

Linguistic diversity and use of English and French in Canada: 2021 Census of Population

On Aug. 17, Statistics Canada is scheduled to release *linguistic diversity and use of English and French in Canada* data produced through the 2021 Census. This category of data release tends to generate intense media interest – especially in Quebec – and these Census results are being released at a particularly sensitive juncture, given that the Government of Canada’s C-13 [An Act to amend the Official Languages Act, to enact the Use of French in Federally Regulated Private Businesses Act and to make related amendments to other Acts](#) is making its way through Parliament.

Although the data itself is objective, how it will be used and interpreted upon release is likely to prove an exercise fraught with subjectivity and political messaging. Because of this, it is essential to bear in mind several basic concepts while critically evaluating Census reporting and interpretation by reporters, columnists, and others.

What is being measured?

No fewer than [eleven language variables](#) are collected during the Census. And for the first time, Census 2021 results will be used to estimate the number of children who have a constitutional right to attend official language minority schools in their province or territory of residence. (We are reserving detailed examination of this element for an upcoming blog post.)

Since Canada has two official languages, the Census splits Canadians into two language categories: those whose first official language spoken (FOLS) is French, and those for whom it is English. FOLS is derived from questions that cover knowledge of official languages, language spoken most often at home, and mother tongue. Note that FOLS is an inclusive way to define English and French minority communities, since it accounts for people whose mother tongue is neither French nor English, using knowledge and use of an official language as a way to place those individuals into one of the country’s two official language columns. Following the previous Census in 2016, the FOLS English population of Quebec was determined to be just over 1.1 million persons.

Mother tongue – the first language a person learned and still understands – is another variable. This variable more finely subdivides the linguistic pie. By this measure, Quebec’s population of English only mother tongue citizens in 2016 was determined to be just over 600 000 people.

FOLS and mother tongue variables are used to linguistically define people and populations. Other variables include knowledge of non-official languages; languages used at work; and at home.

As you can see, the particular language variable on which a commentator chooses to focus can easily make an immense difference on the impression that is left with the reader or listener. Population growth in Canada is achieved through immigration, so the number of non-English or non-French mother tongue speakers is increasing. But in Quebec anyway – as pointed out by the *Office québécois de la langue française* (OQLF)ⁱ – the public use of French is stable. Depending on the variables chosen, both of

the following statements are true: there is a decline of French in Quebec (that is in the number of mother-tongue single response Francophones as a percentage of the total population, thus a decline of the French as a distinct and narrowly defined group); and, there is no decline of French in Quebec (as in the public use of French).

Geography

Likewise, a great deal of attention is often paid to the language demographics of Montreal. However, in this instance again, we are faced with an imprecision: what exactly do we mean by Montreal? From Statistics Canada's perspective, there are several options. These include Montreal Census Division (the Island of Montreal); the City of Montreal (Ville de Montréal); and the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), which includes the region surrounding the city, often referred to as the *couronne de Montréal*. The FOLS English population of the City of Montreal in 2016 was just over 28 per cent. For the CMA, it was 22 per cent. For the Montreal Census Division (which includes the West Island), it was 32.6 per cent.

It is quite apparent that the approach adopted – and above all the conclusions and policy considerations put forward – by any particular commentator will largely be driven by the particular language variables and geographies on which he or she has chosen to focus. Readers should be especially alert to this.

What's new?

A new language variable is also being measured in the 2021 Census, the *Potential demand for federal communications and services in the minority official language*.

The rights of Canadians to be served in the official language of their individual choice has historically been tied to the determination of what constitutes sufficient demand. In a nutshell, for most federal government services, a critical mass of official language minority demand must be deemed to exist in order to trigger the right. Exceptions to this general rule are in place for some services. Notably, the head offices of federal institutions – no matter where they are located – must provide services in English and French.

Outside Quebec, a decline has been under way in the number of FOLS Francophones. As a result, over time fewer and fewer points of federal service have been deemed to be obliged to serve Canadians in French. To address this issue, changes were adopted to [Official Languages \(Communications with and Services to the Public\) Regulations](#). These amended the way demand is measured. Among other elements, a new language variable was developed based on knowledge of official languages; language spoken *regularly* at home; and mother tongue. This comprises the new *Potential demand for federal communications and services in the minority official language* variable.

Expect this new variable to be determined to be about 20 to 30 per cent higher than the FOLS number. Alarm can be expected from some media commentators, who are very likely to try to use this new figure out of context, in order to trumpet that the fresh Census data provides proof positive of a further decline of French in Quebec.

As noted earlier in this post, Statistics Canada is expected in November to release new data estimating the number of children eligible to attend minority language schools under [Section 23 rights of one of their parents, via the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#). Several challenges are associated with

this first-time attempt to provide this data, not the least of which is that Section 23 constitutes a floor, not a ceiling. Further analysis will be conducted when the data is released.

What to expect

In 2017, René Houle and Jean-Pierre Corbeil published [*Language Projections for Canada, 2011 to 2036*](#). This is a key study that has been used as the basis for a number of other language projections – including those published by the OQLF. As already noted, immigration drives population growth in Canada, and a great many immigrants do not have English or French as a mother tongue. As a result, English and French mother tongue populations are either declining or growing at a slower rate than non-mother English/French groups. In Quebec, the children of immigrants are in general obliged to attend primary and secondary school in French. As with their Francophone peers, they are also likely to speak English – given that the rate of English/French bilingualism in Quebec is increasing.

If you recall the criteria used to determine FOLS – knowledge of official languages; language spoken most often at home; and mother tongue – you will understand that the number of FOLS English citizens in Quebec is predicted to rise to about 18 per cent by 2036. Expect the community’s FOLS numbers to increase from the 2016 Census. And look for a decline in the proportional number of single-response English and French mother tongue citizens.

“Lies, damned lies, and statistics,” goes the famous saying attributed to Benjamín Disraeli by Mark Twain. Keep this in the back of your mind when you are reading or listening to some of the more florid and perhaps even somewhat inflammatory commentaries we can expect when the 2021 Census language data is released later this month!

ⁱ Rapport sur l’évolution de la situation linguistique au Québec / Office québécois de la langue française, Direction de la recherche, de l’évaluation et de la vérification interne.
<https://www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/ressources/sociolinguistique/2019/rapport-evolution-situation-linguistique.pdf>