

## Census in Brief

# Immigrant languages in Canada



## Language, 2011 Census of Population

The 2011 Census of Population counted more than 200 mother tongues or languages spoken most often at home. These include Canada's two official languages (English and French), Aboriginal languages and immigrant languages, whose presence is due to the waves of international migration that Canada has experienced over the centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'mother tongue' refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood at the time of the census. Immigrant languages originate from all continents and belong to a variety of language families. In 2011, they constituted the mother tongue of more than 6.8 million people, or 20.6% of the Canadian population.<sup>2</sup>

More than 40% of the immigrant-language population in Canada have a mother tongue of European origin, while persons with one of the various Asian languages as their mother tongue comprise 56% of the immigrant-language population in the country.

### Immigrant languages belong to 23 major language families

The 2011 Census of Population identified 23 major language families with population numbers that are large enough for dissemination ([Table 1](#)). Among the language families to which immigrant mother tongues belong, three have more than one million persons: Romance, Indo-Iranian and Chinese.

The Romance family includes two languages whose population each exceeds 400,000: Italian and Spanish ([Figure 1](#)). Indo-Iranian languages include Persian, mainly spoken in Iran, with 177,000 persons, along with various languages of the Indian subcontinent, including Punjabi (460,000)—the top immigrant language reported in Canada—as well as Urdu (194,000), and Hindi and Gujarati, each with just over 100,000 persons.

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1. The term 'immigrant languages' refers to languages (other than English, French and Aboriginal languages) whose presence in Canada is originally due to immigration.

2. The statistics on immigrant languages provided in this Census in Brief are drawn from both single and multiple responses. Persons living in institutions are excluded.

**Table 1 Population of immigrant mother tongue families, showing main languages comprising each family, Canada, 2011<sup>1</sup>**

Language family	Main languages	Number	Percentage
Niger-Congo languages	Akan, Swahili, Rundi	81,135	1.2
Cushitic languages	Somali, Oromo	45,880	0.7
Semitic languages	Arabic, Hebrew, Amharic	449,580	6.6
Turkic languages	Turkish, Azerbaijani	36,750	0.5
Armenian	Armenian	31,680	0.5
Indo-Iranian languages	Punjabi, Urdu, Persian, Gujarati, Hindi	1,179,990	17.3
Dravidian languages	Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu	175,280	2.6
Chinese languages	Chinese (n.o.s. <sup>2</sup> ), Cantonese, Mandarin	1,112,610	16.3
Tibeto-Burman languages	Tibetan, Burmese	8,210	0.1
Korean	Korean	142,880	2.1
Japanese	Japanese	43,040	0.6
Malayo-Polynesian languages	Tagalog, Ilocano, Malay	443,750	6.5
Tai-Kadai languages	Lao, Thai	22,615	0.3
Austro-Asiatic languages	Vietnamese, Khmer	174,455	2.6
Romance languages	Spanish, Italian, Portuguese	1,196,390	17.5
Germanic languages	German, Dutch, Yiddish	611,165	8.9
Slavic languages	Polish, Russian, Ukrainian	721,605	10.6
Baltic languages	Lithuanian, Latvian	14,055	0.2
Finno-Ugric languages	Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian	96,200	1.4
Celtic languages	Welsh	3,885	0.1
Greek	Greek	117,890	1.7
Albanian	Albanian	25,010	0.4
Creole languages	Haitian Creole	75,255	1.1
Other languages	Kabyle, Georgian, Mongol	29,410	0.4
All immigrant languages		6,838,705	100

**Notes:**

1. Language families are listed according to major region of origin: African and Middle Eastern languages are shown first, followed by Asian languages (Indian subcontinent, East Asia and Southeast Asia), European languages and, finally, Creole languages, which come mainly from the Americas but are also found in other regions such as the Indian Ocean.

