in multilingual households may not speak one or more of the household's languages used at home or may not know one or more of them (i.e., they are not able to have a conversation in this or these languages). For example, there may be situations where immigrant parents speak Spanish and French at home, while their school-aged children speak only French.

## Half of multigenerational households were multilingual

The 2021 Census data show that the number of languages spoken in a household is linked to the number of people living in the household and to the complexity of the household. In fact, two types of households are more often multilingual: 1) multigenerational households, and 2) multiple-census-family households.<sup>7</sup>

Of all multigenerational households, 36.9% were bilingual and 13.2% were at least trilingual. In other words, one in two multigenerational households was multilingual (50.1%). Among multiple-census-family households, 32.0% were bilingual and 15.2% were at least trilingual, for a total of 47.2% of multilingual households.

These two types of households also had the highest average number of persons per household (just over five), twice the average of all households (2.4 persons per household). They accounted for 3.6% of the country's households (536,000 households in 2021).

6. In this report, "other language" and "non-official language" are used interchangeably to refer to languages other than English and French.

7. Consult the [Classification of household type, multigenerational variant](https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1314687) at the following address: <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=1314687>.

## Multilingualism of Canadian households

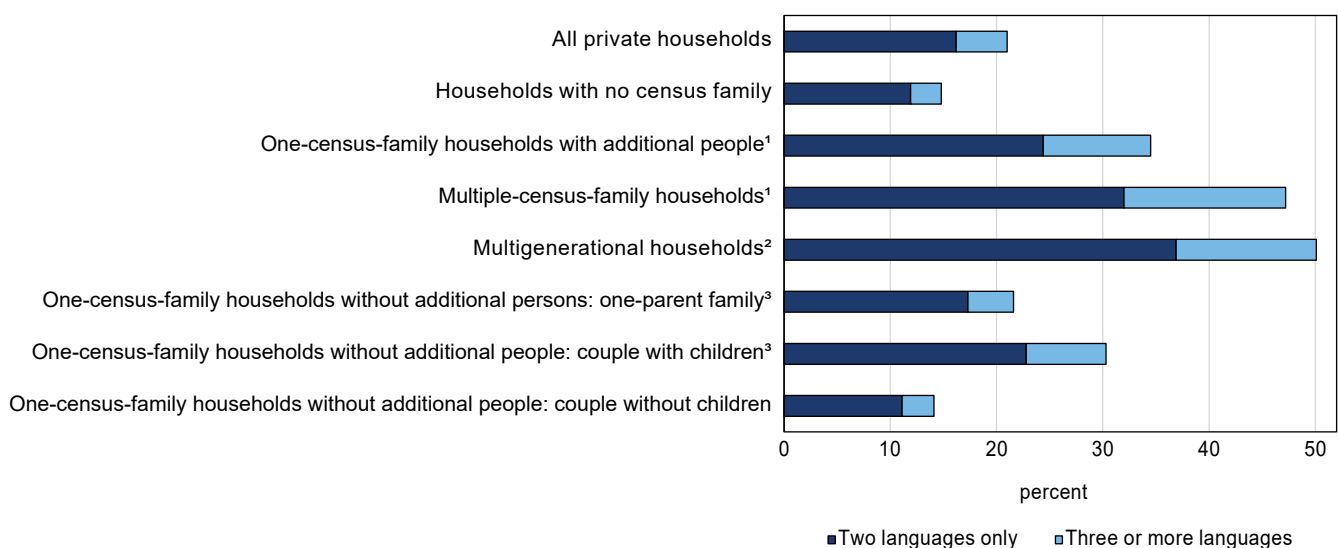
These households have also been growing rapidly over at least the last 10 years, as measured in recent censuses.

In contrast to these generally more complex households, households with a childless couple and non-family households (almost 90.0% of which are one-person households, while the remainder are households with unrelated individuals) had the lowest percentages of multilingualism. In 2021, only 14.1% of childless-couple households were multilingual (11.1% were bilingual and 3.0% were trilingual or more).

These differences by household type are linked to the household development cycle, the presence or absence of children, immigration, and the regional and sociolinguistic context. These factors may spur the creation of linguistically mixed unions and general multilingualism of the population, especially in so-called contact areas (such as Ottawa and Eastern Ontario, Gatineau and Montréal, New Brunswick) and large urban centres where most immigrants settle and most people in a mixed union live.

