

people in these communities developed a regional dialect with a pronunciation style quite distinct from those of “inlanders.” More recently, as outsiders have moved into these coastal communities, the traditional coastal style has come to identify those who adhere to traditional coastal values, as opposed to those who do not. In English Canada, accents tend to be fairly uniform from coast to coast.⁹ Variation does exist, of course; for example, recent immigrants to Canada speak English with an accent, but by the second generation these accents tend to disappear. Exceptions to this homogeneity, somewhat similar to the Maine example, are evident in the Atlantic provinces, rural Ontario, and Newfoundland. Newfoundlanders use sounds and vocabulary separate from mainland Canada, although as the generations pass, these linguistic differences are diminishing.

One other far-reaching force for linguistic change is **linguistic nationalism**, an attempt by whole countries to proclaim their distinctiveness by purging their vocabularies of “foreign” terms. This phenomenon is evident in former colonial countries in Africa and Asia. It is by no means limited to those countries, however, as shown by periodic French-Canadian attempts to purge their language of such anglicisms as *le hamburger*. In an effort to protect the endangered French language, Quebec’s government passed the French Language Charter, Bill 101,

in 1976.¹⁰ Bill 101 declared French the only language of Quebec, and soon became the emblem of linguistic nationalism for French Canadians. Among other things, this bill requires that all public signs be in French, that immigrant children must attend French schools, and that businesses over a certain size must be able to conduct their business in French. The nature of Quebec’s struggle for language equality and official bilingualism is explored in Monica Heller’s Original Study, “Speak Bilingue?” Also in the category of linguistic nationalism are revivals of languages, long out of common use, by ethnic minorities and sometimes even whole countries. In the latter group is the successful revival of Hebrew as Israel’s first language, although not without a bitter campaign against its competitor, Yiddish.

⁹ Chambers, J.K. (1998). English: Canadian varieties. In J. Edwards (Ed.), *Language in Canada*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Genesee, F. (1998). French immersion in Canada. In J. Edwards (Ed.), *Language in Canada*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Linguistic nationalism. The attempt by ethnic minorities, and even countries, to proclaim independence by purging their languages of foreign terms or reviving unused languages.

ORIGINAL STUDY

Speak Bilingue?

Monica Heller, University of Toronto

In many parts of Canada, someone who speaks only English can understandably arrive at the conclusion that French–English bilingualism is a matter of zones—French in some places, English in others—and without too much effort, the twain do not have to meet except perhaps in the virtual worlds of channel-hopping or product labelling. In some parts of Canada, even people who speak only French can live an almost monolingual life, if it were not for the fact that English does in the end dominate and touches almost everybody one way or another. But language borders are as fictive as national borders, as messy and as complicated. Scratch the surface,

and you find many people who are themselves bilingual and many others who, while monolingual, nonetheless find their lives affected by the fact that the relationship between speakers of French and speakers of English is one of the structuring principles of the organization of Canadian society.

Sometimes this is pure fun. Bilinguals tell the wildest jokes (unfortunately, they are the only ones who understand them). One of my favourites was reported to me by a kindergarten teacher. One of the five-year-olds in her class came up to her to ask: *Qu’est-ce que «je m’en fiche» veut dire?* (“What does ‘je m’en fiche’ [I don’t care] mean?”). Being a

teacher who believes in self-directed learning rather than the transmission model, she instructed him to find out for himself. A while later, he came back and announced that he had found the answer: *Ca veut dire «je m'en poissonne»!* Seeing her puzzled look (she had learned English relatively late in life), he spelled it out for her: "*Fiche*, fish, *poisson* ..." and fell on the floor laughing. Now not everyone in Canada can do this; those who do use it to great effect, and not just to amuse themselves and each other. Such performances also serve (albeit largely unconsciously) as markers of the special place that bilinguals occupy astride the language border, and may help them deal with some of the tensions that can arise there.

Which brings me to the part that is perhaps not so amusing: French-English bilingualism can also be a domain of competition and conflict. First, there are many people, of many different language backgrounds, and themselves frequently bilingual or multilingual, who sincerely believe that being monolingual is the best way for individuals or societies or both. Often this perspective is connected to a sense that realism dictates recognizing the language of power (in this case, English) for what it is, and making sure that everyone has equal access to it. It can also be connected to a commitment to achieving equity through identity—that is, giving everyone a fair chance by making sure everyone is fundamentally the same. But it can also be connected to the fear that dominant groups often feel about the ways in which difference can threaten their power.

Then there are the questions that apply to those who in principle agree that speaking both French and English is a good thing. How to explain why parents in Calgary line up all night to enroll their children in French immersion? Or why francophones in Quebec argue about when to introduce English in school? What about fights in francophone minority communities over whether to have bilingual or French-only programs, and how much French students and parents should speak in order for students to be admitted to their schools? Or the tensions in the federal civil service between anglophones who feel they have made a commitment to learning French, only to find that their francophone workmates won't speak to them in French, and francophones who don't understand why they should act as unpaid language teachers on the job when they themselves learned English before they were in the job market? Why would a 17-year-old

francophone in Toronto, talking about English speakers in French immersion, say, "*Les anglophones nous ont tout pris, maintenant ils veulent nous prendre notre langue*" ("The anglophones have taken everything from us, now they want to take our language")?

