

## Immigrant monolingualism and bilingualism in colonial America

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The issue of immigrants (not) learning English has long been and remains an area of intense debate in the United States. While it was once often claimed that early immigrants quickly learned English, historical sociolinguistic research makes clear that many remained monolingual in languages other than English for generations (Wilkerson and Salmons 2008, work since).

Much of the evidence used in such studies is not available at greater time depths. Still, if we take seriously Lauersdorf's admonition to "use all the data" (2018: 211–212), we can build a picture of monolingualism and bi-/multilingualism back into the colonial era. Anticipating modern historical sociolinguistics, Read (1937, 1941) examined newspaper notices that reported language knowledge of run-away indentured servants or enslaved people. His surveys include about 60 case studies commenting on a range of immigrant and Indigenous languages, and often multilingual individuals.

I am assembling a larger database, using online corpora of early newspapers. Here are early examples from the work to date:

- "a French man born, speaks but little English" (1724),
- A Black man who "talks good English and French" (1724),
- "he has not enough English to discribe where his Master lives" (1726).

These sources also often give overtly ideological or evaluative comments: "an Irish-man, but speak as good French as a French man" (1774), an African-American who "speaks indifferent English", an "Indian" who "speaks English pretty well, and no other Language" (1722), and remarks about dialect, e.g. "a West-country Man and talks like one" (1721).

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of this database opens a new window on language knowledge and ideologies far from elite circles, classic "language history from below" (Elspaß 2005). This work underscores just how multilingual the United States has been since long before it was a country.

### References

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