### Chart 2

#### Multilingualism of households (two or more languages spoken at home), by number of languages spoken and type of household, 2021



1. Excludes multigenerational households.

2. Multigenerational households represent all households in which at least one person is both the grandparent of one person in the household and the parent of another person in the same household. They also represent all households in which at least one person is both the child of one person in the household and the grandchild of another person in the same household. In previous censuses, multigenerational households were created only on the basis of the first of these two definitions. As a result, there may be slight differences in the figures for 2011 and 2016 in the archived tables.

3. There are no restrictions on the age of children. Includes children living with a grandparent or grandparents, with no parents present.

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

## Almost half of households in Nunavut and more than a quarter of those in Ontario were multilingual

In 2021, the proportion of multilingual households varied from one region of Canada to another. Nunavut had the highest proportion, reaching almost 50.0% of households on account of the large Indigenous population who spoke an Inuit language. In most multilingual households in Nunavut, two languages were spoken—mainly an Indigenous language and English. One Indigenous language was spoken in 64.0% of all households in the territory, while English was spoken in 78.8% of households, and French was spoken in less than 3.8%.

Among the provinces, Ontario had 20.0% of bilingual households and 5.7% of households where three languages or more were spoken at home in 2021. In total, more than 25.0% of households in Ontario were multilingual in the

## Multilingualism of Canadian households

2021 Census, a higher percentage than in the other provinces or territories, except Nunavut. Ontario is also the province that has for many years received the largest number of immigrants annually.

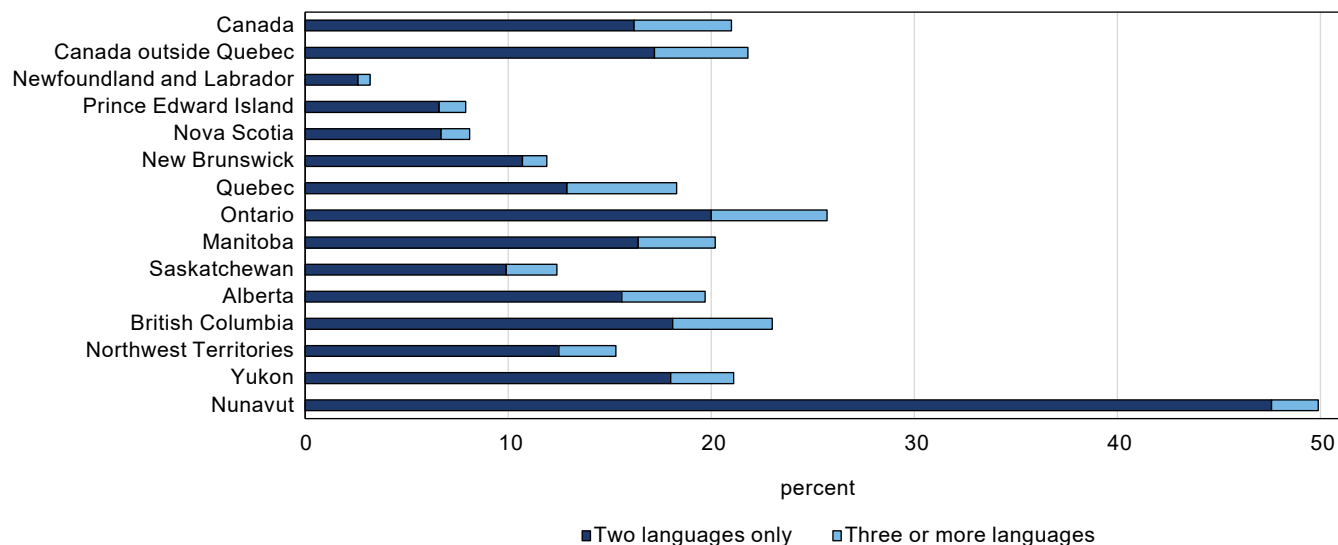
In contrast, three Atlantic provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, 3.1%; Nova Scotia, 8.1%; and Prince Edward Island, 7.9%) had the lowest percentages of multilingual households.

In 2021, the proportion of multilingual households in Quebec (18.3%) was lower than the Canadian average. However, it ranked second (5.4%) for the percentage of households where three or more languages were spoken at home, behind Ontario (5.7%). These two provinces stood out for their large immigrant populations (larger in Ontario than in Quebec) and their significant official language minorities (larger in Quebec than in Ontario).

Generally speaking, multilingualism is associated with the presence, to varying degrees, of diverse linguistic groups, either because of the presence of Indigenous populations (like in Nunavut), immigrant populations (like in Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta or Quebec) or official language minorities (English-speaking in Quebec and French-speaking in Ontario and New Brunswick).

