

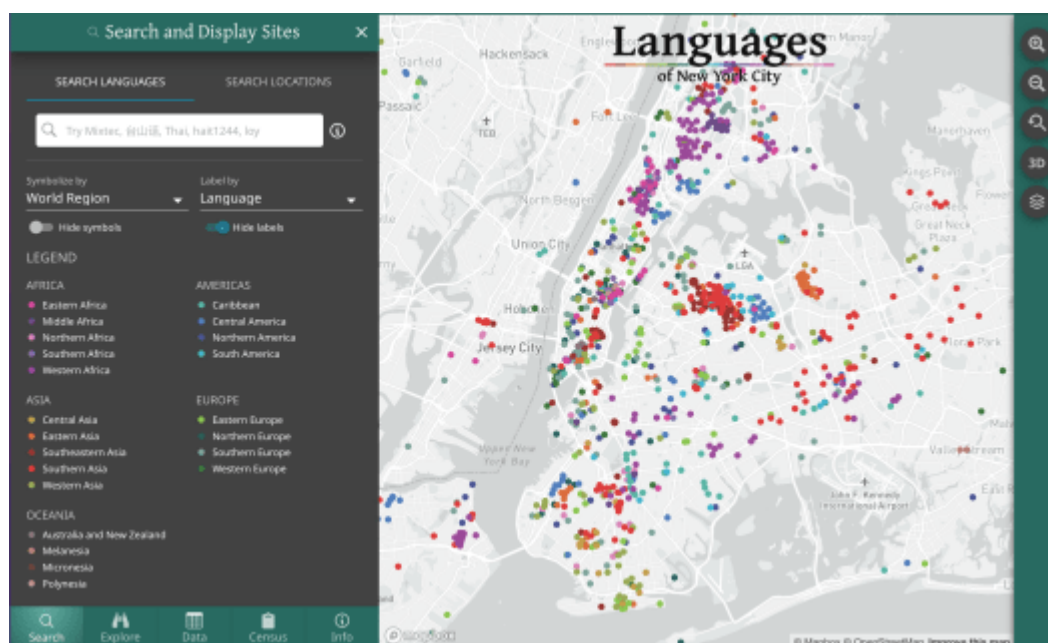


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Book & Geospatial Resources of Languages of New York City: An Urban Language Map

Review by Paige G. Andrew

Languages of New York City: an urban language map. Perlin, Ross, Daniel Kaufman, Jason Lampel, Maya Daurio, Mark Turin, Sienna Craig, eds. New York: Endangered Language Alliance. <https://languagemap.nyc/>. Viewed Oct. 24-Nov. 1, 2022.



Landing page of Languages of New York City: An Urban Language Map's website

"Welcome to Languages of New York City, a free and interactive digital map of the world's most linguistically diverse metropolitan area." This opening sentence in the "introduction box" (my label) that appears first when arriving at the website contains a couple of key pieces of information, such that it is free to use (open source) and that it is interactive. The phrase "...the world's most linguistically diverse metropolitan area" however is up for debate, there are likely another major metropolitan (and especially megalopolises) areas that rival New York City language diversity, but perhaps with a different outlay of languages involved.

This opening introduction box goes on to provide other helpful and useful



information to give the user a sense of where the data on the map comes from, and thus who is behind the active work, from its creation to ongoing updates, to specifics about the types of peoples and their languages that are included. As it states, the mapped data focuses on “significant sites for Indigenous, minority, and endangered languages.”

After clicking on the Continue button one arrives at the map itself. Titled “Search and Display Sites,” a legend color-keyed by dots to locations on the map shows languages originating from four continents (Africa, Americas, Asia, and Europe) and one major geographic region, Oceania. This format is clear and even with a quick glance at the map, one can easily determine pockets of language types by origin, for instance where Asian-speaking peoples live just southwest of LaGuardia International Airport. Within the “Info” tab below the legend area is an excellent introduction to the content of the website, including scope and depth, i.e., “this map includes over 700 languages and dialects confirmed to over 1200 significant sites, including neighborhoods, community institutions, restaurants, and other locations where there is, or was, at least one speaker. In terms of geographic diversity, approximately 38% of the languages shown are from Asia, 24% from Africa, 19% from Europe, 16% from the Americas, and the rest from Oceania and the Pacific.” Within the About section of this tab are the following linked categories of information; ELA Data, Census Data, Contact and Feedback, Credits, Legal, and Sources. I highly recommend reading the content of the About area to gain a footing for what will be an engaging interactive experience. The other three areas under the Info tab are Content & Feedback, a Help menu, and a User’s Manual.

Map Legend and Its Options

Located to the left of the map, the “Search and Display Sites” information box orients the user to the languages involved, has a search box if you wish to approach the map in that manner, and provides access to background information for specific language or area outcomes. Central to this box is the Legend mentioned in the introduction above containing five macro-areas of the world with color-coded language sub-areas under each. In this information box one can search either by language groups or by “world region”, and when one clicks on either of these textual examples appear within the search box above, which is helpful. Note that when you are in search mode the “Search” tab at the bottom is lighted.

If you have either the “Search Languages” or “Search Locations” choices open the five areas of the world from which specific languages are derived, color-coded to



either dots or textual labels on the map remain fixed. As a reminder, those five mostly-continental areas are Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. These are truly the core part of the map, all other features that one can deploy combine these with geography at the metropolitan area level, with the ability to retrieve data about the languages and their communities, and much, much more.

Under either of the Languages or Locations choices, one can also manipulate viewing the colored language types on the map via a toggle to show as either dots or textual labels. Conveniently, the specific color assigned to a language does not change with either choice, allowing one to continuously see groups of similar languages; but of course, a colored dot, even when seeing which part of the world it derives from in the legend, is not as helpful as turning on the label feature so one can read the name of the language involved. In either case, the base map is very cluttered initially so zooming in to a chosen area begins to clarify things.