2. N.o.s. means 'not otherwise specified.'

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Within the Chinese language family, three main languages are identified: Cantonese, reported by 389,000 persons in the census, Mandarin (255,000) and Chinese, n.o.s.<sup>3</sup> (441,000). Note that the category 'Chinese, n.o.s.' is comprised of a large number of persons who answered 'Chinese' to the question on mother tongue in the census, without any other specification. These may, therefore, include persons with Mandarin, Cantonese or any other Chinese language<sup>4</sup> as their mother tongue.

3. N.o.s. means 'not otherwise specified.'

4. Other than Mandarin, Cantonese and Chinese, n.o.s., Chinese languages include Hakka, Taiwanese, Chaochow, Fukien and Shanghaiese.

**Box Chinese language, Chinese languages**

Historically, for example in 1991 and 1996, the data disseminated by Statistics Canada did not distinguish between the different Chinese languages. Data were published for only one category: 'Chinese.' In 2001, the language classification was expanded to include detail on three Chinese languages (Mandarin, Cantonese and Hakka) and a general category entitled 'Chinese, n.o.s.' (not otherwise specified). In 2006, the classification was enlarged again to accommodate four additional Chinese languages (Taiwanese, Chaochow, Fukien and Shanghainese). This language classification, comprising eight categories, was maintained in the 2011 Census. Specialists generally recognize about 10 main Chinese languages spoken in China. In general, those who speak these languages do not necessarily understand one another. For example, Mandarin and Cantonese are as different from one another as French and Spanish. These specialists frequently refer to these languages as 'dialects,' but they are really distinct languages. Cantonese and Hakka, which are spoken in southern China, are the most linguistically dissimilar from the other Chinese languages.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Chinese in China refer to themselves as the Han (Han nationality), and 'Han Chinese' is the term they use to describe the family of Chinese languages. For the 2011 Census, Statistics Canada publishes data for individual Chinese languages, in order to distinguish, for example, Cantonese from Mandarin. However, information about the entirety of the Chinese language family remains relevant.

1. Gordon, Raymond G., Editor, 2005. *Ethnologue. Languages of the World*. 15th edition. Dallas. SIL International. 1273 p.

Comrie, Bernard, Stephen Matthews and Maria Polinsky. 2003. *The Atlas of Languages: The Origin and Development of Languages Throughout the World*. Revised edition. London. Quarto Inc., Facts On File Inc. 224 p.

Crystal, David. 1987. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 472 p.

Four language families have a population numbering between 400,000 and one million: Slavic, Germanic, Semitic and Malayo-Polynesian. Among the Semitic languages, the population with Arabic as its mother tongue totals 374,000. The main Malayo-Polynesian language is Tagalog, which comes from the Philippines and is reported by 384,000 persons.