### Chart 3

**Multilingualism of households (two or more languages spoken at home), by number of languages spoken and province or territory of residence, 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

### In Canada outside Quebec, at least one official language was spoken in almost 98% of multilingual households

According to 2021 Census data, one or both official languages were spoken at home in 97.8% of multilingual households in Canada outside Quebec. In addition, a non-official language, alone or with one or both official languages, was also spoken at home in 90.0% of multilingual households.

The most common language combination in multilingual households in Canada outside Quebec was English and one or more other languages, representing just over 2 million households (or 81.8% of multilingual households) in 2021. Households where English and French were spoken (alone or with one or more other languages) represented 15.8% of multilingual households.

In 2021, it was much less common to observe French and at least one non-official language spoken in a household, or only non-official languages. In Canada outside Quebec, 0.2% of households spoke French and another language, while 2.2% of these households spoke two or more non-official languages exclusively at home.

## In Quebec, both official languages were spoken in almost two-thirds of multilingual households

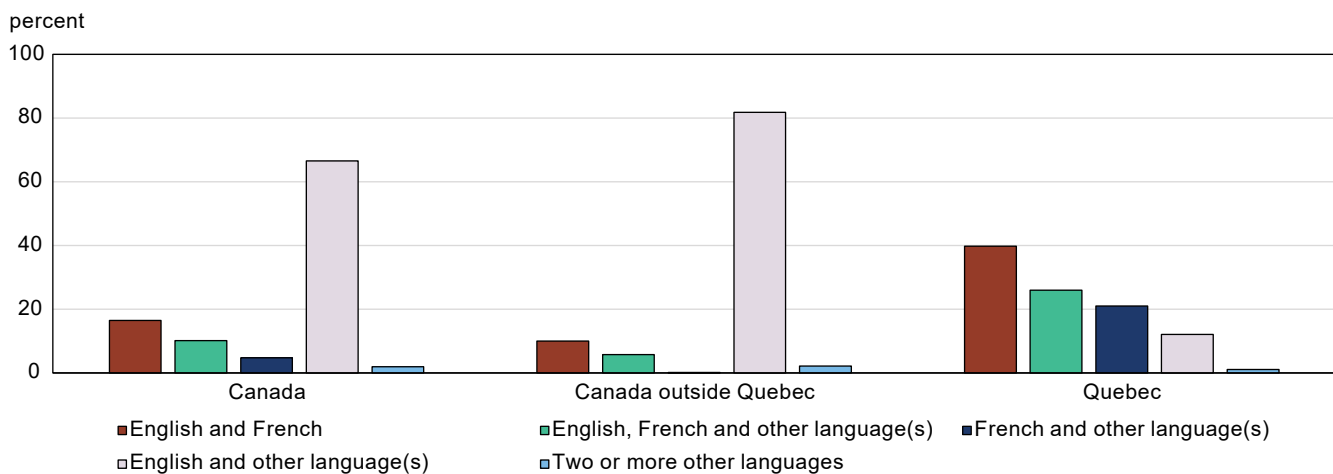
In contrast to the rest of Canada, English–French multilingualism (alone or with one or more other languages) was the most common language combination in Quebec in 2021 in households where more than one language was spoken at home (65.8% of multilingual households). More specifically, 39.8% of multilingual households reported being English–French bilingual and 26.0% of households reported using English, French and at least one non-official language.

In addition, 21.0% of Quebec households spoke French and at least one non-official language at home. In total, French was one of the languages spoken by 86.8% of multilingual households in Quebec. Moreover, just over 12.1% of multilingual households in Quebec spoke English along with at least one non-official language, while 1.1% of multilingual households spoke other languages exclusively at home.

It should be noted that even though a language is spoken at home in the household, it does not necessarily mean that all members of this household speak that language at home (see Box 2).

**Chart 4**

**Combinations of languages spoken in multilingual households (two or more languages spoken at home) in Canada, Canada outside Quebec and Quebec, 2021**



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

### Box 2. In English–French multilingual households outside Quebec, just over 40% of occupants did not speak French at home

More than 473,000 occupants of English–French multilingual households (alone or with one or more other languages) in Canada outside Quebec did not speak French at home in 2021, representing 41.3% of all occupants of these households. The corresponding number in Quebec was almost 148,000 (13.0% of occupants of these households).

