

# Quebec Again<sup>1</sup>

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Lately, Quebec English has received considerable media attention (e.g. Ingrid Peretz, "Anglo may 'verify' her fuel tank," *Montreal Gazette*, 20 Aug. 1997) and has started to get some of the scholarly attention that Quebec French has had for years. What does it mean to say that Quebec English is a distinct regional dialect of Canadian English (or, in our post-structuralist mode, to construct it as one)?

Although most of us might not be able to pick the Montrealer out in a cross-Canada talk show, there are perceptible differences between Quebec English and the English spoken in Canada west of Kingston. First, Quebec English speakers sound different from Canadian English speakers from Kingston to Victoria, according to a study done by Henrietta Hung, John Davison, and J.K. Chambers called "Comparative Sociolinguistics of (aw)-Fronting." Without getting into the phonological gory details, I will summarize their conclusions: English-speakers in Quebec are not as homogeneous linguistically as English speakers in Victoria, Vancouver or Toronto. The results indicate that Montreal did not have a cohesive linguistic community of English speakers in the past, which the researchers feel probably indicates a parallel lack of a cohesive cultural community. When one thinks of the differences between the Jewish communities depicted by Mordecai Richler, the upperclass denizens of Westmount and the Mohawks, say, this suggestion gains force.

I suspect, however, that this lack of cohesion has changed over the past two decades, as the anglophone minority has found itself constructed as a

problem by successive provincial governments and has had to rise to the challenges of increasing 'francization.' Evidence that Quebec anglophones have done so can be found in their English: they use a different vocabulary, or use words in different senses, from those used by their counterparts elsewhere. In Quebec the difference in usage is primarily derived from the familiarity of English speakers with French. This familiarity derives from the language laws that have since the 1970s gradually shifted the working language of Quebec from English to French. The distinctiveness of Quebec English rests largely upon this fact. Quebec anglophones take their children to the *garderie*, buy their milk at the *dépanneur*, and get caught speeding by the *Sûreté* on the *autoroute*. This sort of borrowing is the most obvious. Then there are the cases where words are taken from French that have different senses in English, for example, *primordial*, which to English-speakers means dating from the earliest times or untouched, while in French it means essential. Thus, the comment "The freshness of the fish is primordial" could go unremarked in Montreal, perhaps, but certainly would cause a certain amount of confusion elsewhere. Further, Quebec is not an officially bilingual province, which means that there are no official translations for the names of provincial institutions, so English speakers get used to talking about the *Sûreté* instead of the police, and SAQ (*Société des Alcools du Québec*) instead of the liquor store.

Well, this is all very cute, but what does it mean? Why did the media find the idea that Quebec English was distinctive so entrancing? In part, I think because of its political implications. But it's a little harder to figure out what these are. Certainly the appearance of Quebec English indicates a shift from the past, when English in Quebec (except possibly at the phonological level) was much like English in the rest of Canada. Now the English-speaking community can be distinguished quite easily from the rest of Canada. One might argue that this community has been formed into a minority by linguistic discrimination; certainly there is evidence that English Quebecers have started to see themselves as a minority in Quebec rather than as part of the anglophone majority in Canada—the election of four Equality party members to the National Assembly in 1989 is evidence of that.

But one also has to think about the characteristics of this community. Although anglophones are distinguished from bilingual francophones by census questions that ask what language they first learned in childhood and

still understand, and by another question that asks what language they speak at home, what their English reveals is that many of them are bilingual. These are the people who (for the most part) chose to stay, language laws or no, when anglophone out-migration surged between 1976 and 1981, and are, one has to assume, in Quebec because they want to be there. Census figures from 1986 give the number of Quebeckers who speak English at home as almost 800,000, 12.3% of the total population of Quebec. Most (60%) of this group lives in the Montreal area. This is a small but concentrated group, and it consists of those English Canadians who identify with or at least know Quebec. One has to assume that their use of French words and expressions in their English, to the extent that it is conscious, reflects a pride in their decision to live there. However, their attachment to Quebec cannot be taken for granted: in a 1991 survey, only 35% of Quebec anglophones said they would stay if Quebec achieved sovereignty; 44% said they would not, and the remaining 21 percent did not know or did not respond (McRoberts 176). Further, surveys and actual referenda votes make it clear that this group does not support sovereignty-association or independence for Quebec. As a result, it has become a focus for argument by those who feel Quebec has gone too far in its language policies, and the government of Canada too far in supporting French outside of Quebec: "The English-speaking majority in Canada is showing a reduced willingness to support an official languages policy that promotes the use of French in all parts of Canada, but that, rightly or wrongly, is perceived to be indifferent to the decline of the anglo minority in Quebec" (Joy 5).

