

*Protecting a Minority Culture in a Bilingual Society:
The Impact on Canadian Society of Laws Restricting English Use in Quebec*

Nathaniel Edwards, Yamaguchi National University, Japan

The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper presents the complex historical context and development of language laws and related government cultural policies at the federal and provincial level in Canada and examines the profound impact on Canadian society of laws restricting English use in the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec. Landmark Canadian language laws are compared and contrasted, and the effect of such language laws on Canadian society, culture, education, business, politics, and immigration policy is examined. The numerous and significant linguistic, cultural, and political challenges faced by bilingual and multicultural Canadian society are compared with similar situations in other officially bilingual or multilingual countries and societies. The growing influence of English on the evolution of French spoken in Quebec is also addressed. In order to preserve its unique cultural identity and Francophone society, the provincial Quebec government has sought to increase its autonomy from the federal government in a wide range of areas, leading to political conflict of varying levels of intensity and duration with the federal government (Béland, Lecours & Schmeiser, 2021). Language is a fundamental expression of cultural identity in a society, and the disappearance of a language may lead to the extinction of a unique cultural identity. Predictions regarding the future development of language laws are made based on current and historical trends in government policy and on continuing changes in bilingual Canadian society.

Keywords: Minority Culture, Bilingual Society, Language Laws, Quebec

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Language laws in Quebec restricting the use of English and promoting the French language have evolved from a complex historical context and decades of specific, ambitious government language policies. Language is not merely a method of communication, it is an essential expression of cultural identity (Templin, Seidl, Wickström & Feichtinger, 2016). The francophone majority population of Quebec has managed to preserve its language, French culture, and unique identity for centuries despite numerous political, cultural, and economic challenges in an English majority Canada and North America. Bilingual and multilingual societies face numerous challenges and pressures and need to find a delicate legal, cultural, and political balance between the linguistic rights of different groups.

The Historical Context and Development of Laws Restricting English Use in Quebec

Quebec was a French colony for centuries until it was conquered by British forces. Centuries of French colonial rule in Quebec, also called New France, ended in 1760 after a decisive victory by Britain, and Quebec became a new British colony under military occupation (Land & Geloso, 2020). English became the language of government and law during the British military occupation of Quebec. In 1774, the Quebec Act granted the Catholic French-speaking population religious freedom and permitted the use of French civil law, important changes which had the effect of preserving and promoting the use of French (Uzzell, 2018). The Quebec Act was a recognition that a majority of citizens in Quebec were Francophones and that French remained the dominant language of daily life and business for most inhabitants despite British rule. In 1791, the Constitutional Act gave French official recognition in government and law in Quebec (Hillinger, 2019). The Constitutional Act was another major step in preserving and promoting the French language. Enlightened and tolerant British rulers in Quebec chose coexistence with the French language and French culture rather than cultural assimilation by force.

After decades of relatively peaceful coexistence, a Francophone political movement against British rule began to grow in Quebec. After a failed rebellion in 1837 by a large group of French Canadians, the governor general Lord Durham wrote a report which called for the complete assimilation of French Canadians into British culture and the English language (Garrard, 2021). The 1837 rebellion by some, but not all Francophones in Quebec, convinced some British rulers that cultural assimilation of the Francophones was necessary. Some members of the British ruling class in Quebec viewed the Francophones to be backward and judged their culture to be inferior. The policy of complete cultural assimilation was not adopted, although the official use of French was banned for nearly a decade in Quebec. Relations between the Anglophones and Francophones in Quebec gradually improved, and the use of French was allowed to increase in public life. In 1867, the Constitution Act gave official language status to French in the new Dominion of Canada and in Quebec, which became a founding province of the new semi-independent nation (Hillinger, 2019). French had survived British colonial rule in Quebec.

Although Francophones formed the majority of the population, Anglophones continued to hold most key positions in business and industry up to the 1960s. Beginning in the 1960s, the provincial government in Quebec started to formulate language policies to favor the use of French, and such policies tended to conform to international legal standards regarding human rights but were not without controversy (Binkovitz, 2015). A new generation of Francophones worked to improve their educational, economic and political status. In the

1960s, a social movement began in Quebec called the Quiet Revolution which called for a reduction in the influence of the Catholic Church and for more social mobility and economic influence for French speakers (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). The average levels of education and incomes of Francophones increased steadily in Quebec.

