



New Jersey is one of the few places you can hear these languages — and they're in danger

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Feb. 3, 2019

People in New Jersey speak a staggering variety of languages. Some are in danger of extinction.

At stake is each dialect's unique take on the world, said Ross Perlin, co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance in New York. "There's a complexity, a texture, a character to each language which can never be translated," he said.

Losing a language also comes with a cost for the speakers, said Charles Häberl, chair of Rutgers University's Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures.

"When people ... get separated from their cultures," Häberl said, "it seems to take a psychological toll."

Almost a third of New Jersey reports speaking a language other than English, according to U.S. Census data. In comparison, only three other U.S. states report a larger share of non-English speakers.

That variety is especially pronounced in the northern part of the state. In a dozen towns, more than two-thirds of the population speaks a language other than English.

[See: Data Visualization]

Statewide, a sizable number of people still only speak English, while Spanish clocks in as the second-most popular language.

[See: Data Visualization]

Those categories, however, mask many lesser-known languages: Aramaic, Basque, Ladino, Mam, Garifuna, Gaelic, Kalmyk.

Just last year, even a hospital far from the state's major urban centers like the the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in Hamilton had to call on translators speaking 32 different languages, according to a spokeswoman.

Spotlight: Mam

Bartolo Vail, a Guatemalan immigrant in Morristown, estimated that the Maya language Mam was still used by about a thousand people in the area.

“It is my mother tongue, the language of the people,” Vail said in Spanish.

Central America is known for its Spanish, but many indigenous groups still rely on pre-colonial languages like K’iche’ and Kaqchikel. Some of those, including Mam, are threatened even in places like Guatemala, prompting local groups to launch literacy efforts to keep them alive.

Immigration from Central American has also increased the demand for Mam translators in U.S. immigration courts, according to statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Spotlight: Aramaic

In Paramus, the Syriac Orthodox Church still uses Aramaic during services.

“It’s our identity,” said Saliba Kassis, a priest at Paramus’ Mor Aphrem Center. Although the use of Aramaic is decreasing, Kassis said, thousands of people in the area still speak it.

Aramaic originated in the Middle East millennia ago, and is similar to Hebrew. Because it was spoken in first century Palestine, you can hear the actor Jim Caviezel use it in 2004’s *The Passion of the Christ*.

Spotlight: Kalmyk

If you visit Howell’s town website, a considerable chunk of its history is devoted to the Kalmyks, an ethnic group with deep Mongolian and Russian ties.

David Sanderson, a lay leader at a Buddhist Temple in Howell who married an ethnic Kalmyk, estimated that only a few hundred people in the area still speak the language fluently. That has affected his wife, especially after her mother died.

“There’s nobody that, on a daily basis, she can speak Kalmyk with,” he said. “So whenever she has the chance, she does.”

Strangely enough, Kalmyk was also the foundation for the language spoken by the Teddy Bear-like Ewoks in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*.

Ross Perlin, with the the Endangered Language Alliance in New York, said New Jersey lacks a similar group to document and preserve the state’s linguistic diversity.

“Because there’s really no organization,” Perlin said, “I don’t think anybody has really gone underneath the top layer.”