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978-0-521-87432-8 - The English Language in Canada: Status, History and Comparative Analysis

Charles Boberg

Excerpt

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# 1 English in the Canadian context

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One of the most notable demolinguistic phenomena of the modern age has been the expansion of the English language, from its roots as a set of West Germanic dialects in early medieval England to its current position as the leading global lingua franca. It now has hundreds of millions of native speakers and an even larger population of non-native speakers, living in every region of the world. This expansion has involved three major phases: the anglicization of Britain's Celtic population; the transfer of English to other continents through emigration from Britain and colonialism; and the adoption of English as an international language by people in non-English-speaking countries beyond the former British Empire (the three diasporas of Kachru, Kachru and Nelson 2006, originally conceived by Kachru 1985). Part of the middle phase of expansion, beginning in the seventeenth century, was the bringing of English to North America by British colonists. These were as much Irish and Scottish as they were English, thereby reflecting the initial phase of expansion. The eventual success of their colonial project drew many more settlers, first from Britain and Europe and then from all over the world. If they did not already speak English, most of these settlers adopted it and most of their children became native speakers, so that English was established as the majority language of two new multi-ethnic nations, the United States and Canada. This book is a study of the English language in Canada: its current status, history and most important characteristics. It will not comprise a detailed survey of every regional, social or ethnic variety of English spoken in Canada: such a survey is beyond its scope and studies of local varieties of Canadian English are available elsewhere. Rather, it will principally examine the main features of what might be called Standard Canadian English, the variety spoken with subtle regional variations by most middle-class and indeed by many working-class people across the country.

This first chapter will describe and discuss the current status of English in Canada: its relationship with French, Canada's other official language; its co-existence with many other non-official languages; its major regional types; its close contact with the United States and with American English; its role as the voice of English-Canadian culture; and the body of research of which

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it has been the focus. The following chapters will examine other aspects of Canadian English: Chapter 2 will present the history of settlement that created English-speaking Canada; Chapter 3 will compare the main features of Canadian English with those of other standard varieties; Chapters 4 and 5 will analyze regional variation at the lexical and phonetic levels, respectively; while Chapter 6 will present a summary of the foregoing chapters and a brief speculation on the future of Canadian English.

### 1.1 One of two official languages

#### 1.1.1 *The roots of Canadian bilingualism*

According to the Census of Canada, there were 17,882,775 mother-tongue speakers of English in Canada in 2006. These account for about 5 percent of the world total of 337 million calculated by Crystal (1997: 60). While this seems a small proportion, Canada is in fact one of the major English-speaking nations of the world, along with the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, countries with which it shares a special cultural affinity based on a common language and history. Notwithstanding this bond, Canada is distinguished from these other anglophone nations by having two official languages: in Canada, English shares official status with French. This is a result of Canada's binational colonial history, which is examined in greater detail in Chapter 2. In fact, many Canadians would point to official English–French bilingualism as one of the defining features of Canadian nationhood, differentiating Canada from its much more powerful and influential neighbor to the south.

Whatever its value as a national symbol, the relationship between English- and French-speakers in Canada has often been difficult. It developed from open warfare in the eighteenth century to a resentful separation under British domination in the nineteenth. It then flared up again into armed hostilities in the Papineau Rebellion of 1837 and the Riel Rebellion of 1885 before subsiding into an uneasy and unstable co-existence in the twentieth century. In the title of a recent book on bilingualism in Canada, Fraser (2006) labeled Anglo-French relations “the Canadian crisis that won’t go away.” Ever since the British defeat of France at Quebec in 1759 and the transfer of France’s remaining North American colonies to Britain by the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the common thread of this troubled history has been a struggle among French Canadians to avoid marginalization and linguistic and cultural assimilation in an evermore English-speaking continent, a fate that to a large extent has befallen both the Aboriginal cultures that predate the arrival of the British and French in Canada and the successive waves of immigrants from around the world that followed their arrival.