In the 1977, the provincial government introduced the Charter of the French Language which limited the use of English in the education system, on store signs, and in local and provincial governments (Schmid, Zepa & Snipe, 2004). At the time, the birth rate of Francophones was in decline, the economic status of many French speakers was still low, and many were concerned that English speakers could eventually become the majority in Quebec. The Charter of the French Language was a challenge to the official national policy of a bilingual Canadian society since it stated that Quebec was an officially French province (Iacovino, 2015). Some Anglophones began to leave Quebec.

The landmark Bill 101 was adopted into law in Quebec in 1977 and declared French to be the official language in government, education, and the courts (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). Anglophones criticized the bill and became concerned about their future. English signs in public were banned, and access to English education was limited (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). Bill 101 may be viewed as a significant step in the direction of full political independence and sovereignty for a Quebec nation.

Bilingualism became an increasingly important aspect of national cultural policy in the 1960s. In 1969, the government of Canada had begun to treat both French and English as equal official languages in government services, but that was not enough to prevent the introduction of the pro-French Bill 101 in Quebec (Spencer, 2008). The national policy of bilingualism was not enough to satisfy many Francophones who wanted more political power for Quebec. To promote national unity and the national policy of bilingualism, the federal Canadian government increased federal services offered in French and English in all provinces (Bourhis & Sioufi, 2017). Minority French speakers in other Canadian provinces benefited from the national policy of bilingualism.

In 2007, the Parti Québécois (PQ), a political party calling for the creation of an independent, sovereign, officially French Quebec nation, tried to introduce the Quebec Identity Act (Bill 195), which would have given Quebec more control over immigration into the province of Quebec (Iacovino, 2015). The Quebec Identity Act was an attempt to define Quebec identity in terms other than just the French language. In 2013, a minority government Parti Québécois attempted, but failed, to introduce the Charter of Quebec Values, a charter intended to create a legal outline to define a distinct Quebec identity (Iacovino, 2015). The Charter of Quebec Values went beyond the promotion and preservation of the French language and seemed to challenge the national Canadian policy of multiculturalism and diversity.

In 2018, for the first time in nearly half a century, a political party that was not explicitly a separatist party calling for full political independence from Canada won the Quebec provincial election. The Coalition Avenir Quebec (the Quebec Future Coalition or CAQ), led by the wealthy businessman François Legault, won a majority of seats campaigning on promises to reduce immigration and to limit the display of religious symbols by public workers such as teachers and police officers (Béland, Lecours & Schmeiser, 2021). Many Francophones seemed concerned by a steady increase in visible minorities in Quebec society. The number of Allophones, immigrants who do not speak English or French as a first language, has been increasing in Quebec, and many Allophones give priority to learning

English since English ability can help to secure higher paying jobs, even in Quebec (Grenier, 2019). The proportion of Francophones in the Quebec population may decrease significantly if current immigration trends continue.

Despite decades of language laws, English still enjoys a high status among many Francophones. Code-switching refers to the simultaneous, alternating use of words and phrases in two languages by bilingual speakers in a conversation. Many French speakers in Montreal often mix more English into their conversations than English speakers mix French into their conversations (Valenti, 2014). Quebec French has been influenced heavily by English. The relatively high use of English words and phrases by French speakers in Montreal may indicate that English, closely associated with business management and the majority English-speaking North American culture, still has a higher social status in Quebec than French (Valenti, 2014). English skills can increase employment opportunities in Quebec. Some French speakers view the use of English in Montreal, the largest city in Quebec, with concern and continue to worry about the future of French as a minority language in North America (Bourhis, 2019). Some bilingual Francophones do not view English as a threat to French Quebec culture.

Since the conquest of Quebec by Britain in 1760, the status of French in Quebec has undergone a long series of complex and often diametrically opposed changes, but the French language and French culture of Quebec have managed to survive and thrive. Integrating new immigrants successfully into Quebec culture and the French language is a major challenge for the Quebec provincial government and French society in Quebec (Grenier, 2019). High and increasing levels of immigration are necessary to offset the ageing population and shrinking workforce in Quebec, but maintaining a majority of Francophones in Quebec may be difficult in the long term since most new immigrants are not Francophones and Francophone birth rates in Quebec are not increasing significantly.