However, to regard the anglos of Quebec as an oppressed minority is to forget rather quickly that the institutional resources and educational facilities available to them are for the most part far better than those available to French speakers outside Quebec. The francophones of Quebec, despite their overwhelming majority in the province, have only recently managed to ensure that they do not out of economic necessity have to become bilingual to work in their own province. It is surely inconsistent to assume it is all right to control linguistic rights through economic exigency (English-speaking bosses can prefer English-speaking workers, even in a province where the majority speaks French), but not all right to do so through government policy (although the latter comes under public scrutiny, judicial control and, through the ballot box, some sort of democratic control).

Mordecai Richler writes, in his *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* that “if I thought for a moment that Francophone Quebecers were oppressed in Canada, I would be out there in the streets demonstrating with them” (239). However, it’s not clear what he means by oppression. The loss of a community’s language, however gradual and apparently voluntary, is often the result of small, almost imperceptible shifts in prestige and economic fairness. The existence of Quebec English does show that the prestige of French has risen in the province along with the shift of power in business and government to francophones. It could be regarded as a reversal of the process by which joul—a Quebec French working class dialect heavily influenced by English—was created, when rural Quebec francophones who moved to Montreal and other urban centres in the 1940s and 1950s had to learn English in order to work. But although at one point I felt that this shift in Quebec English was evidence enough that French would survive in Canada, even without language laws, I am no longer so sure.

In a nation that works by majority rule, the fewer francophone Quebecers there are, the less likely the language will be supported fully enough to guarantee survival. Demographic studies show that the proportion of francophones in Canada is declining (it is now less than a quarter of the total population), and that this decline is likely to continue. Studies also show (see Termote) that the proportion of francophones in Quebec is likely to begin to decline in between 25 and 40 years, depending on fertility rates and immigration. Studies like this encourage a feeling of desperation in Quebec nationalists, and even in those francophones who are federalists, particularly since the population of the island of Montreal is already very close to having fewer than 50% francophones.

Although I sympathize with this feeling, on reading the studies and related news stories that evince near-panic at the thought that the urban heart of Quebec was somehow being taken over by outsiders, I think the panic is exacerbated by insisting on the hard line between an anglophone and a francophone. Clearly there is a huge difference between the stereotypical BC anglophone who is affronted by French on the cereal box and someone who lives in Quebec and speaks French all day at work. Why is it so surprising that Quebec anglophones still speak English at home, particularly in a city and a country where English television, radio, and newspapers are all readily available? True, fluency in English means that one can

pack and leave with far less cost than someone who is fluent only in French. But as long as anglophones and allophones persist in speaking their first languages at home, no matter how fluent their French or strong their passions about Quebec, they will be counted in these immensely detailed demographic studies as, at best, provisional Quebecers.

The desire of demographers to define populations clearly is understandable, but dangerous. For example, Richard Joy concludes his study, *Canada's Official Languages: The Progress of Bilingualism*, by suggesting that it would be easier to compile data on language in Canada if, instead of "encouraging multiple responses to census questions on home language, mother tongue, and ethnicity" the census asked "every Canadian his or her preferred official language" (117). This sort of demand ignores the possibility that in the new multicultural urban centres of the world, a different sort of culture is growing, one that fits poorly into traditional ethnic or linguistic categories. To take an example from another large bilingual city, here is Jeanine Treffers-Daller's account of Brussels:

The Brusselers consider themselves to be different from the Walloons and the Flemings. For them, being bilingual is only natural, and they laugh as much about Flemings who refuse to speak French as about Walloons who refuse to speak Dutch. However, a genuine Brussels view of the linguistic situation in the city is not represented in the literature. In the nineteenth century, a genuine Brussels view of the linguistic situations could be found among the Brussels Flamingants, who saw in the mixed nature of the Brussels population, the "*solution inespérée* 'unexpected solution'" to the linguistic problem of Belgium. As a consequence of the growing polarization between the Flemish and Walloon communities in Belgium, the development of a distinct Brussels analysis of the situation turned out not to have any chance. (6)

Perhaps we should hope that a genuine Montreal perspective on the situation might be possible, one produced from a perspective where bilingualism is seen as something other than a negative symbol of either traitorousness or oppression. In a sense this group is the canary in the mineshaft for Canada-Quebec relations, whether Quebec achieves independence or not. As Pierre A. Coulombe points out in his *Language Rights in French Canada*, "we, in the political realm . . . make the truth by moral agreement: it is our narrative" (158). Perhaps at the centre of this narrative should lie the ideas of Quebec anglophones, who are, as their language proves, at the cusp of two cultures.

NOTE

- 1 In this editorial, certain variations in spelling have been maintained and accents left off in an effort to reflect the linguistic variety of Quebec writing.

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