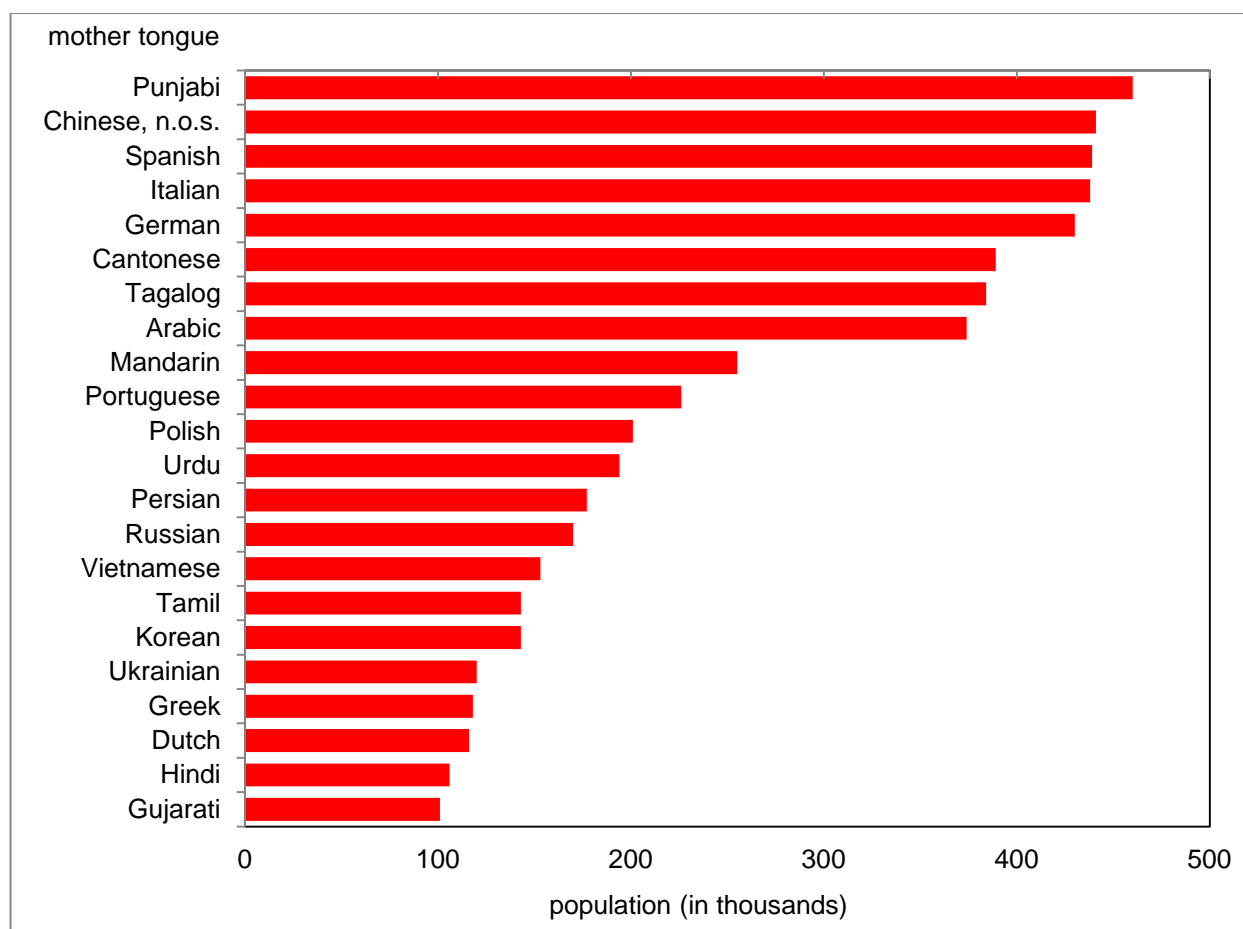
The other major language families whose numbers range between 100,000 and 400,000 are Austro-Asiatic languages, Dravidian languages, Korean and Greek. Tamil is the main Dravidian language, with a population of 143,000, while Vietnamese is the Austro-Asiatic language with the largest population in Canada, 153,000 persons.

Some families consist of a single language. In this group, Korean and Greek account for respectively 143,000 and 118,000 persons.

**Twenty-two immigrant mother tongues with more than 100,000 persons**

In all, 22 immigrant mother tongues were reported by more than 100,000 persons in Canada. Nine of them are languages of European origin, while the other 13 are of Asian origin ([Figure 1](#)). None of these 22 languages comes from sub-Saharan Africa. Of the European languages, three have a population exceeding 400,000: Spanish (439,000), Italian (438,000) and German (430,000). The two Asian languages with the most persons reporting them as their mother tongue are Punjabi (460,000) and Chinese, n.o.s. (441,000).

**Figure 1 Number of Canadians whose mother tongue is one of the 22 immigrant languages reported by more than 100,000 persons, Canada, 2011**



**Note:** N.o.s. means 'not otherwise specified.'

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Three immigrant mother tongues have between 350,000 and 400,000 persons: Cantonese (389,000), Tagalog (384,000) and Arabic (374,000).