The Positive and Negative Effects of Language Laws on Quebec and on Canadian Society

The effects of language laws have been largely positive for the majority Francophone population. Against the odds, French speakers in Quebec have preserved their language and culture for centuries, despite being a minority population in a predominately English-speaking Canada and English-speaking North America. In approximately one generation, starting in the 1960s with assertive and comprehensive language policies to promote French usage in education, work, and government, Quebec Francophones have attained high levels of education, political and economic power and created a more secular society in which the role of the Catholic Church has been reduced (Hamers & Hummel, 1994). Language laws have been beneficial to Francophones and helped to raise their living standards. The Quebec economy, long dominated by English speakers, is now influenced significantly by Francophone business leaders in many industries (Hamers & Hummel, 1994). From the perspective of Francophones, Quebec language policies and laws favoring French usage over English have been extremely successful. More than eighty percent of Quebec citizens still speak French as a native language and work in French, the number of bilingual Anglophones has increased, and access to English-language schools has been significantly reduced (Bourhis & Sioufi, 2017). However, some Anglophones complain of linguistic discrimination. The language laws in Quebec which restrict the use of English are sometimes criticized in Quebec, in other Canadian provinces, and in other countries. Anglophones residing in Quebec have been critical of Quebec's language policy and have challenged some

language laws in Quebec courts (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). Quebec language laws have had a clear and direct impact on business signs, companies, schools, and government services (Soroka, 2014). French language skills have become essential for many Anglophones.

Language laws promoting French have had some negative effects on the minority Anglophone population and on the Quebec economy. A steady stream of Anglophones have left Quebec since the implementation of language laws. Since the introduction of Quebec language laws in the 1970s, more than 300,000 English speakers in Anglophone communities in Quebec, many of them highly educated, have chosen to move to English-speaking Canadian provinces (Bourhis, 2019). The loss of so many highly skilled and educated workers has had a negative effect on the Quebec economy.

The Quebec Office of the French Language (Office Québécois de la Langue Française or OQLF), is a branch of the provincial government which monitors English usage and enforces Quebec language laws. In February 2013, the OQLF ordered an Italian restaurant in Montreal to replace many common Italian words on its menu with French words, a controversial action which was criticized and ridiculed in Quebec, Canada, and other countries (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). Many people, including Francophones, thought that the OQLF had gone too far in this case to protect the use of French. There was no danger of Italian ever replacing French as the majority language in Quebec. This amusing case was dubbed 'Pastagate,' the overzealous leader of the OQLF resigned, and the governing PQ pro-separatism party chose not to continue to strengthen existing language laws (Ketterer-Hobbis, 2017). Language laws may sometimes damage Quebec's international reputation and cause uncertainty for investors.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, designed to protect many individual and group rights, has not been formally accepted by Quebec since it may limit the ability of the Quebec government to place cultural restrictions on some citizens (Iacovino, 2015). Quebec's position creates political tension that does not enhance national unity. There is also tension between the rights of the individual protected by the Canadian Constitution and the desire of Quebec to place linguistic and cultural restrictions on minority groups to protect the French language and culture (Richez, 2014). Quebec's language laws and attempts to control its own immigration policy have some negative consequences for Anglophones, for other minority groups, for national unity, and sometimes for Quebec's international reputation.

Linguistic, Cultural and Political Challenges in Officially Bilingual and Multilingual Countries

Language laws and guidelines are not unique to Quebec and exist in many bilingual and multilingual countries. Laws pertaining to the use, preservation, and promotion of minority languages are increasing in the European Union, and linguistic rights are viewed as a form of basic human rights in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Määttä, 2005). Language use has become a human right. The Council of Europe, an EU organization, creates principles for the protection of minority languages, but these guiding principles are not legally binding and may affect EU member states differently (Määttä, 2005). Minority language groups exist in many European countries.

