

# Official Languages and Their Literatures

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**T**he changing relations between the two official languages of Canada are like those of an ill-matched couple who live under the same roof but sleep in different beds. Our two founding literatures have a similar relationship: the more they share, the more constrained they are by old boundaries. It may seem illogical, but the fact remains that the cohabitation of Canada's two official languages has simply resulted in a union of resistant differences. How could it be otherwise?

The scene: a restaurant in downtown Vancouver. We are sitting at a table, waiting for our order of beer. The conversation is in French. Our waiter arrives. He apologizes for not being able to serve us in French, struggling to do so in a few words of this language that he has studied but not mastered. He explains the situation very courteously. No one takes offence, and the whole matter would end there if one of our group did not feel obliged to add: "One doesn't hear too many foreign languages in this part of the city." His remark is obviously intended to acknowledge the waiter's apologies and to put him at ease.

Some people around the table bit their mother tongue. No one dared reply that French is not a foreign language, according to Canada's Official Languages Act. It was evident that the remark had been made without malice. The speaker was an eminent scholar, a professor with an international reputation. Here he was, a man who had spent many years of his life mastering the subtleties of French (and with such skill that no francophone

would be able to detect the fact that he was not a native speaker), and yet he still felt very profoundly that his acquisition of French was a kind of graft from a foreign body. What should one make of this?

It is not so irrational or inexplicable. The way in which each one of us internalizes our language perhaps accounts for why only one language seems completely natural and entirely suited to the reflexes of one's personality. An individual is capable of learning several languages, of course, but the political symbolism of multilingualism doesn't quite match up with the psychological truth of a mind that remains attached to its first unilingual experiences. How do languages cohabit in the mind of a polyglot? The status of official languages in a bilingual or multilingual state constitutes a phenomenon of quite a different order. The unilingual waiter seemed more aware of this than the distinguished bilingual scholar.

Our experience in the restaurant was quite recent. As we sat around the table that night, we remembered a similar experience from some thirty years before. It was in the early 1970s. At the end of a conference in Vancouver, the delegates were going back to their hotel in a taxi; they were chatting amongst themselves in French. The driver (a member of a visible minority) was intrigued, and asked, "So what language are you speaking?" He was obviously frustrated at not being able to take part. That he wasn't able to follow the conversation didn't shock anyone, but not to be able to recognize the sound of French, and to confuse this official language with the foreign noise of some cacophonous Babel—that was too much. The person who recollected this incident was Québécois and did not hide his anger. Imagine his surprise, then, to hear himself warmly supported in his anger by the very person who had defended the waiter, and who, scarcely an hour before, had spoken of French as a foreign language. Would one not say that this kind of francophilia was in fact closer to the taxi driver's attitude than to that of the waiter? But we will not come to any conclusions too quickly. After all, it takes many conferences and many fine talkers to make a country, bilingual or otherwise.

It's not so much a matter of the ability to speak another language as it is of the political valence appropriate to each language that is spoken. Learning the vocabulary and the grammatical constraints of a new linguistic code is not the only challenge; internalizing the various strategies that a language invents to translate reality in its own distinct fashion—that is what is really difficult and yet it's in that respect that each language is

unique. It follows that every language exercises a kind of absolute sovereignty over the organization of its universe and in the expression of its own relationship to reality. Comparatists like Clément Moisan and Philip Stratford have shown how anglophone literature and Québécois literature render a Canadian reality that is not the same in every respect. If each language tends to make itself into a self-sustaining system, then by definition how could two languages share equal official status? What would this mean in practice? Can they share anything more than their legal status, which amounts to saying that one of them loses what was, in the beginning, its genuine political significance?

This is precisely where language and literature are profoundly connected. Today, there is a general tendency to believe that this link is outdated, and that one can acquire another literary culture without having to go through the process of learning a foreign language. This is a complex debate and we don't intend to get involved in it here, except to question whether one can ever know a literature without knowing the language in which it is written.

If we have two official languages in Canada, what then about the relations between the literatures that represent their highest expression? Why not call them our official literatures? What became of the work of a scholar like Henry James Morgan and the project of Canadian unification set in motion with his *Bibliotheca Canadensis: or, A Manual of Canadian Literature*? The nationalist dream has turned into a complex polysystem of unstable intersections and surfaces that still awaits the analytical work of specialists to render it into an intelligible whole. It is certain that there is still work to do in building institutional links between anglophone literature and Québécois literature; as for the Canadian book market, well, the links between the two literatures are almost non-existent. Clearly, there is a profound gap between the professional readers of Canadian literature and the average readers who buy their own books in bookstores or borrow them from the public library. The researchers, literary critics, and teachers in the two languages communicate with each other, exchanging research tools and sharing the same interests. More and more there is the feeling that we all participate in the same Canadian literary institutions. This is a development in part imposed by the mechanisms controlled by Ottawa: SSHRC, the Canada Council, and the Aid to Scholarly Publishing Programme. All these have a significant impact on the system of university

research and teaching. Moreover, one can observe the same phenomenon in colloquia, conference banquets, journals, and joint research projects, but all this is perhaps less imposed than chosen. The publishers also play their role when they are offered grants to subsidize the costs of translation. Are all these players consciously or passively responsive to pressure from federal sources? In any case, the question remains: is there an identifiable market of bilingual readers? Or is there just a tiny elite catered to by public money? Ask the waiter, not your librarian.

To create a market of bilingual readers will be a long-term task for our education system. At a time when immersion programs have lost ground, the future does not look too rosy. The universities could do their part by strengthening French programs, but it is instead the opposite that one observes: the numbers are not in favour of language teaching. Why? More and more French specialists prefer to teach literary theory in English in order to fill their classes. Academic administrators have been known to reassure potential students by telling them what they want to hear: that it isn't necessary to know how to read or speak French in order to have the pleasure of discussing Foucault or Lacan. André Brochu puts it bluntly in his *La Grande Langue: Éloge de l'anglais*: "The Being, as everyone knows . . . speaks English." As Claude Hagège has rightly observed in *Halte à la mort des langues*, languages are at war. Enforced cohabitation leads only to the erosion of the minority language or to its creolization. And if one also creolizes minds and spirits? But no, we must not tell students that every idea is first embodied in the language in which it is expressed.

A final anecdote. A few years ago, a professor was flying from Ottawa to Vancouver on the now-defunct Canadian Airlines. He was leafing through the airline's complimentary magazine and came across an article celebrating Canada's Top Ten "must-read" authors. Nothing too surprising: Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, and so on. Not a single Québécois writer appeared on the list—not even Gabrielle Roy, even though she was born in Manitoba and has been translated into English and read from one end of the country to the other. And so the professor realized what Canadian literature meant in this context: literature written in English. But when he started reading the French version of the same article on the following page, he could hardly believe his eyes: the translation was literal. The francophone reader, who in this case happened to be a professor of Québécois literature, found himself being offered a summary in

French of his literature, without the name of a single Québécois author. The editor of the publication and his staff, in their innocence, would probably have been very surprised to learn that, in translating this article without paying attention to cultural context, they had managed to wipe out an entire literature. Bilingualism without cultural adaptation or context never achieves its announced objectives. Since the merger of Air Canada and Canadian, we notice that this magazine has sunk without a trace. It is consoling to know that *Canadian Literature* will outlive it.

WORKS CITED

- Brochu, André. *La Grande Langue. Éloge de l'anglais*. Montréal: XYZ, 1993.  
 Hagège, Claude. *Halte à la mort des langues*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000.