Clearly, for many people in Canada, French-English bilingualism is an important resource, one which they believe gives them a head start in life, whether in education, in the job market, or simply in terms of enriching life experiences. The problem is that this resource is not equally distributed; some people get access to it from birth, in their families or neighbourhoods, while others must rely on schools or the media. But a more fundamental problem has to do with who will count as the best, or the real, bilinguals. And for many francophones it is frustrating to see the one advantage that came from being in a minority position being eroded by anglophone access to the same advantage. In other words, underlying many of these tensions is a competition between anglophones and francophones, understood as distinct social groups, over access to the resource of bilingualism, in the service of gaining or maintaining a position in Canadian society in which life conditions will be good.

But we must also note competition within these groups. Among anglophones, as mentioned earlier, not everyone agrees that it is important to speak French. Even among those who do strive for some form of bilingualism, there is disagreement about what the nature and extent of that bilingualism should be. Among francophones, it may be difficult to find people who deny the importance of English, but there are struggles over how to articulate the relationship between the two—that is, over how to become and to be bilingual.

Two competing views of bilingualism dominate the debate, for both groups. One is a view that is usually held by schools and other agencies or individuals who accord themselves, or are accorded, the authority to pronounce on such matters. This view (which can be seen to originate in 19th-century European ideas about the link between unified nations, states, cultures, and languages) holds that the best, indeed perhaps the only, real bilingualism is a kind of double monolingualism. Such speakers can act as though they were both monolingual speakers of English and monolingual speakers of French.

But as any bilingual will tell you, keeping your languages separate is not such an easy task, and,

besides, doing so cuts out all those hysterically funny bilingual jokes that keep popping unbidden into your brain. Instead, many bilinguals (more often those who learned their languages outside school, or who are far from the realms of power and prestige in Canadian society, and therefore mainly working-class franco-phones) mix their languages. Most of them accept others' judgement of this practice as low-status; people will say they know they "don't sound too intelligent" when they talk like that, or that their French is "bad." Nonetheless, the practice persists, in a form of minority resistance and ethnoclass solidarity, the importance of which should not be underestimated. Middle-class anglophones who mix their languages, on the other hand, often confer upon the practice a mark of prestige; in any case, they also know that they can turn in a perfectly good monolingual performance, at least in English, when they need to. For them, French is not imposed, and they are in a position to define the value of their own performances. These two competing views of bilingualism are mainly about class relations, and about the ways in which language and ethnicity crosscut them.

At the same time, relations across ethnoclasses are a daily occurrence in some parts of Canada, ones which have to be conducted on an ongoing basis, and which many people feel add something to the intensity of the pleasure of life. This is a comment one hears often enough in Montreal, probably the place in Canada where you find the most discussion

about these matters. But what is also common in Montreal is a strategy that emerged at least 25 years ago, and that allows everyday life to go on in a city where it is usually impossible to know what kind of person you are speaking to, and even less what their language politics are likely to be. *Bonjour*, hello? May I help you, *puis-je vous aider*? Bilingual talk in service encounters is increasingly routine, and helps people in business make sure that the customer is always right.

Now this has just been about English and French. Let's throw Inuktitut and Cree into this mix, and Italian and Bengali. The relevance of the French-English binary categorization may go the way of the overwhelming 19th- and early 20th-century relevance of religious distinctions between Catholics and Protestants. More and more Canadians not only speak French and English, but have some knowledge of, or feel some authentic tie to, many other languages. One nation, one language, one identity: This is a constellation that is increasingly not only impossible for many, but also not particularly interesting. People can stake claims to many identities, and do not always link language to all or any of them.

Through the lens of bilingualism we can see the changes in Canadian society, what matters to whom, and why. We may not all share the same visions of our country, we may not all want to go about our lives the same way, but we ignore each other at our peril. Speak *bilingue*?

Language Retention

Any examination of language change would be incomplete without a discussion of language retention. Indeed, linguistic diversity is seriously threatened around the world.¹¹ Of the 6000 extant languages in the world today, nearly half are spoken by fewer than 2500 people. Linguist Michael Krause at the Alaskan Native Language Center estimates that only 600 of the world's languages are presently safe from extinction, meaning children are still learning them at home and in school.

Language loss is not a new phenomenon; at the dawn of the 15th century, approximately 15 000 languages were spoken. Since then, wars, genocides, legal bans, and European expansion and assimilation agendas have resulted in the disappearance of more than half of

these languages. The process continues today; most of the 250 indigenous languages in Australia are nearing extinction (of the 50 aboriginal languages in Queensland most have fewer than 20 speakers), most South American languages were wiped out following the Spanish conquest, in Africa 54 languages are dead and another 116 are near extinction, and in Asia half the native languages are spoken by fewer than 10 000 speakers.

Canada's aboriginal peoples are divided into three distinct political groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. First Nations peoples have ten language families: Algonquian, Athapaskan, Haida, Kutenai, Salishan, Siouan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Iroquoian, and Wakashan.

¹¹ Sampet, P. (2001). Last words. *World Watch*, 14 (3).