Some countries, rather than being concerned about the protection of their own language and control of minority languages, have opted to actively promote and increase the use of the international language of English. For example, an increasing number of university programs are offered in English in the Netherlands (Duarte, 2022). Other countries, such as Thailand,

take the opposite approach and promote only one official majority language. In Thailand, the majority national language of Thai is the only official language in public education despite the presence of minority language groups such as the Malays in Thailand (Boonlong, 2007). Minority language groups in Thailand must learn the majority national language to be able to function effectively in society. Rather than imposing the majority language on minority groups, some multilingual and multicultural countries such as Switzerland have several official languages, all with equal status in society regardless of the relative size of their populations. Switzerland has four official languages with equal status. German is the majority language in Switzerland, but French, Italian, and a Latin language called Romansh are all official national languages, and local citizens can democratically choose the primary language used in their schools (Hega, 2001). Some countries can become successful by embracing multicultural policies.

Quebec language laws have had a global impact and directly influenced language policies in other countries. Countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which have large Russian-speaking minorities, employ an approach to language policies and laws which is similar to the Charter of the French Language in Quebec and actively promote the majority language in business, education, and immigration (Maurais, 1991). The Latvian government was concerned by the growing influence of the large Russian-speaking minority. In the 1990s, Latvia actually used large parts of the Quebec Charter of the French Language as a model for its own language laws to restrict the use of Russian and faced the same types of criticisms and challenges as Quebec (Schmid, Zepa & Snipe, 2004). Just as in Quebec, protecting the rights of one linguistic group came at the expense of another group. Language laws help to protect a majority language but may infringe on the rights of individuals in the minority group (Schmid, Zepa & Snipe, 2004). Language laws have become a human rights issue. Some language laws in Quebec could, in some cases, be interpreted as being in conflict with international laws and with international treaties that Canada has signed (Binkovitz, 2015). Language policy needs to include a consideration of issues such as human rights and the freedom of expression.

Implications and Conclusion

Quebec's language laws and policies have been successful in protecting the French language and culture in a majority English-speaking Canada and North America. Official language policies can be effective in preserving and promoting a minority language in a society (Templin, Seidl, Wickström & Feichtinger, 2016). However, the preservation of French in Quebec has come at the expense of the minority Anglophone community which has experienced a steady reduction of its own linguistic rights. To avoid charges of excessive discrimination and to show that Anglophones are still welcome in Quebec, some government and health services in Quebec are provided in English, and English is still taught in Francophone schools (Spencer, 2008). Canada is officially a bilingual country with both English and French enjoying equal status as official languages at the federal level, but French has been declared to be the official language in Quebec by successive pro-Francophone provincial governments. This situation creates an ongoing sense of linguistic, cultural, and political tension which varies in intensity over time between Quebec and the federal government and between Quebec and majority English-speaking provinces. Future majority French-speaking Quebec governments will probably continue to seek more political autonomy from the federal Canadian government and continue to face legal challenges concerning linguistic rights from the Anglophone community and its supporters outside Quebec.

Pro-Francophone Quebec governments, even those advocating for complete political separation from Canada, have not been able to completely abolish the use of English in Quebec, an act which would be too repressive and undoubtedly meet with fierce resistance, criticism and legal challenges at the provincial, national, and even international level. In a long and complex history, French and English have competed for linguistic dominance in Quebec, and both languages have survived existential political threats in different periods. Both French and English in Quebec have proven to be resilient, and both languages seem destined to continue to coexist in Quebec.

Decades of language laws and language policies planned by the Quebec provincial government which made French the main official language have ensured the priority use of French in education, work, cultural events, and government services in Quebec (Hamers & Hummel, 1994). However, Quebec's rapidly ageing and retiring workforce has increased the need for high levels of immigration, but most new immigrants are not native speakers of French or English. Quebec's current governing provincial party, the CAQ, is seeking to create its own criteria for immigrants to Quebec which may conflict with the federal national immigration policy. The conflict between the rights of Quebec Francophones and the rights of individuals of minority groups in Quebec remains unresolved and may continue to be a difficult political and cultural balancing act filled with contradictions. Despite Quebec's decades of success in preserving and raising the political and economic status of the French language, there is no guarantee that French will remain the majority language in Quebec in the long term if Francophone birth rates remain low and immigration levels of Allophones who prefer to learn English increase exponentially.

