Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages
Commissariat aux langues officielles

WHAT NEW CANADIANS CAN TELL US ABOUT THE CANADA OF TOMORROW

DISCUSSION FORUMS ON THE PERSPECTIVES OF CANADIANS OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS ON LINGUISTIC DUALITY

SUMMARY REPORT

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What New Canadians Can Tell Us about the Canada of Tomorrow

Introduction

Canada is internationally renowned as a welcoming and peaceful country, a "host society," with a wealth of experience integrating newcomers from around the globe. This experience dates back more than 40 years, when policy initiatives to better accommodate the needs of "new Canadians" followed in the wake of Canada's great debate on French-English relations.

Today, Canada has one of the highest per capita immigration rates in the world, and statisticians estimate that by 2031 fully one quarter of the Canadian population will be first-generation immigrants.[1] Although this is a significant number, experts are relatively confident that Canada's multiculturalism policy will ensure continued political and economic integration of these newcomers.[2] Maintaining the vitality of Canada's two official languages in the context of these changing demographics may prove rather more challenging, however.

Among the hundreds of thousands of non-native speakers that arrive each year, the vast majority adopt English as their official language of choice and do not speak or learn French. What's more, the proportion of French-speakers among immigrants to Canada is dwindling. A recent Statistics Canada report concludes that "the growing proportion of non-bilingual immigrants within the total population contributed to a decline in the overall rate of bilingualism. Hence, in 1981, immigrants represented 19% of the non-bilingual population outside Quebec. In 2011, the proportion was 24%."[3]

In other words, the proportion of bilingual immigrants outside Quebec is declining. This makes it increasingly difficult for French-speaking minority communities to maintain their demographic proportion of the population. Some commentators have concluded that Canadian bilingualism is consequently unsustainable and that French is destined to join the many other non-official languages spoken across the country.

Indeed, instead of identifying challenges and proposing solutions, the media have opted for a defeatist narrative of decline.[4] The pervasiveness of this narrative underlines the importance of thinking seriously about the future of Canadian bilingualism alongside the country's changing multicultural reality. Are these cornerstones of Canadian identity somehow functioning at cross-purposes? How can we maximize their compatibility?

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[1] Statistics Canada, *International Migrations 2009*, July 2011; *Canadian Demographics at a Glance*, 2008.

[2] See for example Will Kymlicka and Keith Banting, "Canadian Multiculturalism: Global Anxieties and Local Debates," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 23/1 (2010).

[3] Statistics Canada, *The evolution of English-French bilingualism in Canada from 1961 to 2011,* May 2013.

[4] Consider, for example, the media's pessimistic conclusions to the above-mentioned Statistics Canada study. Some of the headlines include "Immigration Shapes the Fall of Bilingualism," **"**Bilingualism rate drops for first time since Pierre Trudeau on back of immigrant influx," "French, English Bilingualism on the Wane," "Bilinguisme pancanadien - Labourer la mer."

One way to refresh our thinking about these difficult questions is to consider the views of new Canadians themselves—the men and women who face the daily challenges of integrating into Canadian society, and the children who grow up in these families. Between 2007 and 2012, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages organized a series of discussion forums with first- and second-generation Canadians of diverse cultural backgrounds. The forums took place in four major Canadian cities: Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax and Montréal.

The aim of the forums was to learn how these diverse groups of men and women perceived Canadian linguistic duality. The discussion forums provided a rich opportunity for thinking about the future of Canadian bilingualism, given the country's increasingly diverse, multicultural population. This report recaps some of what was heard during these discussions.

The first part of the report offers a snapshot of the historical development of bilingualism and multiculturalism in the context of evolving Canadian identity. The next section highlights what forum participants had to say about the challenges and opportunities of linguistic duality in the current context. Finally, the report summarizes the current debate on a changing Canadian identity and suggests areas of further research and policy innovation.