Another Chinese language, Mandarin, has 255,000 persons, while the Portuguese-mother-tongue population, mainly from Portugal,<sup>5</sup> stands at 226,000. About 201,000 persons have Polish as their mother tongue.

All other mother tongue groups have numbers below 200,000.

5. According to the 2006 Census, 64% of the Portuguese-mother-tongue population was born in Portugal, 27% in Canada and 6% in Brazil. The information on place of birth for 2011 will be available on May 8, 2013, as part of the first release of data from the National Household Survey.

The population with Cantonese or Mandarin as its mother tongue is underestimated because of the large number of people who report simply 'Chinese' to the mother tongue question, without further specifying whether they speak Mandarin, Cantonese, or another Chinese language. If the language of persons who reported 'Chinese' were known more precisely, it is possible that either Mandarin or Cantonese, or both, would surpass Punjabi as the top immigrant mother tongue in Canada.<sup>6</sup>

### **Language retention: Many people with an immigrant language as their mother tongue also speak it at home**

The term 'retention' is used to designate the phenomenon whereby people with a given immigrant mother tongue speak that language at home. Retention is said to be 'complete' when the language is spoken most often and 'partial' when it is spoken on a regular basis although it is not the main home language.<sup>7</sup>

In turn, the concept of 'rate of retention (complete or partial)' designates the proportion of the population with a given mother tongue that speaks that language at home, either most often or on a regular basis. The retention rate provides an indication of different groups' linguistic vitality.

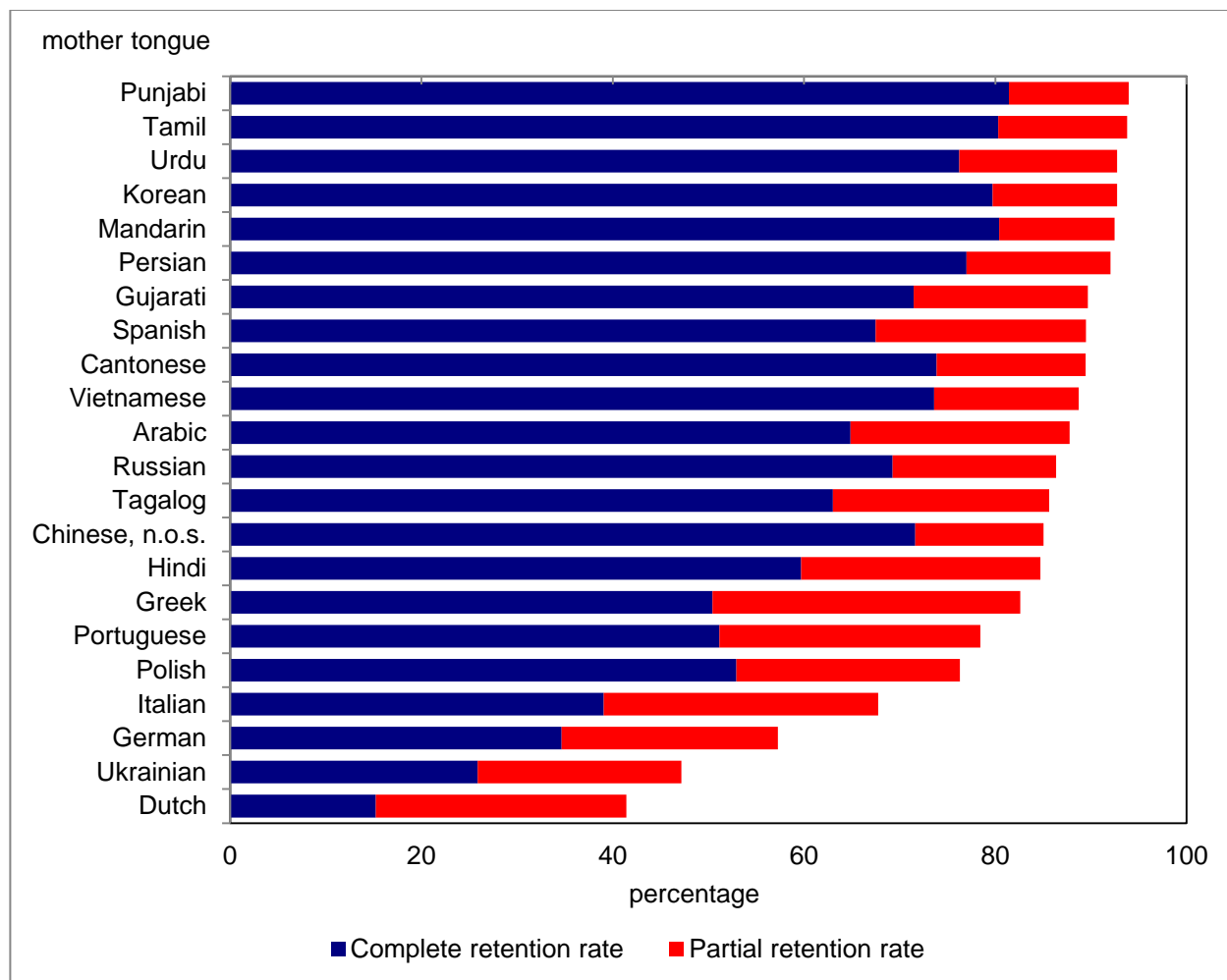
The rate of retention of immigrant languages shows little variation among most mother tongue groups with a population of 100,000 or more ([Figure 2](#)). For ten mother tongue groups, the complete retention rate is equal to or greater than 70%, and for three of them—Punjabi, Tamil and Mandarin—it exceeds 80%. In most cases, then, the main language spoken at home is the mother tongue. If partial retention of the mother tongue is included, 16 language groups have a retention rate equal to or greater than 80%.

