Introduction: What is Linguistic Insecurity?

In 2014, the *Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française* (2018) began a mandate to investigate "linguistic insecurity" and its existence amongst French-speaking youth in Canada. While French-speakers' experience often belies an internal conflict between the various French-speaking communities of Canada, linguistic insecurity is also a phenomenon experienced by English-speaking Quebecers.

Linguistic insecurity is "a speaker's feeling that the language they use is somehow inferior, ugly, or bad" (Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, 2018). It is derived from a belief that the "language of a socially subordinate group is linguistically deficient" (Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, 2018). Many English-speakers in Quebec, including the English-speaking youth community, report having had the experience of anxiety or feelings of inferiority when expressing themselves in French (Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, 2018). Based on Y4Y Quebec's consultations with youth, the feeling of linguistic insecurity is exacerbated in socially stressful situations, such as job interviews, formal occasions, and interactions with people in positions of power.

As one young English-speaker, Milo, put it, "either we come across with a strong English accent and it can be seen as cute but also not competent for the position. Or, we have just enough French to come across as stupid. [French-speakers] can't differentiate our accent, and so the 15 mistakes we've made in the last paragraph just come across as incompetence rather than a high level of French for a second-language speaker."

This is the issue many English-speakers in Quebec experience when expressing themselves in French, their second language: either they have little fluency in French to begin with, or their French-language skills can be perceived as inadequate for a professional environment.

Solutions

Solutions to linguistic insecurity can be divided into two categories of focus: individual and societal. Individually, studies show that positively reinforcing individual efforts to learn French helps develop a psychological state of "resilience" for further language development

(Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française, 2018). This resilient mindset, combined with promotion of French language improvement, can develop an individual's agency in stressful linguistic interactions. Instead of seeing these social situations as negative, they can interpret such situations as development opportunities.

For example, Rachel, an English-speaking teenager who reaches out to French-speaking classmates in class with a resilient mindset, can deal with the complexity needed to interpret different cultural expressions and phrases that come about in conversation. She can cope with the necessary fumbling of such communication tasks while trying to adopt them. It isn't easy to integrate a new language; what is necessary is a desire to take up the challenge. Someone who actively takes such challenges will be better positioned to pass interviews in French and improve their chances of successfully integrating into Quebec society.

When speaking French, Rachel can actively correct the minor errors she may make to achieve a near-perfect expression. If, however, the majority-language community doesn't recognize her potential to excel in a workplace setting, how will she fit in? Or, how can Quebec society actively increase the number of opportunities for English-speakers to fully integrate in Quebec?

One possible solution is to increase the quantity of French-language instruction in the English school system. Montreal has plenty of opportunity to integrate, but isolated communities like Shawville have little access to French learning services. There is much more the government could be doing to promote integration.

The media has a large part to play in resolving this problem. If French television programs began to include English-speakers in social discussions, it would be greatly beneficial. French radio shows could include English-speaking figures, and vice-versa. Cultural production companies could include English-speaking characters in their shows; English children's shows could incorporate French Canadian characters as well. CRTC regulations currently limit the ability of channels to produce bilingual programming; regulatory amendments may be called for.

Recommendations

Y4Y Quebec is well-suited to help alleviate the effects of linguistic insecurity experienced by youth. For starters, Y4Y could play a role in lobbying the provincial government

for better allocation of French learning resources within our regional communities; awareness programs could be launched focusing on the media and large employers in Quebec, as well as PR campaigns, etc.

For example, Y4Y could work with large employers to develop partnerships, in order to sensitize HR personnel to English-speaking youths' unique challenges faced in interview situations in their second language. Workshops could be held to develop agency among youth. On a cultural level, Y4Y could influence SODEC to include English-speakers' representation in its minimum criterion for funding media productions as it does for representation of other minorities.

As an organization representing English-speaking youth, Y4Y should focus its efforts on improving perceptions of English-speakers as capable French-second-language speakers, as well as promoting opportunities for the community it serves to achieve higher levels of self-confidence when expressing themselves in the language of the majority. It is Y4Y's position that linguistic insecurity, like any other challenge, can be overcome more readily if the entire community supports those who are trying to achieve better outcomes for all.

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