The opposite situation was observed for English: in Canada outside Quebec, 6.1% of occupants of English–French multilingual households (alone or with one or more other languages) did not speak English at home in 2021, compared with 21.8% in Quebec. This trend was also observed, though to a lesser extent, for French in multilingual households with French and one or more other languages and for English in multilingual households with English and one or more other languages.

### More than one language was spoken at home in half of Canadian households with an exogamous couple

In a multicultural society like Canada, a large share of couples is made up of people from different ethnolinguistic groups. In this article, the term “marital exogamy” refers to situations of couples in which the spouses have different mother tongues (single language),<sup>8</sup> accounting for 12.5% of couples in Canada living in a household with one census family, with or without children, according to data from the 2021 Census. In Quebec, 10.4% of couples were exogamous and in Canada outside Quebec, 13.2%.

Marital exogamy is associated with more than one language being spoken in the household because the two partners, who have different mother tongues, are likely to speak their language at home with other household members, particularly children.

Almost one in two households (47.1%) with an exogamous couple in Canada were multilingual in 2021. This proportion was 57.5% in Quebec and 44.5% in the rest of Canada. For households with a homogamous couple (defined here as a couple in which the partners have the same mother tongue), 17.7% of households in Canada, 12.8% in Quebec and 19.3% in Canada outside Quebec were multilingual.

### Just under two-thirds of Canadian households consisting of a couple whose partners reported a non-official language as their mother tongue were multilingual

In 2021, the prevalence of multilingualism in exogamous couples varied by type of exogamy. In Canada outside Quebec, 62.9% of households consisting of an other-language exogamous couple (i.e., where the partners have different non-official languages as mother tongues) were multilingual. Specifically, 45.9% were at least trilingual and 17.0% were bilingual. In Quebec, 43.9% of households consisting of an other-language exogamous couple were at least trilingual and 20.2% were bilingual. Total multilingualism amounted to 64.1% in Quebec.

Among other types of exogamous couples, the percentages of multilingualism in 2021 were lower, particularly in Canada outside Quebec (ranging from 40.0% to 45.0% based on the type of exogamous couple), with bilingualism being dominant (more than 30%). In Quebec, about 55.0% of households consisting of exogamous couples were multilingual, about 10 percentage points higher than for the same types of households in the rest of Canada.

Moreover, multilingualism in households made up of a homogamous couple was lower than in households with an exogamous couple. In households consisting of a couple where both partners had the same official language as their mother tongue, the multilingualism rate was 4.0% in Canada outside Quebec and 5.3% in Quebec.

However, multilingualism was more prevalent in households of homogamous couples where both partners had the same non-official language as their mother tongue. In 2021, multilingualism in this type of household was 68.4% in Canada outside Quebec and 63.3% in Quebec.

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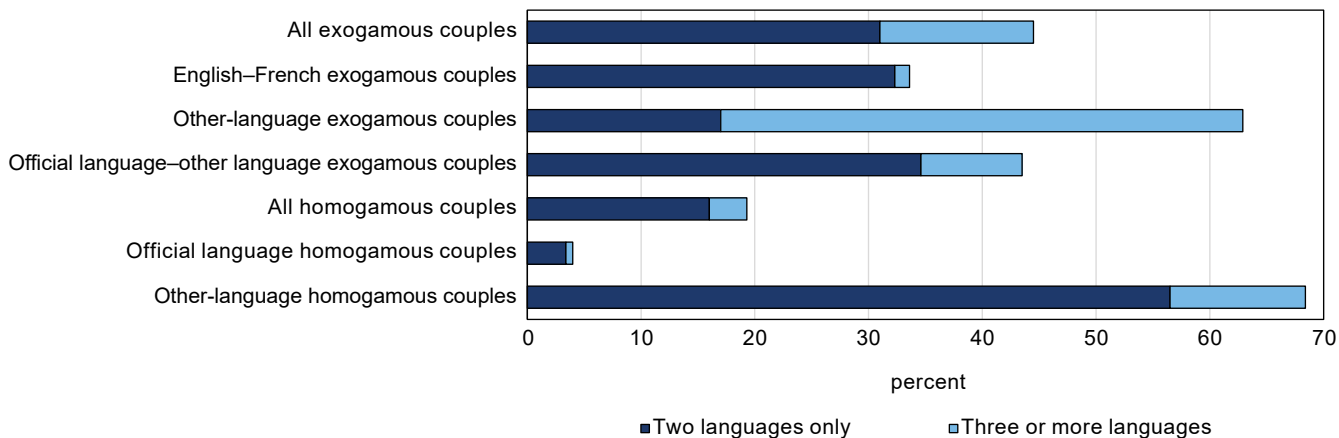
8. Please note that the definition of exogamous couple can also apply to immigration status (a couple comprising an immigrant and a non-immigrant) or to religion (partners with different religions).



