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**HEADLINE:** How many Chinese speakers in Box Butte County, Neb.? The American language tapestry, revealed

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**BODY:**

News flash: There is not a single Chinese speaker residing in Box Butte County, Neb.. Which may not sound like a particularly useful sliver of information - unless you're a Box Butte-bound speaker of Chinese looking for someone to converse with out on northwestern Nebraska's lonely prairie.

Now consider that ZIP Code 15101 - that's Allison Park, Pa., near Pittsburgh, for those of you keeping score at home - has 49 speakers of Arabic and six of Armenian. Yiddish, meanwhile, is spoken by people in every state - including two each in Montana and South Dakota, suggesting that Billings and Rapid City aren't the prime places to pick up some killer smoked whitefish.

Why are we telling you all this? Because thanks to the Modern Language Association, one of academia's most venerable organizations, now we can.

The MLA's new interactive **Language Map** Data Center, which goes public Wednesday, is a truly fascinating ("hen you yisi" in Chinese, "muy interesante" in Spanish) glimpse into the tapestry of tongues spoken by American citizens and residents. It's a story told by 2000 U.S. Census data, crunched and leveraged to linguistic and geographic ends.

"So often, when we think of languages and cultures that are not Anglophone America, we think of the world out there - foreign," says Rosemary G. Feal, the MLA's executive director. "We don't necessarily realize how, in our own American globalized society, we've got all these linguistic resources woven into the fabric."

For anyone interested in language and culture, the site - with its interactive maps in bright purples and blues, easily navigable by mouse - is as addictive as a catnip-filled mouse for a kitten. It's hardly just a parlor game, though. In an era when study of all foreign languages is rising in America, the possibilities are myriad.

Academics tracking languages can hone in on particular areas and find out how immigrants from abroad are integrating linguistically. Marketers who want to target speakers of Thai, Persian or Navajo can find the ZIP codes where mass mailings would be the most lucrative. Social service agencies can calibrate their work to the

ethnic breakdowns in their own communities.

"We incorporate the world in the United States," Feal says. "We always have."

And on a planet of terrorism and wars where intercultural communication grows more crucial by the year - some in the U.S. government bemoaned the lack of Pashtu translators, for example, during the first months of the war in Afghanistan - knowing the language resources in one's own community or state can be a boon to national security as well.

"There's not enough accurate information about how language works and how language is present in our society," says Donna Christian, president of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. "There must be a thousand ways that civic leaders could use this information."

MLA developers initially conceived the **language map** idea as "a really big poster" before the idea ran away with them and evolved into the interactive operation. So far, they have mapped the top 30 languages in the country.

They are working on an even more detailed second tier that will be made available for crunching - suggesting that before too long, we will presumably be able to determine how many speakers of Uighur have taken up residence in Walla Walla, Wash.

America being what it is, someone will find that fact as pivotal as, say, how many lefthanded shortstops named Tim are batting over .300 against righthanders during twi-night doubleheaders in Fenway Park on Sundays in May.

"For people in this country, to appreciate the range of languages spoken here is so important," Christian says. "There's such a strong feeling that English is the only language around. To get an idea of how many languages are spoken here, that can give us all a better sense of understanding of each other."