Canada’s modern bilingual status originates in two historic developments: the colonization and settlement of the territory that now constitutes Canada

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by both France and Britain; and the decision of British colonial authorities, following the British conquest, to allow a continuation of French language, culture and institutions in Quebec, rather than attempting the complete assimilation of their French-speaking subjects into an English-speaking and culturally British society (the Quebec Act of 1774). When Canada became an autonomous British dominion in 1867, though extensive English-speaking settlement had already reduced French-speakers to less than a third of the population, the status of French as one of two national languages was protected by the British North America Act, Canada's founding legislation. Section 133 of this act stated that:

Either the English or the French Language may be used by any Person in the Debates of the Houses of the Parliament of Canada and of the Houses of the Legislature of Quebec; and both those Languages shall be used in the respective Records and Journals of those Houses; and either of those Languages may be used by any Person or in any Pleading or Process in or issuing from any Court of Canada established under this Act, and in or from all or any of the Courts of Quebec. (Canada, Department of Justice, 1983: 45–46)

When Canada revised and updated its constitution in 1982, the new Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms included a section on official languages of Canada that confirmed the provisions of the British North America Act, stating plainly in Section 16 (1) that:

English and French are the official languages of Canada and have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and government of Canada. (Canada, Department of Justice, 1983: 65)

Despite these official guarantees, the practical status of English and French in Canada has never been equal, with English in the ascendant and French struggling to survive outside its main base in Quebec. Even within Quebec, many French Canadians by the mid twentieth century felt their language and culture to be threatened by a large and powerful English-speaking minority and by a steady influx of immigrants who tended to adopt English rather than French as their second language. This situation contributed to the rise of a French-Canadian nationalist movement in the 1960s that posed a serious threat to Canadian unity. The federal government attempted to respond to this threat in 1963 by establishing a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to study the problem. The commission's findings led, in 1969, to the adoption of the federal Official Languages Act, which sought to promote bilingualism across Canada, both within federal institutions and in Canadian society as a whole, thereby making French Canadians feel more like equal partners in Confederation.

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Canada, however, is a federal state, in which administrative prerogatives are divided between the federal government, in Ottawa, and the governments of Canada's ten provinces (the three northern territories are federally administered, with more limited local autonomy). To provincial jurisdiction the British North America Act assigned such crucial legislative domains as healthcare, municipal institutions, natural resources, education and agriculture, thereby creating a decentralized federal state, in which federal power is constitutionally limited. With respect to language, this has meant that the provinces have been free to develop their own policies, as long as the federal Charter rights are respected. In large part, these policies have reflected local demolinguistic reality rather than national bilingual idealism. The reality is that speakers of Canada's two official languages, far from being evenly distributed across the country, are heavily concentrated in certain areas. Tables 1.1a and b show the number of people reporting English, French and non-official languages as their only mother tongue in each province and territory of Canada, first with the proportion of each province or territory's population accounted for by each language group (Table 1.1a), then with the proportion of each language group accounted for by each province or territory (Table 1.1b). In discussions of language use in Canada, these groups are referred to respectively as *anglophones*, *francophones* and *allophones* (from the Greek for *other*).

Beyond the general national predominance of English over French (57 vs. 22 percent), Tables 1.1a and b show the uneven territorial distribution of speakers of Canada's two official languages. The large majority of francophones live in Quebec (86 percent), where they constitute the majority of the provincial population (79 percent), while the rest of Canada is mainly English-speaking, with relatively few francophones. New Brunswick, on Quebec's eastern border, is the only other province where francophones constitute more than 5 percent of the population. Indeed, Quebec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, the latter two of which attract very little overseas immigration, are the only provinces or territories where francophones are not outnumbered by speakers of non-official languages as the second-largest linguistic group after English. This has meant that full, official bilingualism at the provincial level is restricted to New Brunswick, where francophones make up a third of the population, while the provincial governments of Ontario and Manitoba provide services in French to their proportionally smaller francophone populations on an as-needed basis. The French Language Services Act introduced by Ontario in 1986, for example, guarantees the right of Franco-Ontarians to receive provincial government services in French in twenty-five designated areas. It is overseen by an Office of Francophone Affairs, which seeks to encourage Ontario's francophones to participate fully in provincial life while maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage.

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Table 1.1a *Mother tongues in Canada, 2006 (single responses by province and territory, with percentage of total populations) (see Map 1 for locations)*

Province	Tot. pop.	English	% of tot.	French	% of tot.	Non-official	% of tot.
BC	4,074,385	2,875,775	70.6	54,740	1.3	1,091,530	26.8
Alberta	3,256,360	2,576,665	79.1	61,225	1.9	583,525	17.9
Sask.	953,845	811,730	85.1	16,055	1.7	118,465	12.4
Manitoba	1,133,515	838,415	74.0	43,960	3.9	236,315	20.8
Ontario	12,028,895	8,230,705	68.4	488,815	4.1	3,134,045	26.1
Quebec	7,435,900	575,560	7.7	5,877,660	79.0	886,280	11.9
NB	719,650	463,190	64.4	232,980	32.4	18,320	2.5
NS	903,090	832,105	92.1	32,540	3.6	34,620	3.8
PEI	134,205	125,265	93.3	5,345	4.0	2,960	2.2
Nfld/Lab.	500,610	488,405	97.6	1,885	0.4	9,540	1.9
Yukon	30,195	25,655	85.0	1,105	3.7	3,180	10.5
NWT	41,955	31,545	76.8	970	2.4	8,160	19.9
Nunavut	29,325	7,765	26.5	370	1.3	20,885	71.2
Canada	31,241,030	17,882,775	57.2	6,817,655	21.8	6,147,840	19.7

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Canada.