Identity politics yesterday and today

The latest chapter of Canada's long history of language relations dates back to the well-known creation of the *Official Languages Act* in 1969. But language relations in Canada have a much longer history than this. Relations were first brokered in the years following the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759. It would have been unsurprising at the time for the British victors to impose their language, laws and religion in the colony of Québec. Instead, thanks to *habitant* resilience and official tolerance, the French language remained vigorous and predominant in both public and private life.[5]

In the 1840s, Robert Baldwin assisted Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine in repealing the Act of Union clause banning the use of French in the Legislature; the clause had originally been proposed by Lord Durham as a means of assimilating French-Canadians. Nearly three decades later, the protection of French was entrenched in the country's founding document, the *Constitution Act, 1867*. By consecrating some of the more institutional uses of French—in laws, in the federal

[5] This was primarily because French-Canadians were permitted to continue practising Roman Catholicism and to retain their civil law tradition and customs. The period following the Conquest was a formative one for French-English relations in Canada. The *Canadiens* were traumatized by their defeat, as well as by having been abandoned by the mother country, France. Meanwhile, the British rulers who took over were for various reasons fairly tolerant. It is significant that the first ruler of the colony, Governor James Murray, was said to have loved and admired the French-Canadians as a people. See Christian Dufour, *Le défi québécois*, 1990.

Parliament and Quebec Legislature, as well as before federal and Quebec courts—the Act effectively formalized policies that had gradually taken root since 1759.[6]
This first, formative phase of language politics in Canada leading up to 1867 was central in shaping the country's national identity. It presaged what Northrop Frye has referred to as the "Canadian genius for compromise."[7] To be sure, there were repeated attempts to marginalize the French fact during this time, such as with Durham's unification of the Canadas; but the political sensibility that ultimately triumphed acknowledged the need for dialogue to deal with the enduring will of French-Canadians to develop and prosper.[8]

Implicit in the evolving Canadian identity was a core principle of respect, reaching across French-English barriers of culture and language. The Fathers of Confederation, and those who inspired them, understood this well. On the last night of the Confederation Debates, on March 10, 1865, John A. Macdonald responded to a question about the status of French in the new political arrangement that was being developed. "[T]he use of the French language should form one of the principles on which the Confederation should be established," he said.[9]

Although this founding principle has been betrayed on several occasions since Confederation, language politics in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s underscored how deeply the principle was ingrained. Thus, despite such repressive episodes as the abrogation of official bilingualism in Manitoba in 1890 and the abolition of Ontario French schools in 1912, the original principle of respect resurfaced with great urgency and enthusiasm during the tenure of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the 1960s.

As this pivotal moment in Canadian language relations was playing out, another facet of the principle of respect arose with regard to new Canadians. Just as French-Canadians fought against the spread of British imperialism earlier in the century, minority immigrant communities sought freedom from the repressive mould of "Anglo-conformity."[10] As such, beyond the strong

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[6] In addition, the Act's protection of denominational schools was commonly interpreted as a guarantee of the freedom to choose the language of education for one's children. See Barbara Burnaby, "Language Policies in Canada," in Michael Herriman and Barbara Burnaby, eds., *Language Policies in English-dominant Countries: Six Case Studies,* Multilingual Matters, 1996.

[7] Northrop Frye, *Literary History of Canada*, 1965, p. 345. The full sentence reads "The Canadian genius for compromise is reflected in the existence of Canada itself."

[8] Historian Jocelyn Létourneau argues that it is on the basis of such dialogue that "francophones, from their seat in Québec, became a major political community in Canada." See "What History for the Future of Canada" in *A History for the Future*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, p. 86.

[9] Richard Gwyn, *John A: The Man Who Made Us*, Random House Canada, 2007, p. 323.

[10] For insight on the social implications of British imperialism in Canada see Daniel Francis, "Your Majesty's Realm: The Myth of the Master Race" in *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997. Canadian historian Philip Buckner offers an interesting observation related to this point. He comments that Canadian identity is characterized by distinguishing features: the cohesiveness of the French-speaking ethnic core, and the prolonged length and strength of the British connection. See *Canada and the End of Empire*, University of British Columbia Press, 2005.

reaffirmation of language-based respect, this period also saw the rise of a new facet of Canadian identity where pluralistic cultural diversity is cherished and accommodated.[11]

Today, a half-century later, Canadians have integrated these dual facets into a unique, deeply diverse national identity. However, such a distinctly *civic* identity—that is, an identity based on values and laws, as opposed to ethnic ties—is in need of constant reaffirmation, particularly given its complex, multifaceted nature.[12] Canada's present civic identity is relatively young in historical terms and is subject to ongoing changes and pressures, not least of which is the demographic restructuring resulting from immigration.