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6. However, statistics from Citizenship and Immigration Canada show that between 1997 (the year of the handover of Hong Kong to China) and 2009, the number of permanent residents from mainland China (the majority of whom have Mandarin as their mother tongue) largely exceeded the number from Hong Kong (primarily Cantonese mother tongue). During this period, more than 400,000 immigrants arrived from the People's Republic of China versus 50,000 from Hong Kong. During the previous 13 years (1984 to 1996), the number of immigrants from mainland China was 100,000, compared with 300,000 from Hong Kong (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Facts and Figures: Immigration Overview*, different years).

7. The 2011 Census includes two questions on the languages spoken at home: the main language, namely the one spoken most often at home, and any other languages spoken on a regular basis.

**Figure 2 Rates of complete and partial retention for 22 main immigrant mother tongues, Canada, 2011**



**Note:** N.o.s. means 'not otherwise specified.'

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2011.

Because of the use of English or French as the main home language, some immigrant mother tongue groups have complete retention rates of their language below 60%. Thus, in four of the 22 mother tongue groups with more than 100,000 persons, 50% or more use English or French as their main home language. This is the case with longer-established language groups such as Italian, German, Ukrainian and Dutch. In the latter two groups in particular, less than 30% speak their mother tongue most often at home.

### Additional information

Additional information on language at various levels of geography can be found in the [Highlight tables](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011002, [Topic-based tabulations](#), Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011016 through 98-314-X2011045, and 98-314-X2011048 through 98-314-X2011050, the [Census Profile](#), Catalogue no. 98-316-X as well as in the new census product [Focus on Geography Series](#), Catalogue no. 98-310-X2011004.

### Note to readers

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2011 Census while maintaining the quality of the results, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Due to random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical document, highlight tables, and topic-based tabulations.

### Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by René Houle of Statistics Canada's Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, with the assistance of staff members of the Census Subject Matter Secretariat, the Social and Aboriginal Statistics Division, the Census Operations Division, the Dissemination Division and the Communications Division of Statistics Canada.



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Published by authority of the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada

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October 2012

Catalogue no. 98-314-X2011003

Frequency: Occasional

Ottawa

Cette publication est également offerte en français.

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