# Multilingualism of Canadian households

**Chart 5**

**Multilingualism of households, by exogamy or homogamy of the couple and the number of languages spoken at home, Canada outside Quebec, 2021**

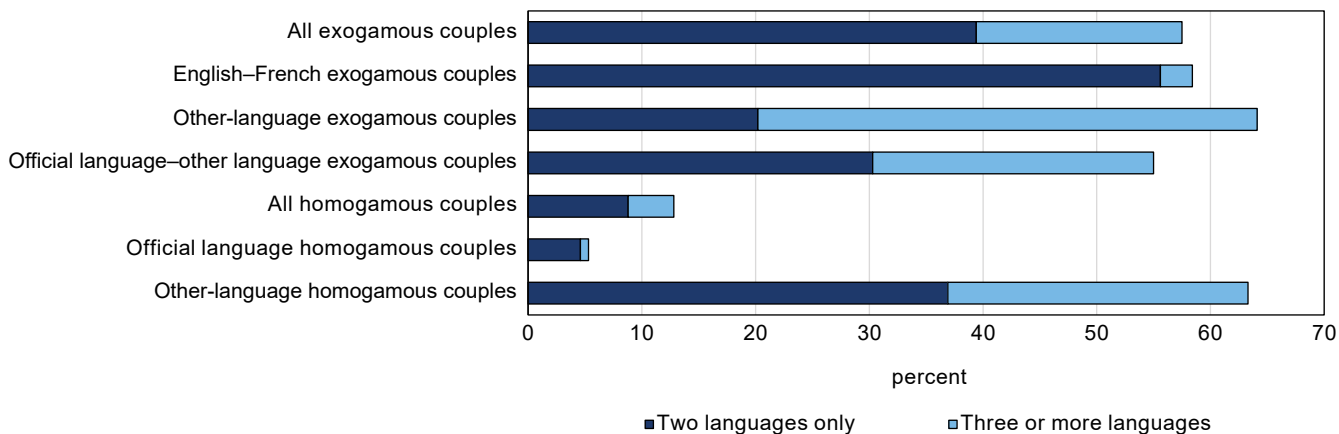


**Note:** This chart represents only one-census-family households with a couple (married or in a common-law relationship) where both spouses reported only one language as their mother tongue.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

**Chart 6**

**Multilingualism of households, by exogamy or homogamy of the couple and the number of languages spoken at home, Quebec, 2021**



**Note:** This chart represents only one-census-family households with a couple (married or in a common-law relationship) where both spouses reported only one language as their mother tongue.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

## Conclusion

This study illustrated the wide diversity of language situations in Canadian households in 2021. These situations differ by family, household, and region of Canada.

For example, in Nunavut, two or more languages were spoken in nearly half of households in 2021—an Inuit language and English in most cases. In Canada's provinces and other territories, around 20.0% of households were multilingual, a proportion that ranged from 3.1% in Newfoundland and Labrador to 25.7% in Ontario.

In Quebec, although a smaller proportion of households were multilingual in 2021 (18.3%), the makeup of its multilingualism set the province apart from the rest of Canada. In fact, English and French (alone or with one or more other languages) were spoken in 65.8% of multilingual households. In comparison, this percentage was 15.8% in Canada outside Quebec, where the most common combination was English and at least one other language (81.8% of multilingual households).

In 2021, select types of households were more likely than others to be multilingual. This was true of multigenerational households and other multi-family households. Moreover, the results show that households consisting of an exogamous couple were more often multilingual than households consisting of a homogamous couple.

As the ethnocultural diversity of Canada's population continues to grow thanks to current and future international migration, we can expect an increase in the number of households where more than one language is spoken at home. Studies on immigrant families, and the language behaviour of their school-aged children in particular, are an avenue to explore in order to better understand the linguistic integration mechanisms used for immigrants.

## Additional information

Additional information on knowledge of official languages can be found in [data tables](#) and the [Census Profile](#).

[Reference products](#) are designed to help users make the most of 2021 Census data. These include the [Guide to the Census of Population, 2021](#), the [Dictionary, Census of Population, 2021](#) and the [2021 Census of Population questionnaires](#). The [Languages Reference Guide](#) is also available.