

UNDERSTANDING AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE MINORITY COMMUNITY

Canada is a federation, with the federal and provincial governments operating within defined areas of responsibility. Canada has two official languages, English and French. Some provinces, like Quebec, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and the Nunavut territory, also have their own official languages strategies.

Two ways of thinking about official languages are particularly useful: using a national perspective; and then using viewpoint of a province or territory.

In 2016, 26 million Canadians identified as English-speaking, with another 7.9 million identifying as Francophones. Thus, French is a minority language from a Canadian perspective. But remember we are a federation, a “Union [that] would conduce to the Welfare of the Provinces.” As an exercise in compromise, Confederation accommodated multiple regional economic, linguistic, and religious interests. The identification of French and English provincial minorities is part of our constitutional history; examples are found in the Constitution Act, 1867, and the Manitoba Act, 1870.

The composition of the Senate ensured representation for Quebec’s ‘Anglophone’ minority. The federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms specifically refers to English and French linguistic communities in New Brunswick. Supreme Court of Canada judgments dealing with Canada’s official languages refer to English and French linguistic minorities. These minorities are defined by the majority language of a province or territory.

Canada’s English language minority exists entirely within one province – Quebec. This minority is not a branch of Canada’s English majority. Beyond the legal fact of our existence, English-speaking Quebecers have their own unique culture and history. Many English-speaking Quebecers have deep ties to Quebec, going back generations. English-speaking Quebecers were among the first settlers in several regions of Quebec, including the Townships, West Quebec, and the Lower North Shore. We have more similarities with our Francophone neighbours in Quebec than with our Anglophone neighbours in Ontario.

The Government of Canada has a statutory obligation to support the development of English and French linguistic minority communities. The generic term for these communities is “Official Language Minority Community,” or OLMCs. This is defined as “a group of people whose maternal or chosen official language is not the majority language in their province or territory.” Canada’s support of these OLMCs is a key driver toward the federal goal of promoting linguistic duality, “the coexistence of two majority language groups, including minority language communities spread across the country.”

The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism spent years during the 1960s studying the linguistic landscape across Canada. The Commission’s Report noted that, “within the provinces...both Anglophones and Francophones live in some cases as a majority, in some cases as a minority...In either case...the principle of equality requires that the minority receive generous treatment.” The Commission also noted that “equality...requires that a person who engages in some activity or associates with some institution need not renounce his own culture, but can offer his services, act, show his presence, develop, and be accepted with all his cultural traits.” Canada’s Official Languages Act was built on these bedrock principles.

In Quebec, English is the minority language. It matters not to English-speaking Quebecers what language is spoken in the public and in institutions in other areas of Canada or North America. Our community understands living as a linguistic minority.