We noted above the pressures coming from the spread of a harmful narrative forecasting the decline of Canadian bilingualism. Instead of embracing the full breadth of both bilingualism and multiculturalism, each of which speaks to Canada's unique national identity, some influential commentators impose a simplistic either-or logic suggesting that bilingualism is passé and that multiculturalism is the way of the future. So, for example, *Globe and Mail* editor John Ibbitson contrasts an unrealistic bilingual country with a view of Canada as a cosmopolitan, multicultural utopia:

> I have argued in the past that Canada failed as a country, thanks to the inability of English and French to do more than tolerate each other. But that very tolerance, that culture of accommodation, produced what could be called the world's first post-national state: the urban, polyglot, intensely creative and simply fabulous country that we live in, and celebrate, today.[13]

The demographic projections for Canada in the decades ahead undoubtedly present a challenge for Canadian bilingualism. But instead of bringing enthusiasm and creativity to the table, these commentators mask their defeatism in illusory "post-national" theories. Those who believe in Canadian linguistic duality have a responsibility to challenge such narratives with broad-minded assessments and convincing ways forward. An important, if commonly overlooked, part of any such assessment involves taking into account the views of new Canadians themselves.

The forums

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[11] The basic aims of Canada's multicultural policy are to 1) recognize and accommodate diversity 2) remove barriers to full participation 3) promote interchange between groups and 4) promote official languages acquisition. For further information see Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way*: *Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

[12] The concept of "deep diversity" was developed by philosopher Charles Taylor. It is an interpretation of Canadian cultural diversity that superimposes two levels of diversity, one based on Canada's historic communities of belonging (i.e., French-Canadian/Québécois and Aboriginal) and the other based on belonging by way of one's legal rights as an individual citizen, whose background may be any one of the world's cultures and civilizations.

[13] This citation is from Ibbitson's "The Literary Review of Canada Presents" talk on December 5, 2011. This same narrative is implicit in his much talked about recent book, co-authored with Darrell Bricker, *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business and Culture, and What it means for our Future*, 2013.

The participant base and focus of the four forums held between 2007 and 2012 varied by region. Typically, there were 30 to 50 participants at each forum, consisting largely of leaders from Canada's main ethno-cultural groups, whether from Europe, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Asia, the Middle East or Africa. The forums held in Toronto and Vancouver offered interesting insights on the willingness and ability of English-speaking immigrants to learn French. The two-day French and English forums held in Montréal and Halifax offered additional insight on the challenges faced by French-speaking newcomers.

For the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages the input received from the discussion forums was both positive and negative. It was positive in terms of the overall appreciation expressed for the values underpinning the deeply diverse Canadian identity. Bilingualism and multiculturalism were praised as valuable and complementary civic ideals. The negative feedback, by contrast, had mostly to do with problems of implementation. These first- and second-generation Canadians showed they were keen on meshing their own cultural background with the bilingual heritage of their adopted homeland, but felt they lacked the institutional means to do so. The problem as they saw it was a gap between rhetoric and reality.

The experiences participants shared and the ideas they exchanged tended to reflect the linguistic realities of their corner of the country. Evidently, one's relation to French or English will differ significantly depending on whether one has previous familiarity with either or both of these languages, and whether one is settling in British Columbia or, say, New-Brunswick. It is noteworthy, however, that no matter where the forum was held, participants showed a strong appreciation for the ideal of linguistic duality. Far from seeing Canadian bilingualism as doomed to failure, participants emphasized the mutually reinforcing linkages they saw between this ideal and that of Canadian multiculturalism.

One view heard repeatedly throughout the forums was that Canada's policy of bilingualism—not only the right to services but also the encouragement and incentives for all Canadians to learn a second official language—is a uniquely important means of cultivating a tolerant and open attitude toward other cultures and languages from around the world. Participants felt that by learning a second official language, Canadians are better able to appreciate the journey upon which newcomers embark when moving to Canada. As one participant put it, the promotion of linguistic duality "gets people out of their enclaves and helps to create a society where people are willing to learn."