Table 1.1b *Mother tongues in Canada, 2006 (proportion of total population and of each language group living in each province) (see Map 1 for locations)*

Province	Tot. pop. (%)	English (%)	French (%)	Non-official (%)
BC	13.0	16.1	0.8	17.8
Alberta	10.4	14.4	0.9	9.5
Sask.	3.1	4.5	0.2	1.9
Manitoba	3.6	4.7	0.6	3.8
Ontario	38.5	46.0	7.2	51.0
Quebec	23.8	3.2	86.2	14.4
NB	2.3	2.6	3.4	0.3
NS	2.9	4.7	0.5	0.6
PEI	0.4	0.7	0.1	0.0
Nfld/Lab.	1.6	2.7	0.0	0.2
Yukon	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
NWT	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.1
Nunavut	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.3
Canada	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Canada.

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### 1.1.2 *English and French in Quebec*

The situation of English and French in Quebec deserves special consideration, since it is very different from that in the rest of Canada, having been shaped by a program of massive government intervention designed to prevent a gradual decline in the vitality of French. This program has met with some success and has therefore attracted considerable attention outside Quebec, particularly from those in language-planning circles who are interested in sustaining the viability of minority or traditional languages, or in moderating, stopping or reversing the global expansion of English. Unfortunately, the effort to support French in Quebec has had the secondary effect of damaging Quebec's English-speaking community, a fact that is of less interest to the world's language planners but cannot be ignored by the half million English-speakers who remain in the province. Indeed, while English thrives in the rest of Canada, gaining new speakers every year, in Quebec it has been in retreat during the three decades since Quebec's language laws came into effect. These developments have been highly controversial and have generated a huge body of comment and analysis in both popular and academic circles, from a wide range of perspectives. Here, in keeping with the focus of this book, the author will attempt a summary of the main issues from the perspective of their impact on the English-speaking community, and offer some of his own views of this much debated situation.

In Quebec, the Official Languages Act and the guarantees of linguistic equality in the Federal constitution, referred to in the previous section, were not enough to quell many French Canadians' fears of linguistic attrition and assimilation, while a smaller group believed the only way to secure the future of the French language and francophone culture in North America was political separation from Canada. In fact, following passage of the Official Languages Act, French Canadian nationalism seemed to grow rather than ebb. It came to focus on four perceived threats to the future survival of French: the general decline of francophones as a proportion of the Canadian population; the declining birth rate of francophones in Quebec; freedom of choice in language of schooling; and the dominant position of English in commerce and industry (d'Anglejan 1984: 31–36). To a large extent, these threats were seen to be interrelated.

The most pressing concern of the nationalists was the assimilation of immigrants into anglophone rather than francophone culture, an issue that rose to prominence because of a sharp decline in the birth rate of native Quebec francophones. Until the 1960s, Quebec's francophone population had been not only sustained but increased by a high birth rate, consistent with the Roman Catholic values and traditional family structure of the majority of the population. During the nineteenth century, Quebec women had an average of six children each; the average was as high as eight among rural francophones, which was double the average for anglophones. This produced

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a large increase in the francophone population known as *la revanche des berceaux*, ‘the revenge of the cradles’ (Henripin 1989: 31). As late as the 1950s the rate was still close to four children per woman, well above the level required to balance deaths (Henripin 1989: 35, 51). The growing immigrant populations of Canada and Quebec tended to favor English as their adopted language: even in Quebec, transfers to English during the post-war immigrant boom were more than twice as common as transfers to French (Caldwell 1974: 52; Charbonneau and Maheu 1973: 71). Despite this pattern, natural increase of the francophone population balanced immigrant additions to the English-speaking population and maintained traditional proportions of francophones: about a third of Canada and 80 percent of Quebec.