Of importance to this left area of the screen are five tabs below the legend, allowing one to navigate elements of information to either of the geography based (from above) results. Clicking the “Search” tab will always take you back to the beginning, the base legend. The “Info” tab to the far right opens a box providing information about the overall Project and how one can support it. The other three allow one to “drill down” and retrieve data specific to a language and location, these are “Explore” that pops open the Explore ELA Data box arranged by languages, religions, countries, language families, neighborhoods and macro-communities; the searchable “Data” tab which pops up tabular data that provides the data content in a different manner while also, in some cases, may include video of a specific neighborhood or community or audio of same; and finally the “Census” tab. An explanation for this tab shares that “All dots on the map represent site-based ELA data, drawing on information from communities, speakers, and other sources. Most are unknown to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), which is only useful for the largest [approximately] 60 languages. Census data is visualized here as green polygons, by tract were available or else by PUMA.”

Navigation and Use

The Languages of NYC map’s navigation layout will be familiar to anyone who has experience with similar online maps such as zoom and pan, scroll arrows, and show/hide panels. Yet, there are other features that allow changes to the map’s background and orientation, especially those key to discovering individual languages and dialects of specific languages.



The “base” map view is perpendicular to the ground showing colored dots representing many languages and where they are spoken across New York City. From this starting point, one can use features found to the right of the map in a toolbar to traverse and manipulate the map. Of course, pan and zoom buttons are there, but additionally, there are buttons that give the ability to reset the map to its base configuration, to toggle between a 2D (perpendicular) view versus a 3D perspective (bird’s-eye, looking south to north) view and a final “base map options” button that opens a new box of options. This last button is unique to this map, allowing the user to approach data shown on the map by geography in tandem with language data. It also has a feature to lighten, darken, or not do anything to the map’s background lighting to accommodate individual users’ viewing needs. The preset “light” level allows one to see the street network clearly and seems to me would be more useful than the other two, but the other two options may enhance the outcomes of a search in better ways when combined with other features.

Sticking with the “base map options” navigation box, there are three toggle-based options for showing, or not, the following: (1) neighborhoods within the 5-borough area, illuminated in a light yellow with dark yellow lines for boundaries, taken from the 2020 NYC Census, (2) county boundaries, “The entire 31-county tri-state area (including the 5 counties aka “boroughs” of NYC), as defined by NYC’s Department of City Planning and other sources” and (3) “show and zoom to my location” obviously linked to one’s computer wherever it is being used to explore the map’s content. Let’s look at what the first two of these do when employed.

Neighborhoods Option

Once turned on all neighborhoods are displayed across the city, while the array of colored language dots remains static. The user interacts with this feature by clicking on a specific neighborhood area and to the left of the map a new information box pops up. This contains the name of the specific neighborhood and the primary language or languages spoken within it, accompanied by text about the history of the area and its people. There are links to census data for that area, to other similar communities across the city, and the ability to learn about similar communities originating from the same language region, for example, if starting from Creole clicking on the Caribbean tab brings up a group of similar Caribbean community types with details about each. This Neighborhood option is multi-faceted with too much detail to explain here, interactively linked to individual language dots on the map and each page of data provides other means for exploring information about the languages involved within this geographic context.



Country-level Option

By hitting the reset button to the right and then toggling off the neighborhoods option one can then re-start a search by toggling on the “show counties” portion of this interactive map. The background of the map becomes light blue and individual counties are not apparent at first, which I found a bit disorienting. But, those individual county areas are there, one simply needs to click on an area for them to be highlighted in a darker blue shade for excellent visibility and the name of the county also appears. Simultaneously to the left of the map the information box shows which languages are spoken within the county, for instance in Essex County, there are six languages ranging from African-American English to Amharic to Cape Verdian Creole. One can click on any of these to explore each much more deeply.

Every choice made from either of the two above options results in the Explore feature being turned on in the legend box found to the left of the map while displaying data visually on the map. Let’s next explore the Legend box area’s features that work crisply in tandem with the geography-based data to the right of the screen that is part of the array of navigation features.

Summary and Assessment

As an occasional user of online interactive maps, my personal impression of the scope and depth of this tool is very positive. I believe that high school students to college or university researchers would find this tool of great value, particularly for topics within the scope of the humanities. Of course, anyone with an interest or expertise in languages and their origins would also find this website and the interactive map of great value.

Because the Endangered Languages Alliance (ELA, <https://www.elalliance.org/>) chose to embed data about and related to individual spoken languages beyond simply their location or locations within the greater New York City area, this tool provides both a diverse and inclusive basis for use. “ELA is committed to mapping urban linguistic diversity, representing many of the smaller, minority, and Indigenous languages that are primarily oral and have neither public visibility nor official support.”

My descriptions above barely scratched the surface of what a researcher could do with this languages-based tool to enhance meaning of many societal-based inquiries, and find a wealth of related data, such as origin of communities or



population size, and especially the native language interactions within a “world region” so useful. In addition, the Alliance has a list of ten other similar projects underway on their homepage. “ELA has worked to different degrees on numerous projects with speakers of over a hundred languages spoken in New York City and beyond. More in-depth work continues on the several dozen [languages] featured here.” It is here too one will find details about how the Alliance was started and what its mission is, “Founded in 2010, the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA) is a non-profit dedicated to documenting Indigenous, minority, and endangered languages, supporting linguistic diversity in New York City and beyond.” A worthy goal and one that will benefit a huge range of researchers aiming to connect many human and societal factors in their work.

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