The forums also revealed that new Canadians saw personal benefits from learning both official languages. There is a clear sense among new Canadians that knowing both English and French is a professional asset, one that can help them realize their ambitions. For example, we heard the story of Peter Liang, a Statistics Canada employee in Vancouver, who decided soon after starting his job that he would be better at serving Canadians if he were able to work in both languages.

When he joined the public service, he already spoke English, Mandarin and Cantonese; yet he set out with enthusiastic determination to learn French too. He joined conversation clubs, studied grammar books, used the federal government's Campus *direct* services and even organized bilingual activities at Statistics Canada. For two years, learning French was, as he put it, "his number one passion." Quite incredibly, in relatively short order, he managed to advance to the highest level in the federal government language examinations. Looking back on the experience, he said:

> Learning French has been a tremendously rewarding experience for me. I started off thinking that it would be great for my career, but I have gained so much more. Through this journey, which I will undoubtedly continue, I have come to discover and embrace another side of the Canadian identity and heritage. I am prouder than ever to say that I am a true Canadian.

This citation neatly captures why new Canadians want to learn both official languages, highlighting as it does both pragmatic and ideological motivations for bilingualism. The words "prouder than ever" speak to the effort newcomers are willing to invest when it comes to living the Canadian dream. Ironically, this suggests that when it comes to learning a second official language, newcomers to Canada could be role models for other Canadians.

There was a third source of motivation mentioned at the forums, one that is particularly meaningful for Canada's first- and second-generation immigrant youth. In today's increasingly globalized society, there is a sense among young immigrants that speaking several languages is a standard expectation. We heard that "multilingualism is modern," as it offers a unique window of opportunity for worldwide civic engagement. For them, one of the upshots of learning French and English is that both are prominent on the world stage. In Halifax, we heard from a young English-speaker who had arrived from Ghana and rapidly picked up French. Commenting on the source of his motivation, he noted, "I've always thought that learning French is particularly important because it's spoken on every continent and it opens doors to amazing cultures."

Participants from the forums had many positive and encouraging things to say about Canadian linguistic duality. But, as mentioned above, the feedback was not all positive. Very rarely was the criticism at the level of values. Rather, it was aimed at the perceived disparity between the professed values of bilingualism, which participants wholly endorsed, and the lived reality of first- and second-generation Canadians. Participants from the Toronto forum, who remarked on the lack of information and poor quality of services in French, felt that the country has yet to "resolve its internal contradictions." Public policy, they said, must be adapted to better reflect the country's fundamental values.

Participants from other forums agreed that there were important "contradictions" that needed to be resolved. One such problem was the lack of opportunities for both children and adults to learn a second official language, particularly French. If Canada truly sought to promote bilingualism, why would such opportunities not be made widely available, they asked. Another

frequently mentioned problem was the pattern of perceived contradictions pertaining to policies across different levels of government. So, for example, at the Vancouver forum, participants recalled their surprise, upon settling in Canada, when they discovered that French was not mandatory in British Columbia's public education system.

These same participants expressed surprise and disappointment at the lack of opportunity for taking adult French language classes. The basic assessment of English-speaking representatives across the different forums was that the demand from their communities for such training far outstripped the supply. One participant referred enthusiastically and promotionally to Israel's *ulpan* program, which offers 500 hours of free Hebrew-language training to newcomers.

Another suggestion, rich in possibilities, would be to take certain bold steps forward regarding the "right-to-learn" aspect of language policy in Canada. Instead of simply being geared toward children belonging to official language minority communities, this principle could be extended to all men, women and children, across all parts of the country. It is not clear how this principle could be implemented. But it was felt that its realization would enhance the coherence of Canadian public policy. One participant remarked:

> Ideally, all Canadians should have an opportunity to become bilingual. There is a myth that Western Canadians do not value French; they do, but there are not the opportunities for everyone to get the chance to learn French in a thorough way.

At the Halifax and Toronto forums, a different kind of problem was raised, this one pertaining to French-speaking newcomers in search of the Francophone community in their respective region. Among the many hurdles faced by newcomers, newly arrived Francophone families that settle outside Quebec are often faced with the challenge of locating Francophone institutions, networks and services. Participants indicated there is a problem of "visibility" in this regard. When French-speaking families are able to find the local Francophone community, it allows them to forge lasting social ties and a sense of community connection. However, participants felt such contact between Francophone newcomers and existing Francophone communities was all too often accidental, rather than planned:

> Except in New Brunswick, Francophones and their institutions are not very visible to newcomers. This can be explained in part by a lack of information both before newcomers leave their country of origin and upon arrival in the Atlantic region.

