

# Chicago Tribune

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**HEADLINE:** MLA creates online map of language use in the U.S.

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**BODY:**

Nothing connects us like language. It's how we express thoughts and feelings in a way that others can understand. Not just spoken expressions: There's body language, the language of music, the gestures that say, "Hey, you numbskull, you just cut me off on the freeway." Even architecture has a language: Nearly every bank used to inhabit a building that was low, stout and ribbed with Greco-Roman columns to communicate strength and durability, especially after the Depression. Now, banks use glass and open floor plans to communicate a sense of friendliness and openness.

The teachers and scholars of the Modern Language Association have been studying written and spoken language for 120 years. One of their recent projects created a map of where languages are spoken in the U.S., based on the 2000 census.

The map holds some great nuggets of information.

For instance, I knew my Chicago neighborhood is diverse, but a check of my ZIP code on the MLA's **Language Map** shows that people who speak only English in the home in my area are the minority; there are nearly as many people who speak Spanish in the home, and when you add all the other languages used in my ZIP code -- from Russian to Gujarathi to Mon-Khmer -- people who speak a language other than English outnumber English-only residents by nearly 2-1.

What will the **Language Map** say about your world?

Go to [MLA.org/census\(underscore\)main](http://MLA.org/census(underscore)main), or go to [MLA.org](http://MLA.org) and click on "**Language Map**." The color-coded map takes a while to load all the census data. Meanwhile, you can reflect on the fact that the map works on Macs and PCs using Netscape 6 or later, and PCs using Internet Explorer 5 and later, and Macs using Safari 1.2 or later. The map doesn't work with other operating systems (and it doesn't work with the Mac's version of IE, either).

You have several options of breaking down data: by ZIP code, by city, by state or the continental U.S. in total. (Individual maps are created for Alaska, Hawaii, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.) You can compare languages in different areas

of your state or in different areas of the country. You can see where the nation's biggest concentration of Navajo speakers lives (northeastern and north-central Arizona), for instance.

The MLA extrapolated its data from 4-year-old census figures, so numbers are only estimates.

The map went up June 16, says Rosemary Feal, executive director of the MLA: "It took us about a year from conception to publication."

Last year, MLA officers and staff members kept wondering what such a map would look like.

"We know there are a bunch of Arabic language speakers in Chicago and Japanese speakers in California, but what would it look like on a map?" Feal recalled.

Browsing **language maps** at linguistic Web sites turned up documents that didn't quite fit what the MLA was after, so the organization built it itself.

The result?

"We thought people would be interested, but we did not expect as much interest as we got," Feal says. "When we put out an edition of the MLA handbook, we get a couple of calls but not a hundred," as happened after the map was posted on the Web.

Questions, compliments and suggestions have come in from media professionals, nurses, government agencies and teachers and librarians, Feal says. She says the map has helped in unexpected ways.

"People are using it to find jobs. They say, 'OK, I know three languages; where can I go that takes advantage of those skills?'" Feal says.

The MLA is looking to improve the site.

"We're going to expand it," Feal says. "We want to get the older census data up, so you can compare what the map looked like 10 years ago, 20 years ago."

The site gets about 10,000 hits a day, she said, and that number is expected to rise when school gets back in session.

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