References

- Béland, D., Lecours, A., & Schmeiser, P. (2021). Nationalism, secularism, and ethno-cultural diversity in Quebec. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 55(1), 177–202. Retrieved February 4, 2023, from EBSCO database.
- Binkovitz, I. A. (2015). International legal regimes and language policy in Quebec: A case study of compliance, and some continuing tension. *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, 33(2), 223–253. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Boonlong, F. R. (2007). The language rights of the Malay minority in Thailand. *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights & the Law*, 8(1), 47–63. Retrieved September 2, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Bourhis, R. Y. (2019). Evaluating the impact of Bill 101 on the English-speaking communities of Quebec. *Language Problems & Language Planning*, 43(2), 198–229. Retrieved August 6, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Bourhis, R. Y., & Sioufi, R. (2017). Assessing forty years of language planning on the vitality of the Francophone and Anglophone communities of Quebec. *Multilingua*, 36(5), 627–661. Retrieved August 12, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Duarte, J. (2022). The implementation of plurilingual language policies in Higher Education – the perspective of language learning students. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, 12(2), 367–389. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from EBSCO database.
- Garrard, G. (2021). John Stuart Mill and the liberal idea of Canada. *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 33(1), 31–46. Retrieved February 5, 2023, from EBSCO database.
- Grenier, G. (2019). Quebec's language policy and economic globalization. *Language Problems & Language Planning*, 43(2), 179–197. Retrieved August 7, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Hamers, J. F., & Hummel, K. M. (1994). The francophones of Quebec: Language policies and language use. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 94(6), 127–152. Retrieved August 16, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Hega, G. M. (2001). Regional identity, language, and education policy in Switzerland. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, 31(2), 205–227. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Hillinger, A. (2019). The status of the French language in British North America: From the conquest to the confederation. *Translation & Interpreting*, 11(2), 18–31. Retrieved February 9, 2023, from EBSCO database.
- Iacovino, R. (2015). Contextualizing the Quebec charter of values: Belonging without citizenship in Quebec. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 47(1), 41–60. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from EBSCO database.

- Ketterer-Hobbis, S. (2017). "The Comic and the Rule" in Pastagate: Food, humor, and the politics of language in Quebec. *Food, Culture & Society*, 20(4), 709–727. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Land, J., & Geloso, V. (2020). Colonial military garrisons as labor-market shocks: Quebec City and Boston, 1760-1775. *Social Science Quarterly*, 101(4), 1326–1344. Retrieved August 9, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Määttä, S. (2005). The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, French language laws, and national identity. *Language Policy*, 4(2), 167–186. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Maurais, J. (1991). A Sociolinguistic comparison between Quebec's Charter of the French Language and the 1989 language laws of five Soviet republics. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 12(1–2), 117–126. Retrieved August 4, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Richez, E. (2014). Losing relevance: Quebec and the constitutional politics of language. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 52(1), 190–233. Retrieved August 3, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Schmid, C., Zepa, B., & Snipe, A. (2004). Language policy and ethnic tensions in Quebec and Latvia. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 45(3), 231–252. Retrieved September 6, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Soroka, T. (2014). Quebec's politics of language: Uncommonly restrictive regime or ill-repute undeserved? *TransCanadiana*, 7(1), 151–174. Retrieved September 2, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Spencer, V. (2008). Language, history, and the nation: An historical approach to evaluating language and cultural claims. *Nations & Nationalism*, 14(2), 241–259. Retrieved September 17, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Templin, T., Seidl, A., Wickström, B.-A., & Feichtinger, G. (2016). Optimal language policy for the preservation of a minority language. *Mathematical Social Sciences*, 81(1), 8–21. Retrieved September 3, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Uzzell, L. A. (2018). James Murray: A forgotten champion of religious freedom. *Catholic Historical Review*, 104(1), 57–91. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from EBSCO database.
- Valenti, E. (2014). "Nous autres c'est toujours bilingue anyways": Code-switching and linguistic displacement among bilingual Montréal students. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 44(3), 279–292. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from EBSCO database.