A second issue raised by Francophone newcomers was language skills and integration into the local labour market. Workplace practices favour the use of English. Occasionally, such practices have even taken root in French-dominant areas such as Montréal. Participants from the Halifax forum said this created a problem of what they called "divided loyalty." Because English is a professional asset, families feel torn between integrating into the Anglophone community to improve their English, and integrating into the Francophone community, which could reduce their job prospects.

Discussion

The contributions by participants in the four forums generated both inspiring and unsettling insight into how linguistic duality is lived and experienced by new Canadians. The question now is how to interpret their input, given the complicated nexus of empirical reality, successful and less successful policies, public opinion and political will. The backdrop to all of this is the narrative of decline mentioned above. In the foreground, two broad policy objectives emerge from the forums: meeting the demand for French language training among English-speaking immigrant communities, and enabling French-speaking newcomers to strengthen Francophone communities outside of Quebec.

The forums suggest that any narrative privileging a multicultural identity over and beyond our bilingual heritage is a move we make at the expense of immigrant communities themselves. Forum participants were generally unanimous that Canadian bilingualism is a natural corollary and facilitator of multiculturalism. Newcomers of diverse backgrounds see bilingualism as a professional asset, a source of civic pride and a structuring force in the new internationalist culture of immigrant youth.

On the point of bilingualism as a source of civic pride, this issue in particular warrants further research and verification. Is the desire for civic belonging strong enough to motivate newcomers to learn not just one but two official languages? This perspective, as expressed in the forums, recalls the well-researched tendency of newcomers to participate more in the political process. If it can be proven true, it would turn the decline narrative on its head. Far from constituting a demographic brick wall, newcomers may well become national leaders on this issue.

Of course, the development of any such leadership would be predicated on the existence of institutional infrastructure for language training, an infrastructure that participants currently find lacking. The creation of institutional means and learning opportunities cannot happen without political will. Perhaps the economic argument, linking the advantages of a bilingual workforce to economic trade vitality, could bring some added pressure on political leaders, beyond the Canadian identity argument. Indeed, a recent study demonstrates the comparative advantage of a bilingual workforce for Canadian companies competing in the international marketplace.[14]

Another approach, as mentioned above, would be to increase opportunities from a "right-to-learn" perspective. However, the problem with the idea of a right to learn one's second official language—regardless of one's linguistic background or the region of residence—is that it remains unclear what this would mean in practice. Taken literally, it would mean inscribing such a right into the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* or including it in one or more

[14] Conference Board of Canada, *Canada, Bilingualism and Trade*, June 2013.

provincial human rights codes. Could less legalistic measures achieve the same end? The issue certainly merits further exploration.

Another area worthy of investigation is the labour market issue. Francophone immigrants wishing to live in French outside of Quebec find the economic incentives to learn English an impediment to integrating into the minority Francophone community of their region. Beyond the disadvantages this carries for the protection and enhancement of Canadian linguistic duality, the study cited above suggests there are also macro level disadvantages for the national economy. But how can current workplace tendencies be reformed? Are there any international examples of successful support mechanisms that governments and firms can leverage toward this end? This presents another rich area of research for policy innovation.

Canadian national identity, based as it is on civic ideals rather than ethnic ties, is at once old and new. In contrast to those who cast the country as a cosmopolitan hotel—comfortable, but without roots or permanency of purpose—the forums suggest that newcomers yearn to make a contribution to the national project that began on the Plains of Abrahams more than 250 years ago.

Certainly, newcomers from the troubled regions of the world appreciate coming to a land with a credo of “peace, order and good government.” Yet they also want to feel part of a political community with a sense of purpose beyond these formal virtues. The hopeful prospect suggested by the forums is that experience-rich new Canadians can be vital partners in helping forge the destiny of their adopted homeland. More research is needed to determine exactly what kinds of institutional infrastructure would help them seize the role they have expressed a clear willingness to play. Meanwhile, it is never too early to challenge spoilers and to remind Canadians why they should feel optimistic about this crucial part of their national life.