The societal changes that accompanied Quebec’s *Quiet Revolution* in the 1960s threatened to alter this balance, however, by causing the proportion of francophones in both Canada and Quebec to shrink. A rebellion against the traditional power and influence of the Church in Quebec society challenged traditional family structures and encouraged the practice of contraception and abortion, while the rise of feminism meant that younger Quebec women were better educated, more independent and less interested in devoting their lives to raising children than their mothers had been. As a result, by 1971 the birth rate was cut in half; over the following decade it dropped further, until it was fewer than two children per woman. This was not enough to sustain the current population, let alone match the continued growth of the increasingly anglophone immigrant population; by the mid 1980s it had reached a low of one and a half children per woman (Henripin 1989: 35). In light of these changes, which seemed unlikely to be reversed, it became clear to language planners that maintaining the historic proportions of francophones would depend on compelling immigrants to speak French rather than English (Henripin 1973). A failure to do so threatened demographic doom, at least in the long term. One demographic projection made in 1969 predicted that by the year 2000, in the absence of corrective governmental intervention, the proportion of francophones would decline from 82 percent to 72 percent in Quebec as a whole and from 66 percent to 53 percent in Montreal (Charbonneau, Henripin and Légaré 1970: 201). Another, similar projection was made for the year 1991 by Charbonneau and Maheu (1973: 292). The cause of this projected decline was not natural increase among Quebec anglophones: their rate of natural increase was also dropping and remained consistently below that of francophones (Charbonneau and Maheu 1973: 279; Paillé 1985: 108). It was the growth of the immigrant population. By the late 1970s, 72 percent of Montreal allophones were transferring to English, compared to only 28 percent transferring to French (Paillé 1985: 55).

The main assimilatory agent causing the transfer of immigrant populations to English was clearly the school system in which immigrant children were educated. In 1969, the Quebec government attempted to address this concern by adopting Bill 63, which respected the right of parents to choose



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the language of instruction for their children while encouraging immigrant children to attend French schools and ensuring that all children developed an adequate knowledge of French. Unfortunately, far from appeasing nationalist sentiment, Bill 63 aggravated it by appearing to enshrine the principle of free choice: without stricter controls, it was assumed that most immigrants would continue to choose English. Moreover, Bill 63 did nothing to address another systemically related concern, the language of work. One of the reasons that immigrants wanted English-language education for their children, and that many French Canadians themselves felt a need to learn English, was that English was still a necessary language in many workplaces and was strongly associated with upward social mobility. To satisfy these concerns, which were examined by the provincially appointed Gendron Commission from 1968 to 1973 (Government of Quebec 1972), Bill 63 was superseded in 1974 by Bill 22. This more comprehensive law made French the official language of Quebec; implemented a process of *francisation* of the workplace; and abolished freedom of choice in education, restricting English-language education to children with sufficient pre-existing knowledge of English, thereby effectively barring non-English-speaking immigrant children from attendance.

Finally, in the provincial election of 1976, an avowedly separatist group, the Parti Québécois, was elected to office. Its first legislative business was to introduce Bill 101, now Law 101, the controversial Charter of the French Language (1977), which sought to go farther even than Bill 22 in establishing Quebec as an exclusively French-speaking domain. The Charter ended the remaining official use of English in government and law (thereby overturning the bilingual status conferred on Quebec by the British North America Act); made *francisation* mandatory for large businesses; limited access to English education to children whose parents or siblings had been educated in English in Quebec; and introduced what was to become its most iconic measure, a ban on English commercial signage, as part of an intended *francisation* of Montreal itself. Some provisions of the Charter were subsequently challenged successfully in the courts and had to be softened: English education rights were extended to children whose parents had been educated in English anywhere in Canada; and the ban on English signs, declared a violation of Canadians' constitutional right to freedom of expression, was replaced with a requirement that French be predominant over other languages (Bill 178, 1988 and Bill 86, 1993). This predominance was to be measured and enforced by a team of inspectors, derisively called by their detractors the "language police." The inspectors' efforts, particularly when directed at such evidently absurd targets as imported British beer coasters, kosher food products and "authentic" Irish pubs, or against apparently trivial orthographic infringements like apostrophes in business names or the lack of a final <e> on *Tavern*, have frequently attracted scorn and ridicule in Montreal's anglophone community. More seriously, they have often been resented by the affected businesses as harassment and bullying, given the businesses' responsibility



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for buying and installing new signage and the government's power to levy fines for non-compliance.

Not surprisingly, while it was welcomed by most francophones, the Charter met with overwhelming disapproval among anglophones. Locher (1988: 83) reports a survey showing over 80 percent of anglophones opposed to the law and fewer than 10 percent in favor (see also Levine 1990: 119–120). Among many it was perceived as a direct attack on their rights and on their historic status as one of the founding peoples of modern Quebec (Taylor and Dubé-Simard 1984). Caldwell (1982: 60) presents statistics showing that English Quebecers have consistently made up about a fifth of the province's population going back to the 1840s; Rudin (1985: 28) shows that they made up 10 percent of the population – more than twice the proportion of francophones in any Canadian province other than Quebec or New Brunswick today – as early as 1812; Provost (1984) documents the already considerable English community of over a thousand people resident in Montreal by the 1770s (see also Levine 1990: 8). In a flagrant denial of this history, the Charter sought to impose a unilingual state on a bilingual society.

The Charter's principal architect, Parti Québécois cabinet minister Camille Laurin, denied any anti-English sentiment in its intent. He insisted that its main goal was “to give the people of Quebec concrete means with which to express their own identity and to make it respected everywhere by all, without committing injustice” and “to assure, in a climate of respect for others, the expansion of the French language in all domains of the social life of Quebec”. He emphasized, moreover, that it “was not adopted to stifle the expression of an English culture in Quebec” and that the spirit of its authors was “far from meanness or a spirit of vengeance in regard to the anglophone community.” On the contrary, he predicted that “the English community will remain vital in Quebec” and urged that, “if this community undertakes to integrate itself increasingly in the cultural life of Quebec, without ever renouncing its language, identity or institutions, this will enrich Quebec society” (the author's own translation of Laurin 1980: 9).

Nevertheless, to some of its opponents the Charter seemed to be exactly what Laurin claimed it was not: a mean-spirited, vengeful attack on Quebec's English community. William Johnson, a harsh critic of Bill 101, argues that this attack was the culmination of a long history of anglophobia in French Canadian society; a suspicion, resentment and even hatred of “the English” that has deep roots in the intellectual and literary traditions of Quebec, nurtured by a cultural memory of the British Conquest (Johnson 1991; see also Scowen 1991: 143–147). For the Catholic clergy who dominated traditional Quebec society, the English were the main local representatives of Protestantism, in their eyes a dangerous heresy, as well as of secular liberalism, a further threat to the spiritual well-being of their parishioners. For the secular leaders of modern Quebec, the English were the capitalist elite, a convenient scapegoat for the frustrations of the French-Canadian people and a target for the resentment of its working class in particular: fanning that resentment

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could serve the interests of an aspiring populist politician or union organizer. For their part, some of the English had perhaps encouraged this resentment by an imperious assumption of their own superiority and a refusal to learn or use French: they had behaved like colonial overlords in a conquered land. Of course, most of the English were not members of any elite and bilingualism was higher among Quebec's anglophones (37 percent) than among francophones (26 percent) even in 1971 (Termote and Gauvreau 1988: 65), but such facts do not get in the way of ethnic stereotyping. Another factor sometimes alluded to in arguments about language laws is the history of anglophone treatment of francophone minorities in English-speaking provinces, which was not always as generous or nurturing as Ontario's current policy, in some cases ranging from neglect to hostility. Though most anglophones, as is evident in Ontario's current approach, now admit that such treatment was wrong or at least regrettable, its legacy has been to contribute to francophones' sense of themselves as a threatened minority and to encourage their resentment of English dominance.

Whether or not the Charter was conceived in a spirit of vengeance, its approach does seem to discount the crucial role that anglophones played in the development of several regions of Quebec, especially the Gaspé, Quebec City, the Ottawa Valley, the Eastern Townships and of course Montreal. It appears to reject the two-centuries-old bilingual culture of Montreal in particular, which was once the most important metropolis of Canada and a symbol of its national bilingual and bicultural identity. Indeed, in the mid nineteenth century, a small majority of Montrealers were anglophones: Levine (1990: 8) says this was true as early as 1831 and that, by 1851, 55 percent of the population of 60,000 was of British ethnic origin (see also Rudin 1985: 36, who points out that even Quebec City was 44 percent anglophone in 1861). It was a comparatively high francophone birth rate (the *revanche des berceaux* discussed above), together with the migration of a surplus rural population into the city to find work (often in businesses established by anglophones), that restored a francophone majority later in the century. But the creation of modern Montreal as a major industrial city in the nineteenth century, and its further development in the twentieth, had relied crucially on the contributions of English-speakers (Baillie and Baillie 2001; Rudin 1985: 69–93, 201–221).

Despite this history, the goal of the francophone nationalist movement, and of the Charter, appeared to be the development of an exclusive equivalence between the “national” culture of Quebec and the French language, a blending of civic and ethnic entities through an identification of the state with the language and culture of the majority of its citizens. No longer French Canadians, an ethnolinguistic minority within Canada, these citizens would be *québécois*, the people of a francophone state. To that end, the Charter aimed not simply to ensure a place for French alongside English in public life, or even to establish a dominance of French corresponding to